

WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES IMPLICATION AND RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN NIGERIA: NEEDFOR INTERVENTION.

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Abstract

Widowhood practices in developing Country Nigeria have been detrimental to women's general well-being and as such considered a serious social problem. Several Nigerian women are subjected to various harmful traditional practices in the name of widowhood rites. These often result in the violation of their human rights. This paper examines widowhood practices implications and rights of women in Nigeria: need for intervention. It conceptualized widowhood, health and human right. The paper particularly looked at the physical, psychologically, economic and social health implications of widowhood practices, human right violations and the need for interventions to alleviate the sufferings of widows and to free them from all forms of abuses. It also describes the situation of the widows who suffer cruel and dehumanizing cultural and ritual practices as a mourning process for their dead husbands. It concluded with the following suggestions among others as qualitative education for the girl-child at early stage, enlightenment programmes, Religious organizations to assist widows during and after the demise of their husbands and should continue to preach equality between both sexes so that women will not be treated as slaves and vocational skills acquisition for all women, particularly widows, as means of reducing, if not totally eradicated the harmful traditional rites, rituals, unjust discrimination and inhuman treatments against widows and the generality of women.

Keyword: Widowhood Practices, Implications, Human Right, Interventions, Nigeria.

Introduction

Widowhood is a sordid situation that befalls women after the death of their husband. The harmful rituals associated with this widowhood have lots of serious implications on the health and general wellbeing of the widows. Widows lack right to ownership of property, they face lots of inhuman traditional practices harmful to their health, such as female genital mutilation and widowhood rituals which both old and young widows are compelled to undergo as part of mourning their dead husbands. Mourning and burial rituals are inherently left for women to suffer whenever a man dies. This situation presents a traumatic, painful, and regrettable experience all over the world, but worse in developing countries including Nigeria, where there are lots of these obnoxious practices and rituals (Odimegwu&Okemgbo, 2003). A widow in the Nigerian context refers to any female, married under native law and custom or under the marriage Act or any other law recognized in Nigeria, whose husband has died, and has not remarried (Amasiatu, 2009). While

widowhood is the state or period of being a widow (Foluso, 2011). Widowhood rites, as practiced in many traditional African societies, are the practices that accompany the mourning of the loss of one's husband. The period of mourning is coupled with a series of life events which often have wide-ranging implications to their health situations. Some of these practices are variously described as barbaric, atrocious, backwards, immoral and abuse of the sexual and human rights.

In Nigeria, a widow is expected by tradition to undergo serious mourning rituals and rites hence, widowhood practices is an enduring period of deep rooted agony, seclusion and exclusion, anxiety, deprivation, restitution, trauma, insecurity and pain, all these have lots of social and health implication to the widow. Widowhood is faced with brutal and harsh economic that affects the children's welfare and education especially the girl child. Also, poverty may force widows to withdraw their children from school, exposing them to exploitation in child labor, prostitution, early or forced marriage, child trafficking, and hawking. Widowhood rites is enforced on widows in different ways as the tradition demands and inevitably expose them to economic hardships, confinement and ill-treatment (Owen, 2011).

In some societies, the death of a husband makes the wife lose some of her pride and glory. She becomes an object of maltreatment. The widow's status traditionally changes from womanhood to widowhood. The pathetic state of widows is often worsened by some cultural implications, norms and deprivations. The physical and psychological violence inflicted on widows as part of the traditional burial rituals of cleansing have lots of implications on the health of the widow who is most times traumatized and battered. The children of the widows are less protected in sharing their mother's pain, especially if they are still young.

In Nigeria, like any other African Country, traditional practices like widowhood is still consciously and unconsciously upheld by significant proportion of the population. Widowhood practices are observed by almost all the ethnic groups in Nigeria. Because widowhood is a tragedy that befalls a married woman as a result of the timely or untimely death of the husband making the survival of the widow difficult and challenging. The culture of widowhood has been in existence from time immemorial and transmitted from generation to generation. Traditions are particularly hard on widows because widowhood involves varying degrees of physical hardship, deprivation, ritual contaminations, emotional instability, socio-economic and psychological trauma. Oloko (2001) also reported that in different parts of the country, widowhood is associated with rituals and taboos, which are degrading and inhuman. Part of the ritual include the initial seven days confinement in a particular room, putting on black or white cloths, having her hairs shaved. The proper mourning could last for three months initially, while the duration of wearing dark clothes ranges from three months to one year or even more, depending on the culture, religion and family position on the matter.

Across African societies, especially in Nigeria, women continue to struggle for the right of gender equality and women's rights violations. In support of these women's rights, several human right instruments has been put in place to protect them from obnoxious abuses such as Customary laws, International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, and national Constitutions (Wuraola, 2016). In the context of this study, the paper examines the Health and Human Right implications of Widowhood Practices in Developing Country Nigeria; Need for Intervention.

Conceptual Review

Widowhood

The state of having lost one's spouse to death is termed widowhood. Widowhood has also been defined as the state of mourning the loss of one's husband or wife through death (Behrendt, 2010). The stress of this

phenomenon is as real as those of loneliness and divorce. Widowhood is thus seen as a life event with a wide range of consequences. For instance, widowhood is known to be responsible for the poor health status of widows and widowers, with minimal long-term consequences and is also associated with intense grief and angry expressions.

Human Right

Human right is commonly understood as inalienable fundamental rights to which a person is inherently entitled simply because she or he is a human being (United Nations, 2014). The concept of human rights emerged as an explicit category. Man and woman came to be seen as an autonomous individual, endowed by nature with certain inalienable fundamental rights that could be invoked against a government and should be safeguarded by it. Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, whatever our nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status. We are all equally entitled to our human rights without discrimination. These rights are all interrelated, interdependent and indivisible and should to be extended to all widows.

Widowhood Practices in Nigeria

Across the various ethnic groups, widowhood practices remain the norms that attracts activist of human right violation. Widowhood practices or burial rites are by no means limited to Nigeria as they are commonly practiced across Africa. However, in different parts of Africa and Nigeria in particular, various forms of rituals or rites are performed when woman losses her husband. Irrespective of whether a marriage results in children or not, widowhood practices are observed for women who are married both legally or under customary law (Samuel, 2011). In many ethnic groups in Nigeria, a bereaved wife is expected to undergo certain rites upon becoming a widow. In some ethnic groups, the nature and manner in which these rites are performed vary, depending on the culture of the people performing it. Widowhood or burial rites are performed not only to mourn the dead but also to ensure that the link between the dead and the living is intact. Thus, the period of mourning is often accompanied by series of life events and activities to show respect for the soul of the departed husband (Cook, Dickens & Fathalla, 2003).

From the foregoing, this practice is known as widow cleansing which includes ritual shaving of the widow's hair, wearing of black or white clothes for period of one year or more, sleeping and sitting on the floor, mat or a very low stool, being refrained from bath for several number of days, being made to swear with husbands corpse or oath taking, sleeping alone in the same room with husband's corpse for days to prove their innocence (Armstrong, Beyani & Himonga, 1993). Others are being made to weep and wail occasionally throughout the mourning period of the husband's death, the widow remained in confinement for a period of time after the husband's burial, chased out of their matrimonial home by in-laws, dispossessed of their husband's property and even property they jointly owned and even when the husband provided for his wife in the event of his death, widows cannot always be sure they will have access to that provision, restricted from going to certain places during the mourning of their husband, abandoned and not taken care of by their husband's relatives, severally accused of causing their husband's death, sent back to their father's house because they did not have a male child, at the end of the mourning period, the widow is inherited by any of the dead husbands male relative (European Journal of Research and Reflection in Educational Sciences, 2016).

Different communities, different cultures foster different treatments on widows in the Nigerian society. In some ethnic groups in Nigeria, the implication of widowhood practices exists across the nation but with differences in the form and types and the extent to which they are detrimental to the widow. In South-Eastern Nigeria, some Igbo culture exposes widows to a number of hardship in an attempt to prove their innocence in relation to their husband's death. Some part of Igbo culture indicates that a widow is truly expected to be mourning her husband with black clothes. Genyi & George-Genyi (2013) observed that when a man dies the wife will tie a wrapper over her chest without a blouse. She must not talk to anybody and will

not have her bath until her husband is buried. After the burial, the 'Umuada' (daughters of the man's ancestors) will shave her hair and bath her in an open compound. The rest of them will provide privacy by surrounding her. They will also confront her with questions on how and when the husband died, the circumstance that led to his death, what she did to save him from dying and her extent of contact with the late husband's family before his death? Where the explanations are not satisfactory, the widow will go through series of torture to prove her innocence (Genyi& George-Genyi, 2013)). The funeral rites "IkwaOzu" last for three days after that, the 'umuada' remain in the deceased's home for 12 days or sometimes as long as one month after the funeral at the expense of the widow (Anugwom, 2011).

Apparently, in some parts of Yoruba, widowhood involved not having right to the husband properties if they are to live in peace with the communities, otherwise they will be socially labelled. A widow is expected to express her sorrow of losing her husband by wearing black clothes, crying and often falling into the ready hands of others surrounding her to prevent her from injuring herself. This is a sign of bond between her and her late husband (Bazar, 2009). According to their traditional norms, widows are expected to mourn and be confined from three to twelve months as the case may be. At the end of the mourning period, the final rites are performed on the widow. This include being 'washed' in the night after having the final wailing and making some rituals which are expected to finally put the spirit of the departed to final rest and the 'outing' which involves change of dresses and being led to the market. According to Aransiola and Ige (2010), widowhood practices are observed among the Yoruba to protect the woman from being harmed by the spirit of the husband.

In some Northern communities in Nigeria, the widow is the first suspect to be scrutinized to ascertain whether the husband's death was natural or not. She is given various treatments to prove her innocence (African Guardian Magazine, 1988). Widows are generally not expected to witness the burial of the deceased. The period of mourning for widows in this region ranges from seven days to six months. Muslims observe three months and ten days during which the widow is prevented from wearing jewelry, interacting with other people and has restricted movement. The period of bathing and changing of apparel are prescribed. In some areas, they are required to pray or say incantations, wear certain objects or carry certain objects while wearing black clothes. The end of the period indicates the sharing of the assets of the deceased. Where the children are young, they and the property are left in care of the deceased's brother. In all cases, the widow is free to remarry. Marrying again is almost always to the younger brother of the deceased. If she accepts, the assets remain unshared.

Widowhood practices are also observed among some ethnic groups in the country, such as in Rivers state and Delta State. Ewelukwa, (2002) reveals that after the initial seven days compulsory confinement, additional thirty days is made mandatory for widows. This is done to ensure isolation, restriction of movement and association with people. The widow will wear a single black or white mourning cloth for six months to one year, work on bare foot or bathroom slippers during the mourning period. At the end of the mourning period in some parts, there will be a second burial mostly in the upland areas after which she can remarry (Nnodim, 2012). In the riverine communities especially in the Kalabari areas of Rivers State, widows are escorted on bare foot by women to where the late husband's corpse is and they are made to sit with a low stool at the head of the husband, crying and at the same time singing and praising the late husband.

In some parts of AkwaIbom State, the widowhood rites involve sacrificing a fowl and shaving the hair during which incantations are said. After her husband's death, the widow will not be allowed to go out, but will be made to sit on the same location to cry and mourn. She has to wear the same wrapper and blouse for a period of six weeks until after the burial. One of the beliefs of the community is that, a man and his wife shared everything in common in their lifetime ((Nnodim, 2012). While among the Quas of Big Qua Town of Cross-Rivers, a traditional practice known as the 'Mbukpoisi' is carried out. When a traditional ruler (Etubom) dies, his widow is confined to a corner of the house. She does not bath, brush, go out or look in a mirror and sleeps on a dirty mat. If the burial rites take a year, she must comply.

Though Christianity has brought about some modifications in widowhood practices such as wearing white cloth instead of black, but the practices still exist. And in recent times, civilization and religious beliefs have influenced the number of days or months for mourning and confinement.

Health Implications of Widowhood Practices in Nigeria

Woman in Nigeria suffers stressful situation when the husband dies, this situation infringe in them emotional, physical, psychological, mental spiritual and social problems. Health involves the ability to function physically, emotionally, psychologically, mentally, spiritually and socially in an environment. But the widows do not enjoy the best of health due to pressure of conforming to widowhood practice. A lot of sanctions placed on widow by the society make it difficult for women to express their view point in widowhood. The negative physical implications suffered by widows could be attributed to a number of factors such as drinking the water used in washing the corpse, excess grief, confinement, starrng and emotional violence etc.

Another dimension to the ordeal of widows is the psychological health implications of widowhood practices. Agumagu (2007) opinion that most of these implications are as a result of forcing the widows to marry their husbands relatives against their wishes which will bring about unhappiness, while isolation and confinement exposes them to grief, boredom, anger, mental torture and hallucination. Much punishment causes them emotional fatigue and memory loss. Also forcing the widow out of their husband's house leads to hopelessness, mental stress, destitution and grief while sleeping alone with their husband's corpses causes fear, panic phobia, anxiety, shock and heart attack, again, disinheriting them of their children causes them serious pains, heart attack, perpetual marital unhappiness, frustration and sometimes leads to madness, constant accusation over their husband's death subjects them to shock, sleeplessness and pounding heart. Discrimination against the widows subjects them to desperation, depression and frustration.

Economic implication of widowhood practices includes wallowing in economic hardship, poverty, impoverished, discrimination from working in the public sector, family burden, begging practice, children dropping out of schools (George, 2013).

Social health implications of widowhood practices include discrimination, regarded as outcasts, oppression and depression, dissociation from social groups, restriction from talking in public gatherings, they are treated as strangers and hardly recognized in family meetings (Owolabi&Onibokun, 2013).

Many of the rituals performed to cleanse or purify the widows are dangerous to their health yet many communities continue to practice it through wife inheritance where a widow is inherited by a male member of her dead husband's family, forcing her to marry him. And if the husband died of HIV/AIDS and must have infected the wife before his death, the wife who is now living with the HIV virus can passed on the virus to the male in-law who inherited her. And if the new husband has wife or wives, he will also infect them and the virus will continue to spread from one person to another either through the husband who might also have other women outside or the wives cheating on him which is referred to as sexual networking that fuels the spread of HIV/AIDS in our society. Again, if the widow was not infected but the husband who inherited her has the HIV virus, he can pass it on to the widow.

Widowhood Practices as a Violation of Human Right

In many ethnic groups in Nigeria, some traditional practices are generally regarded as being harsh to natural justice, good conscience and equity. It is also interesting to note that some of this practices and customs have vanished and new ones are emerging to deal with the new situations. However, traditional practices such as widowhood rites which infringe on women's right decline to change. While the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has changed some aspect of it to accommodate global changes, thus, we therefore expect changes in the customary laws also (Iwobi, 2008). However, speaking on the violation of human rights through these harsh widowhood rites, most of the elders do not believe there is any kind of

rights that women can enjoy without the support of their husbands. They believe women have to enjoy their so-called rights in their matrimonial homes. This shows why widow's maltreatment still exist in Nigeria. The question is why widowers are not partaking in such practices whenever they lose their wives or do the spirits of their wives not hover or disturb them as the men's spirits do? Also, if losing one's husband is associated with ill-luck, is losing one's wife a good-luck which everybody likes? If it is not a good-luck then widowers should also be made to undergo rites for their own purification. The fact that such trials are rarely given to widowers in Nigeria, indicates that, it serves a different purpose (Daramola, & Oluwatusin, 2013).

Although, there are indications that widows maltreatment and impoverishment in contemporary Nigeria is a function of how empowered educationally and economically the widows are as well as of their age, rural and urban location. The reality remains however that the majority of Nigerian women do not possess access to or have control over resources like finance and education that would make them less vulnerable to maltreatment and impoverishment should their husbands die. The socio-cultural conditions that make widowhood such a terrible experience for many women in Nigeria do so because of the structural disadvantage that women suffer from not having access to productive resources and this has impacted negatively on their self-esteem which is made manifest in their lack of will to rise against the violation of their human rights. Majority of rural women are poorly educated, concentrated in low-earning economic preoccupations and their views are unrepresented at decision making levels. The dependency of women on men is a key part of the explanation for women's vulnerability to the violation of their human rights (Iraq, 2014).

The context of inheritance under customary law or cultural practices of inheritance is not under uniform law in Nigeria. Individual ethnic groups determine the law that would be applied. However, the laws protecting the right of widows in Nigeria against harmful traditional practices are limited in scope by virtue of customary laws. In fact, in most cases the widows are not aware of the existence of such laws protecting them. Specifically, under the 1999 constitution in chapter IV titled "fundamental right" every Nigerian is guaranteed the right to life, dignity of the human person, personal liberty, freedom from discriminatory practices. Also, the sanctity of the person shall be recognized and enhanced. Based on the above statement on human right it becomes clear that widowhood violates the Right of life of Widows (Tasie, 2013). Many women are exposed to dangers that can easily claim their lives in the course of the death of their husbands because of the socio-economic, socio-cultural and spiritual elements attached to the practices of widowhood ritual and rites (Bamgbose, 2005).

United Nation Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Right (UDHR) in its global document states that everyone is entitled to all their right and freedoms set forth in the declaration without distinction of any kind which indicates that there should not be distinction between how a widower and widow be treated. Thus, women's right are as important as any other right, everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and its benefits. The implication of this is that no one must be forced to participate in any traditional practice of his/her society. The choice to participate solely rest on the individual concern (Byrnes, 2002).

Intervention into Widowhood Practices

On the way forward for the intervention of widowhood practices in Nigeria, there is need for relevant organizations and institutions of human right to be involved in the needful legislation or legal framework to end the barbaric practices. Other means that can help to alleviate the sufferings of widows involves education of women, vocational skills acquisition, enlightenment programmes and creating awareness. For widows to be free from all forms of abuses, Government, Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs) and the religious body have some roles to play. The government in particular should re-affirms that the girl-child is educated at an early stage of life so as to become empowered, enlightened and be able to fight for themselves, if eventually they found themselves in such state. Moreover, the rural communities should as a matter of fact

be enlightened, particularly, on the way of handling the issue of widowhood practices. The government, through its agencies, legal practitioners, religious leaders as well as all stakeholders should create awareness, enlighten and educate the rural communities that are still practicing widowhood rites. In addition to these, widows need to be economically empowered for them to be free from inhuman rites and practices. This can be achieved through vocational skill acquisitions to expose them to all necessary economic opportunities as well as supportive services that can liberate them from unemployment, economic depression and poverty (Adeyemo, 2014). Skill training is an important linked to increase in productivity, quality, diversity and occupational safety, as well as improvement in health and increasing in-come.

In other to deal with widowhood practices, courts that deal specifically with matrimonial affairs should be set up. The government should also establish a local Committee Courts at the village level. This committee court should be governed by customary law and deal with issues concerning the widow in terms of inheritance and succession disputes. Widows should be sensitized to use these courts closer to them to seek protection from dehumanizing widowhood rites. There should be an appointment of a widows to sit as Magistrates of these Local Courts. Having gone through some of the experiences themselves, they will be best suited to appreciate and therefore protect widows from dehumanizing widowhood rites.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been established in this paper that despite civilization and religious involvement, widowhood practices still exist in some ethnic groups in Nigeria. Among the implications of widowhood are the pathetic, degrading and dehumanizing rites that widows are subjected to. And for widows to be fully liberated, awareness programmes should be given to them to sensitize them to some facts, particularly on what widowhood entails. It is therefore a challenge to the society, so the government, parents, women leaders, religious and opinion leader should sensitize all women and widows about the negative impacts of widowhood.

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