

Human Rights of Widows: A Study of Widowhood Practices in a Nigerian Society

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Abstract

The subject of widowhood practices remains one of the serious issues of our times and one which has elicited mixed interpretations. Nigeria, being a multi-ethnic society, has different forms of widowhood practices that reflect its cultural diversity. This study focuses on widowhood practices in the south-eastern part of the country which is populated mostly by the Igbo-speaking ethnic group, one of Nigeria's largest groups. Marriage, as one of the basic institutions of any society, is laden with many challenges for most couples. For the woman, this is worsened by the loss of her husband. In Nigeria's Igbo society, when a woman loses her husband, her identity suddenly changes. After the death of her husband, she no longer is viewed as a pure and complete woman. Widows in many Igbo communities are subjected to dehumanizing practices that cause them to suffer physical as well as psychological trauma. Unfortunately, such cultural practices are perpetuated by the *umuada* (patrilineal daughters) who call themselves preservers of the local culture and tradition. In spite of the enactment of many laws for the protection of the rights of widows, widows in Igbo society still face social discrimination and deprivation and are often denied their due inheritance. This paper analyses the phenomenon of Igbo widowhood practices with a view to understanding the cultural and social milieu in which such gender-oriented practices thrive.

Keywords: widowhood practices, Nigeria, Igbo Society, widows' rights, inheritance

Introduction

Customs and traditions are enthroned by the people of any given

society. Unhealthy or oppressive customs and traditions, therefore, need not remain static but should be jettisoned by the people or replaced by wholesome practices that respect the rights and dignity of every member of the community. Culture should not be blind to the contemporary situations and circumstances of the society. Literature, as a mirror of the social phenomena has portrayed the theme of culture from many perspectives. This paper is focused on how cultural tenets and practices affect the condition of widows in the south-eastern part of Nigeria, a region peopled mostly by the Igbo ethnic group. The study is based on published information on the widowhood practices and culture of Nigeria's Igbo society.

To understand the concept of widowhood practices in south-eastern Nigeria, one needs to have an in-depth understanding of the socio-cultural norms of the Igbo and their implications for individuals and the society at large. The Igbo are one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria and also among the largest groups in Africa. The Igbo people of Nigeria believe that death is not the end of life as life is seen as a phenomenon that continues in the spirit realm even after someone's physical death. Ikenga-Metu, a professor of African religious anthropology, asserts that "death is not the final end of man in Igbo thought, all men continue to live in some form or the other after death" (62). This has implications for the plight of widows:

The Igbo culture makes it incumbent on the living to respect the wishes of the dead, while the dead are compelled to protect the living. Widowhood practices are therefore integral part of the funeral rites accorded the dead. These funeral rites are aimed at guaranteeing the admittance of the dead people into the abode of the ancestors, who, they believe, will ultimately reincarnate into the community of the living (Oreh 4).

As Ohale has noted, "the Igbo people have belief in life after death, in their ancestors and reincarnations. Central to the Igbo

traditional religious thought is the concept of deceased's ancestors continuing to play an active part in the lives of their descendants" (62). Therefore, the world of the dead or the spiritual world is so authentic to the Igbo people that they consider a complete human community to be made of ancestors, the unborn, and the living. An aspect of the Igbo people's ontology is that the dead must be honoured and should not be treated as a mere body. He/she should be honoured according to the social status he/she had earned while alive. The Igbo believe that if the deceased is not buried properly by culturally following the rites and rituals befitting the dead's social status, he/she will turn into an evil spirit and wander about to attack the living members of his/her family (Okoro 323-350).

In this paper, a "widow" is defined as a woman whose husband has died and who has not remarried. Widowhood in Igbo society is associated with certain cultural norms and practices that suddenly change the narrative of a woman's life as soon as she loses her husband and makes her life traumatic. In the perception of many Igbo, she now becomes impure and unclean and, therefore, needs to undergo some rituals to effect her cleansing. The Igbo people are known for various cultural beliefs and practices. Some of these adversely affect widows. Oreh, professor of adult education and community development, paraphrasing Boulding, says that a widow, among the Igbo, "is like a melancholy bird that sits wailing all night, increasing her distress without redeeming features" (5).

Oreh further notes that widowhood in Igbo society entails

a physical break in the family relationship and it is ranked by widows as the most stressful and devastating event in life. This is because widowhood does not only involve the loss of the role of a wife to the husband but also the loss of a person most supportive of the woman, the person who has played a central role in the woman's life, the father of her children, the family breadwinner and the companion of the woman. This transition from wifehood to a widow happens so suddenly and

swiftly that in one minute a woman who is a wife transits to a widow. It is at this moment that she starts to experience all the widowhood practices.... (6)

Widowhood Practices in the Igbo Society of Nigeria

Every culture and society has its cultural practices for the dead. Widowhood practices differ from one society to another. In the Igbo society, practices associated with widowhood include mourning rites, seclusion of the widow, shaving of the widow's hair, limitation of the widow's inheritance rights, suspicious behaviour of people towards the widow, and change in the widow's social and economic status. Some of these practices have customary roots while others reflect the negative attitude of people towards the widow.

Widowhood practices in Igbo culture should be viewed also from gender perspective. The widow and the widower are human beings in the same society but they get different social response and treatment from the society. Generally, when a man loses his wife, the society sympathizes with him and treats him lovingly. The community surrounds him to pay due condolence to him. More importantly, they encourage him to remarry, pointing out that he needs another woman to console him and take care of him and, if applicable, his children. But we don't find a similar sympathetic response when a woman becomes a widow. The moment she loses her husband, she becomes vulnerable to social bias and control. The same society doesn't spare a moment before claiming that the widow is the killer of her husband while a man is rarely suspected of being responsible for the death of his wife. Furthermore, the widow is viewed as an impure woman in the family and the community. As such, she is required to undergo dehumanizing ordeals to purify herself (Dittrich and Carrel).

In his article, "The Widow's Right in the Context of Fundamental Human Rights", Edekobi comes up with the view

that most widowers usually prefer to remarry soon after losing their wives while most widows choose not to remarry, especially when they have children. For fear of losing the children, they suppress their desire to remarry and decide to live in the same family compound in spite of the mistreatment of their in-laws.

The Igbo society displays clear gender disparity in the matter of mourning rites. While mourning rites are not traditionally imposed on widowers, widows are forced to cry their hearts out repeatedly during the early part of their bereavement (Agumagu). This mourning period remains a seclusion period only for the widow and the objective is to prolong her agony and anxiety. During the mourning period, the widow is subjected to emotional, psychological as well as physical torture. A widower, on the other hand, is exempted from such torturous rituals. According to Odimegwu, widowhood practices in African societies are given rise to by the sex roles and social expectations imposed by different communities. In the context of Igbo widowhood, it has been observed that the rites and rituals signify the traditional concepts about feminine roles, death, inheritance, and family structure (Tasie 155-162).

Ifeoma Okoye, a well-known Nigerian author, in her book, *The Trials and Other Stories*, also agrees on the point that the problems of persisting widowhood practices are the outcome of a patriarchal society that supports gender disparity. She has observed that in Nigerian society, widows face discrimination and are deprived their fundamental human rights. A patriarchal society believes that women occupy the secondary position to men and thus inferior to men. Okoye maintains that

It is discriminatory that widowers don't go through dehumanizing rites and rituals. They don't lose their property or children when their wives die. They easily acquire their deceased wives' property. They remarry without losing their

children to anyone (2).

Okoye, as a widow, encountered the phenomenon of widowhood and a few brutal occurrences that compelled her to reflect upon some of her experiences in the “Letter to the Reader” featured in *The Trials and Other Stories*, her collection of short stories. She writes, “I refused to undergo the subjugating, humiliating and dehumanizing rites of hair shaving to which many Igbo widows are subjected” (ii). She tells us that she has not written *The Trials* with the purpose of telling the widows’ stories to the people or entertaining them but to awaken them about the menacing system of widow practices. She has exposed the dehumanizing acts that are forced upon widows in Nigeria during the period of mourning. She observed that there are some traditional rites and rituals that reduce the respect and dignity of widows.

She says that discriminatory patriarchal system of laws is also responsible for the persistent problem of widows losing their inheritance. Deprived of their property and inheritance, some widows become beggars, low-paid employees or prostitutes. In some cases, some widows are compelled to withdraw their children from school because of economic deprivation (1-2). Okoye notes that some widows are forced to marry their husband’s brother in order to avoid losing their children if they remarry outside their husband’s family.

While widowhood practices are common prevailing phenomena in Igbo culture, Umezina says that the degree of adherence to the rituals differs from town to town. Generally, however, the Igbo of South-Eastern states of Anambra, Abia, Enugu, Ebonyi, and Imo States treat widows in a very dehumanizing manner. The harsh practices meted to women make widowhood more traumatic than it ought to be. Death for the Igbo is caused by an ill wind; no death is natural. Every death is caused by witchcraft, bad medicine, or

some other evil forces. Because of this perception, the family or relatives of the deceased starts investigating the cause of the death the moment a person's death is announced. If the deceased is a young person, they take investing the cause of the death more seriously. A wife is normally the first person to be suspected; she is pronounced the murderer or an indirect cause of the death, depending on her relationship with her in-laws and the *umuada*, the patrilineal daughters.

A wife is taken as the prime suspect of the death because she is the closest person to her husband. Usually, she is placed under an oath during the burial period to ascertain her innocence. She is also asked to stay with the dead body of her husband until interment (Sossou 201-209). The case becomes more complex when the couple is traditionally estranged; this makes the suspicion that she killed her husband more intense. In this case, the widow is tortured psychologically and physically. She is forced to drink the water used to bathe the corpse of her husband.

Ohale elaborates on how a woman enters a state of impurity after she loses her husband:

In most areas of Igboland as soon as a husband dies, culture dictates that his widow must sit on the bare floor, neither taking bath nor changing her clothes...and secretly attempting to attend to her personal hygiene might attract some punishments (1-11).

In some Igbo communities, more severe rituals are inflicted upon the widow after her husband's death. In the first period of mourning, she is kept in a secluded place, without having clothes on her body except a few leaves to cover the most sensitive parts of her body. She is prohibited from all outings and from mixing with people. However, in some urgent cases, she is allowed to go outside but accompanied by an older widow who must be a member of the *umuada* (the patrilineal daughters). While going

outside, she must carry a calabash which symbolises that she is in the mourning period. In this period of mourning, the widow is culturally prohibited from touching any object, including her own body parts because she remains impure at that period. Thus, she keeps a piece of broken pot or a stick to scratch her body. She is given food cooked separately and served her in some broken plates (Sossou 201-209).

Further, the widow gives a loud wail at a certain period of time – morning, noon, and evening – as the custom demands. In the views of Sossou, this ritual of loud wailing reflects her deep sadness and a mark of honour for her deceased husband: “The fundamental social change in her life style is dramatized, emphasising her faithfulness to her husband’s memory and her chastity during the marriage period” (201-209). Ohale takes this wailing of the widow at the arrival of good friends and relatives of her late husband as a public show of grief which is done to appease the family and the relation of the deceased and to prove her innocence (1-11).

One of the beliefs connected with following these rituals is that the dead husband hovers around seeking to interact with his wife. Therefore, the widow is guided, if she needs to go out of her hut for some serious work; she must come from the back door of the hut and must not enter through the same gate. While going outside, she has to carry a knife or stick which would protect her from the attack of her husband’s spirit.

Meeks confirms the assertion that in some Igbo sub-cultures, such as among the Nsukka people, the widow is not left alone during her times of mourning and wailing and that the patrilineal daughters are always present there with her. He further notes that the formal lamentation for the deceased by the female relatives continues for three to six days. The female mourners collectively culturally sleep in the hut of the deceased. Every morning, large

quantities of local beer are served them by their friends and relatives. Every day, at dawn, these mourning women give loud cries of grief at the sight of friends and relatives (226).

In most Igbo communities, it is compulsory for a widow to be placed in seclusion after her husband's death. This practice is maintained throughout the initial mourning period and ends with the interment of the deceased. In this condition, the widow is restricted from any interaction with people (Ohale). The first period of mourning is most severe and health-damaging. In her twenty eight days of confinement, the cultural practice restricts the widow from any social contact. She is not allowed to go to the stream, farmland or market (Nzewi 1-11).

After the first phase of burial rituals, the second phase of rites and rituals take place. In this stage, certain rituals are performed to purify the family members of the deceased. The widow, especially, has to perform all the purification rituals for she is still considered impure or defiled. The rites performed at this stage also denote the end of the marriage and the separation between the deceased and his wife forever. Soon after, the *umuada* take the widow to the secluded place of the compound where her head is shaved; her pubic hair is also shaved. After shaving her, the widow takes a ritual bath. Thereafter, she is dressed in new mourning attire; she will wear this dress for the rest of the mourning period. In the case of a pregnant widow, her hair and the dress she was wearing during the seclusion are buried; in the case of a non-pregnant widow, her shaved hair and dress are burnt to symbolize the beginning of the separation between the widow and her late husband (Nzewi 6-7).

After this ritual, the widow resumes a life of limited freedom governed by certain widow rules of behaviour. In this phase of mourning, she is permitted to interact with people, talk to anybody and go outside but she is restricted from returning home late during

the night. Before resuming normal life, the widow must go through the last cleansing process to further purify herself and improve her personal hygiene. Her room and its contents are also cleansed. The *umuada* and the widow's friends and relatives help the widow in cleaning up the mourning environment. The filth is gathered in a basket which the widow carries to the bush, accompanied by a member of the *umuada*. This ritual of throwing filth is done very early in the morning to prevent people from watching the event. To forewarn people to look the other way, a woman from the *umuada* goes before the widow to give a warning cry. Then the widow is again bathed culturally and shaved properly by the *umuada*. This final ritual of cleaning indicates the last separation between the widow and her late husband. Now, she can resume her normal life in the family and the society. If she is young and interested in remarrying, she is allowed to do so but if she doesn't want to remarry, she stays in the same family with her in-laws (Nzewi 1-11).

Igbo beliefs behind widowhood practices

The Igbo regard burial and mourning rituals as culturally important on several grounds. Since Igbo people believe in two worlds (physical and spiritual), death is not regarded as an end to life. As such, there is need to separate the widow from the spirit of her husband, protect their children and the deceased's property as well as maintain the peace and stability of the entire community through the widow's fulfilment of the widowhood practices. Ewelukwa (444) notes that mourning rituals in the Igbo society are performed to pay homage to the deceased and that such rituals celebrate the status of the deceased as the widow's late husband.

These rituals are also practised in favour of the widow, considering that these mourning rituals are believed to protect the widow from the menace of evil spirits. In the words of Okorie, "the traditional concept of death is also an important fact in the

widowhood practices...since traditionally it is believed that the dead continue to participate in and influence the lives of the living, we saw in one area, where widows had to run very hot mixture across their faces to expel the spirit of their departed husband” (79-84). Tasié believes “the overall aim of the widowhood rites could therefore be summed up as to sever the ties between a dead husband and his living wife/wives” (155-162). Properly followed, the rituals bring some benefits to the widow and her family as, according to Ewelukwa, a feast and some form of economic package, in some Igbo sub-cultures, is awarded to the widow after her successful fulfilment of all the rituals.

Widowhood practices are also undertaken to enhance the deceased’s smooth entrance into the spiritual world, to make him enter with peace and comfort and facilitate the harmonious relationship between the living and the ancestors. So, it appears the purpose of retaining these rituals is because they are perceived as cultural exercises by which the widow and the community are purified and protected.

Protecting the Rights of Widows in Nigeria

In Nigeria, discrimination against widows has reduced due to rapid growth in the education of women and amendment of local laws. Onyekuru notes that in spite of the enactment of laws to protect the widows, widows in Nigeria are still deprived inheritance rights and are still subjected to physical and psychological torture. There are two types of marriages in Nigeria: statutory (monogamous) marriage and customary (monogamous/polygamous) marriage. Although statutory law grants women right of inheritance after the death of their husbands, in practice it doesn’t prevail. In customary marriage, controversies and conflicts regarding the matter of inheritance usually take place among the wives after the death of their husband.

According to Bukar Usman, Nigeria’s renowned folklorist and

writer whom I communicated with while researching this paper, customary law pertaining to widowhood practices and the widow's right of inheritance differs from one ethnic group to another. He says that the widow's inheritance rights, in customary terms, largely depend on the cultural milieu in which the marriage is contracted. In his view, some Nigerian customary marriages are similar to the Islamic marriage and there are a large number of Nigerians who follow the Islamic religion and whose marriages are governed by the customary system.

Onyekuru is of the opinion that in Nigeria the widow usually loses out after the demise of her husband because there is no concept of co-ownership of property by couples. In Nigerian society, male relations of the deceased take possession of the deceased's assets thereby depriving the widows of their inheritance. In most of the sub-cultures of Nigeria, male relatives of the deceased traditionally inherit his wives (widows) and serve as social security for the widows. This practice is sometimes against the consent of the widows. When widows revolt against such discriminatory acts, the patriarchal society would accuse them of being the killers of their husbands, and this might result into several dehumanizing acts being inflicted upon them.

There are many laws in Nigeria aimed at reducing dehumanizing widowhood practices. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Chapter 4, on fundamental human rights, grants equality of rights, obligations, and opportunities to every Nigerian citizen. It also provides widows' rights to freedom in the choice of remarriage, right of inheritance and provides that no humiliating and dehumanizing treatment should be meted out to widows. On March 8, 2001, the Enugu State House of Assembly enacted some laws protecting the fundamental rights and welfare of widows and widowers. No person can compel a widow or widower to follow the dehumanizing and humiliating rites and

rituals which are against their choices. The law says that anyone who contravenes the Provisions of sections 4 or 5 of the law will be fined or sentenced to two years imprisonment. In 2003, in Imo state of Nigeria, a law (law no. 12) was enacted to prohibit humiliating customary widowhood practices. Anyone who goes against this law will be liable to a fine of N10,000 or six month imprisonment. And on November 26, 2004, the Cross River State House of Assembly enacted a law to protect widows against maltreatment and domestic violence (CIRDDOC).

Conclusion

After going through the study of facts and myths of widowhood practices among the Igbo, this writer comes to the conclusion that the continuation of these practices by Igbo people is sustained by the belief that widowhood practices are for the protection of the widow, for the welfare of the community, and for maintenance of mutual harmony between the physical and spiritual world. This study also reveals that widowhood practices are engaged in by all Igbo widows but the type of treatment, whether harsh or light, meted out to the widows, depends on the socio-economic background of each widow. Educated widows and those who are self-dependent or who dwell in the urban place are safer and more protected than the widows who are uneducated, who are dependent on the family or who dwell in the rural areas. The childless widow is the most humiliated because the society regards her as a witch.

Women should be empowered by being educated. Education plays a vital role in encouraging widows to revolt against humiliating cultural practices. One notes from Ifeoma Okoye's personal experience of widowhood that being an educated widow enabled her to revolt against the humiliating and dehumanizing aspects of Igbo widowhood practices.

It is really disappointing to see that the *umuada* (patrilineal daughters) who are responsible for ensuring that Igbo widowhood

practices are carried out don't appear to be sympathetic but rather insist that the widows should fulfil everything the torturous practices demand from them. Such *umuada* needs to be educated to make them change their traditional patriarchal ideologies and understand that they need to treat their fellow women with dignity and mercy. Men and women are equally important in bringing about radical changes that would stop or reform these harmful and lethal cultural practices that subjugate and violate the rights of widows.

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