

**WIDOWHOOD PRACTICE AS AN EXCLUSIVE RITE FOR WIDOWS, NOT WIDOWERS  
IN IGBO COSMOLOGY: A DISCRIMINATORY APPROACH TO WIDOWHOOD IN THE  
LIGHT OF ECCLESIOLOGICAL APPRAISAL**

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**Abstract**

*Widows and not widowers are the more affected group of people when it comes to the sin of omission especially in Igboland and Africa in general. They are often forgotten even by their closest relatives immediately after the burial of their husbands. The Igbo society to a large extent does not have an existing structure or budget plan that covers the welfare of the widows. This has constantly been a wound in the hearts of these widows when their male counterparts are exempted from such stringent burial rituals while mourning their late wives. Principal findings in Igbo cosmology revealed that widowhood is often covered in myth and its processes left to the governance of whatever social or cultural system. Such myths and cultural system are mainly targeted to the widows and not widowers. These cultural traditions to a very large extent appeared to have made women class vulnerable in the society they belong. Recent societal experiences on widowhood and adjustment process however, question this position. It is clear that a more critical understanding of the widowhood process within traditional cultural, legal and psychological contexts need to emerge. The researchers in actualizing this goal adopts the Feminist theory which supports equality for women and men in an egalitarian society.*

**Introduction**

Widowhood practice is an exclusive rite for widows, not widowers. This is necessitated by a number of reasons. One of the reason being that a widow is a woman and women are not equal with men in Igbo culture. Odunze (2005) described widowhood as an unwanted and horrible period that women pass through in life. Widowhood is an awful period for any woman whose husband has died. A lot of stress and punishment are meted out to the woman as soon as her husband is pronounced dead. In Igboland, hardly can a man die and his kinsmen will accept that he died a natural death. The automatic perception is usually that the wife has killed him. The widow is treated worse than a murderer. She undergoes certain rituals in order to appease the dead husband and the spirits of the forefathers.

In Igbo cosmology, widowhood in women is considered a stigma, and widows as inauspicious. Various Igbo communities have diverse ways of practicing rites pertaining to burial, but traditions are particularly hard on women. Culturally widowhood burial rites in most Igbo communities involve varying degrees of physical hardship, deprivation, ritual contamination, emotional instability, and socio-economic and psychological trauma (Odunze, 2005). Widowhood practices in Igbo cosmology involve dehumanizing rites and rituals that women are mandated to follow. Widowhood is often the beginning of life-long oppression and misery for women. (Nnachi, 2011). Arinze and Anyogu (2011) stated that in some Igbo Communities it is demanded that a widow sleeps with the high priest of a deity to separate herself from the spirit of the dead husband as a mark of purification. The widow is made to sit at a place on a chair or on the floor from morning till evening.

In some Igbo cultures, it's taboo for a widow to sleep in the afternoon. She is not allowed to shake hands, and compulsorily undergoes twenty-eight days of seclusion without stepping out of her compound. Thereafter she settles for additional two or five months of mourning depending on the particular cultural observances. In some Igbo communities, the widow is not allowed to see the corpse of her husband or eat the food cooked for the burial rites of her husband while the men can freely eat and see the corpse of their late wives. As painful as it is, these obnoxious practices are perpetrated on the widow by women called *Umuada* which are daughters of the deceased immediate and extended families married to other families. In Igbo cosmology, the disposition of the deceased properties is by will (testate) or by customary and traditional laws (inestate). Where there is no written will, inheritance is generally based on the applicable customs and traditions of the deceased's ancestral community. Abuse of rights in the form of traditional practice excludes women from ownership of lands and properties, leaving many of them destitute after their husband's death.

According to Ntozi (1997), widowhood is a route that is branded by some inordinate customs and traditions, enforced melancholic lifestyles, social exclusion, denial of rights, extreme neglect, social oppression and psychological depression, amongst others. Nwadinobi (2001) added that at the death of the husband, the widow is dethroned, defaced and disinherited. This means that in Igboland, as soon as the husband dies, the woman loses all her worth. Her dignity is believed to be the husband and once the husband is dead, the dignity crumbles. This is why Njaka (1975) maintained that widowhood practices remain the most unjust cultural practices that affect women when their husbands' death are dehumanizing and have negative influence on their lives. Onuogu (2007) observed that during the pre-Christian period, the treatment of widows differed based on the customs of their various communities. Every widow then, no matter the community in Igbo culture, is meant to offer the ritual cleansing.

According to Onyekwu in Amalu (2013), there are discriminations in the behaviours towards widows, depending mostly on the social status of the widow. Firstly, the socio-economic status of the widows is carefully taken into consideration before a decision is taken on the processes that the widow will undergo. The factors that are considered included the economic status of the widows, educational background, the widow's relationship with her in-laws, and the relationship between the widow and her husband. Thus, these factors determine the level of stress that a widow undergoes in most Igbo communities.

There are several examples of abominable cultural practices in Igbo cosmology that are exclusive to widows, not widowers. They are given as follows:

- a. Drinking water that is used for washing the corpse of the husband. Some Igbo communities still ask the widows to drink the water used for bathing the corpse of her husband to prove that she has no hand in his death.
- b. Having asked to sit on a bare floor throughout the mourning period in some parts of Ebenebe of Awka north and Isiagu of Awka south, all in Anambra state the woman's hand is tied to her back like a thief and the first 28 days of mourning is usually the worst. The widow is expected to cry often to signify that she is missing her husband. Widows are not allowed to go to market during that period.
- c. Widows are not expected to shave their public hair during the period of mourning. They are kept in an unhygienic environment. They are not meant to look neat so as not to attract other men. According to Njaka (1975), this is a pan Igbo custom that has been practiced for a long time. As it stands now, widows can now take adequate care of themselves such as having access to good hospitals without being subjected to die at home.

These and many more are the agitations of this research. These conditions strip the widow bare and expose her to humiliating physical and psychological violence, often in the name of culture, usually by those who should console her and support her in time of bereavement. It is however, unfortunate that these obnoxious practices are carried out as part of culture, the researchers are poised on finding lasting solutions to this social exclusion and societal calamity using the principles of feminist theory.

### **Feminist Theory**

Feminist theory supports equality for women and men. There are many feminine strive for gender equality, they include liberal feminist, socialist feminist and radical feminist. According to Ruther (2008),

Feminism is a critical stance that challenges the patriarchal gender paradigm that associates males with human characteristics defined as inferior dominant (irrationality of power) and females with those defined as inferior and auxiliary (in tuition, passivity). Most feminists reconstruct the gender paradigm in order to include women their full and equal humanity (p.3).

This scholar is not satisfied with the pattern the patriarchal societies do things by giving much power and dominion to males and designating females as inferior. Both males and females who identify themselves as feminists disagree on many things that pertains feminism. However, most feminists agree on five basic principles of working to increase equality. Feminists believe that both men and women should have the freedom to develop their human interests and talents, even if those interests and talents conflict with the status quo. Individuals associated with this school of thought identify the family as the main source of exploitation and feel that the patriarchy is so deeply rooted in this society that even a socialist revolution would fail to see the evil. In order words, the only way to end women oppression is to create a gender- free society. To this effect, Throme (1997) argues that:

Feminism has contributed to sociological theories of the family in fire broad theories; feminist have challenged the ideology of the monolithic family which has elevated the nuclear family with a bread winner husband. Feminists have challenged traditional dichotomies between what is private and public raising question about family boundaries and showing that isolation is in part illusory, given the close connections between the internal life of families and the organization of paid work, state-organized welfare and legal systems, school, child care and other institutions (p.22).

This study agrees with the above view, because feminists have actually fought against monolithic family in Igbo cosmology and challenged traditional dichotomies and discriminations between the males and the females in the society. According to Pobe (2012), "Feminism originates in the perception that there is something wrong with society's treatment of women; it attempts to analyze the reasons for and dimensions of women oppression and to achieve woman's liberation" (p.24). The study is in agreement with this scholarly view because in Igboland, something is wrong with the way women are being treated. How can widows be oppressed and discriminated against in terms of their husband's inheritance. Boff (1986) says;

If by feminism we understand whatever defends the basic quality of women to men, it is certain that women are human persons, and opposes any institutions that seek to reduce them to the status of objects, then Jesus was certainly a feminist. After all, the general teaching of his ethical preaching consists of the liberation of human being from a legalistic, discriminatory, freedom and a communion of sisters and brothers.... This ethical revolution launched by Jesus created a space for the liberation of women as person (p.79).

The study agrees with the above view on the feminism of the New Testament gospel according to Jesus which was liberation to humanity and the women inclusive from every oppression of the Judaic Old Testament ways of life. Feminism, however, is not a coherent ideology. It is a combination of some major traditions. These are liberal feminism, socialist feminism, and radical feminism, new feminism and post feminism. The first law was based on the principle of liberalism that advocated for equality of human individuals regardless of their sex and other distinctions. Thus, it argues for women's equal entitlement to all rights and privileges in the society as enjoyed by men on the basis that both are human beings. However, this study adopted this theory as one of the theories suitable in analyzing the findings of this study.

### **The Oppression of Widows Owing to the death of their Husbands**

Nwangwu (2018) reported the oppression of widows due to the death of their husband thus, “The husband may die before the wife will be subjected to untold hardships and marginalization from the men folk. The study however, finds out that the plights of the widows in Igboland range from poverty and economic deprivation to marginalization and inhuman treatment in the husband’s family, in the church as well as in the society. The widowers are not subjected to these conditions possibly because of the maleness of the Igbo culture.” (p.8). The patriarchal culture has provided a comfortable landing for men, unlike women. The issues of gender disparity and gender-based violence are worse experienced by women at the death of their husbands. The psychological concept of the Igbo culture has also created a perception, mostly stating that ‘men’ lose their wives, while ‘women’ kill their husbands. Women at the death of their husbands have been made to hold the short end of the stick. From abuse to discrimination and disinheritance, most women at the death of their husbands have been stripped naked physically, financially, socially, and otherwise in the name of culture. From the widowhood rite to property grabbing many widows have suffered severe hardship. Widowhood remains the most hidden and veiled area of violation of human rights. Women in widowhood are increasingly becoming vulnerable to multi-level poverty, discrimination, violence, stigmatization, depression, isolation, and suicide.

Experience has shown that gender power relations is skewed against women even long after her marriage has been nullified by the death of her husband. Some respondents from some Igbo communities were asked whether the widow has any right on the death of her husband, all the respondents said was that the widow has rights. Then the question of the kind of rights she has was put and respondents classified it into diverse subheads. While 8.1% of male respondents and 7.0% of female respondents identified right to life, 22.8% of male respondents said the right of the widow to train her children with the properties left behind by her husband, 3.7% of male respondents said right to remain in and be respected by the people of her husband. If this high percentage of the respondents admitted that widows should remarry, it shows that the widows are not really comfortable in their late husband’s houses.

Enforcement of harmful widowhood practices is violence against women. Dehumanizing widowhood rites and practices are prevalent gender-based violence practices extensively perpetrated against widows among the Igbo people in South-eastern, Nigeria. Alutu (1995) pointed out that because of the cultural and religious norms, superstition, fear, and traditional resistance to cultural changes, the victims who are women condone such violence and are considered vulnerable.

Secondly, women not only condone such violence but also perpetrate and perpetuate them by enforcing traditional laws and customs that infringe on the human and reproductive rights of widows (Ilika, 2005). From the findings of his study, it was discovered that though women are the victims of violence, they are surprisingly also perpetrators and astute enforcers of the practices, as well as those who vehemently oppose any form of change. What a paradox?

Again, Alutu (2005) stated further that organized women groups, civil societies and even the churches and religious leaders lack the courage or initiative to tackle the problems because of anticipated or imagined obstacles, conflicts, recriminations or reprisals often associated with breaking through such age-long and deep rooted cultural structures. The case of widowhood rites is further complicated and shrouded by its association with death, burial, myths, and superstitious beliefs.

Women in Igboland had made efforts to demand their rights in the past. The Aba women riot of 1979 is a typical example of such efforts when Igbo women confronted the British Colonial government in protest against the rumoured plan of per capita taxation. One, therefore, wonders why the Igbo women of modern society would not learn from this but instead allow themselves to be traumatized, marginalized and violated all in the name of culture. These harmful practices and their persistence are also explained by the woman to demonstrate considerable public grief over the death of her husband. It is appalling that in some Igbo cultures though, it is still believed that the woman is usually responsible for the death of her husband, hence the harmful practices are designed to elicit remorse and impose

punishment on the woman as the culprit and also to purify the widow by means of these practices (Genyi, 2013). This is in support of Okoye (1995) assertion that these practices are rooted in the belief that every death is unnatural and therefore the widow must pass through these rituals to prove her innocence and purify herself and also protect herself from further defilement.

### **The Women's Roles in Tackling Women Subjugation in Igboland**

The Igbo people of Nigeria always went to their women "Umuada" (daughters of the village) as a last resort when they are faced with serious conflicts or disputes of any sort, and were unable to resolve the situation. The matter was often placed before the daughters of the village. It is also known that once they have given a ruling on a particular controversy, the matter is deemed closed. They also take decision on issues which concerned them as a sex. If a woman is observed to be failing in her duties, especially in her traditional female role as a wife and mother, the daughters of the extended family would usually come together and caution the culprit. If she does not heed their warning, then they reserve the right to fine her. This fine would usually range from kolanuts, palm wine to money.

The (daughters of the land) "Umuada" have thus become a formidable force, through which women fight for the welfare of themselves and of the general public, while members draw considerable strength and support from one another. In some cases, when an offender displays some considerable obstinacy, these daughters who are also recognized as her (offender's) husbands could take her back to her parents and could authorize the man involved to marry another wife.

On the other hand, if a man is found to be cruel to his wife, the daughters of the extended family would come together and speak very seriously with him while they recount to him his duties towards his wife. If he continues to be nasty, they would come around and tell his wife to stop cooking for him. In addition, they would impose a levy on the man. Commenting on the role of Umuada, Green (2018) writes:

These women acted as political pressure groups in their natal villages in order to achieve objectives. They stopped quarrels and prevented wars. So powerful was their reputation that their villages had to reckon them and their possible reaction to every major decision<sup>6</sup>.

From the above cited examples, it would be realized that the Igbo woman played significant socio-political role during all three main developmental stages of her society: pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras. It is this significant role which that her the liberty she enjoys, it is the same significance which made it possible for her in the past to embark on the confrontations she had with British colonial authority, a symbol of patriarchal political and economic oppression.

In 1929, the women had displayed an enviable strength of solidarity when they turned out in their tens of thousands to protest with intense repugnance against the oppressive policies of the colonial administration which had already embarked on the collection of tax from all male citizens in the towns, while it was being rumoured that it was contemplating the same action with regards to the women. In spite of this method of extorting money from people, it has also reduced the price of palm produce which it got from the people a sure process towards the impoverishment of the country. The Igbo women understood the implications of these colonial measures and reacted with an organized all female match to the administrative headquarters, smashing and destroying some properties belonging to the colonial authority. This spirit of fighting for legitimate right to survival should be employed in tackling the menace of the obnoxious cultural traditions against the Igbo widows. They should form a common force in resistance against these obnoxious cultural traditions.

In modern times, as male and female relationship has gradually shifted from inequality to oppression, as roles change from complementary to perpetuated oppression of the womenfolk, there have also evolved out of the new social environment more modern methods of reacting to the female domination by the modern African male. These methods include the use of organized action to build the countervailing power. This includes several women's organization which by and large have political affiliation. Through such groups, while demonstrating to all that they are a capable politicians as they

are remarkable wives and mothers, they seek to acquire respect and prestige on the one hand and freedom from subjugation and denigration in their society on the other. This type of organization in Zambia has made notable contributions towards the improvement of the position of the Zambian woman.

### Conclusion

In all, the strategies to be adopted in combating the problems of widowhood subjugation and male dominance in Igbo culture cannot be achieved through separation (turning roles so that men will now be oppressed as the women have been). In the welfare of humanity, men need women, just as women need men. The women do not seek the over turning of roles so that men will now be the oppressed as the women have been, by the oppressive exploitative system of the world economy. As a practical solution, women/widows have not dealt with widowhood oppression in a confrontational manner either. They have dealt with it by seeking to constructively remain engaged in the society. In searching for a solution, it is important that a healthy link between men and women be maintained so as to avoid the risk of impairing the preservation of society. Verbal protests have been used. Strikes and punishment also. Political agitation has continually been employed. The quest for knowledge and economic independence has remained the target of the majority of women. The fight is within, not without the system. Barret (2019) appropriately sums up the position of the African women in the struggle for women's emancipation in Africa.

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