

# **‘Plead the case of the widow’ (Isaiah 1:17): The stigma of widowhood in eastern Nigeria and the needed faith-based interventions**

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## **Abstract**

Even though it is the 21st century, where education and scientific advancements have changed the face of the modern society, age-old customs and traditions continue to encourage gender-based violence in Igbo land. While research has paid much attention to widowhood in Nigeria, this study lays greater emphasis on the experiences of widows, specifically in Eastern Nigeria. The qualitative study conducted using the phenomenological approach also analysed some verses from the Old Testament that deal with care for widows. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 informants who were selected purposefully and data analysed thematically. Findings show that the stigma that widows suffer includes the widow being accused of killing the husband, the widow being accused of being hostile to the in-laws when the husband was alive, the widow being pushed into abject poverty, and the widow being isolated from friends and family. Widows are also subjected to physical, mental, and sexual abuse leading to increased attempts to commit suicide. The experiences of widows have been sustained by traditional leaders, church groups, and the government due to a lack of political will and silence on the part of the victims. It is concluded that there is need for a serious campaign for the protection of widows in eastern Nigeria by traditional rulers, church leaders and faith-based organizations.

**Key words:** Domestic violence, Gender-based violence, Igbo land, Nigeria, Widowhood

*Mila (N.S.), Vol. 13(2024), pp.43–53, ISSN 1015-6178 ©2024 Institute of Anthropology, Gender and African Studies*

## **Introduction**

Even though it is the 21st century, where education and scientific advancements have changed the face of post-modern society, age-old customs and traditions continue to encourage gender-based violence against widows in eastern Nigeria. Eastern Nigeria is one of the four major regions in Nigeria made up of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. Before the coming of the British, the Igbo people were known to be followers of African traditional religion (ATR). In ATR in eastern Nigeria, there are rituals that are associated with certain events, ranging from marriage, the new yam festival, to the birth of a child, and death. In death, the treatment given to the spouse of the dead varies on a gender basis and this is observable all over eastern Nigeria. Death, which is supposed to be a time of mourning

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and lamentation and also solidarity for those affected, has metamorphosed into a time of abuse and dehumanisation of women in Igbo land (Elochukwu 2021; Chika and Nneka 2014; Ukaegbu and Oguejiofor 2022). A man is comforted and taken care of after his wife passes away, whereas a woman is in difficulties when her spouse passes away. Everyone in the community offers the man consolation when a woman passes away. But the woman is made the scapegoat after the man passes away. This study focuses on the experiences of widows in eastern Nigeria including Enugu, Abia, Anambra, Imo, and Ebonyi.

Culture and traditions of the Igbo people must be respected in order to enjoy blessings from the ancestors—personally and community-wise. Unfortunately, some of these cultural make-ups have been strongly affected by bias and man-made hate social practices towards one another (Oluwapelumi 2023; Nwafor 2017). Given that the Igbo people hold in their arms religion, education, and modernization, one would think that this could have ameliorated this menace, but the reverse is the case (Mezieobi *et al.* 2011:73).

Women continue to play the second fiddle in cultural affairs throughout most sectors of livelihood in eastern Nigeria (Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Asuzu 2019). A woman does not talk when her husband talks, and she also does not move until the husband says so. In fact, there has been an age-long practice of inheritance where the woman or daughter is not made to inherit anything after the husband's or father's death (Ajayi 2020; Silas 2020). Furthermore, when it comes to education, the boy child is sent to school, while the girl child is forced to stay at home as a home-keeper. The female elder group (*Umuada*) was formed to care for women and protect their rights, but it has also joined in the sexist interpretation of the death of the man. The *Umuada* concurs with those inflicting physical, psychological, and other pains on the woman. These pains are what this study is geared towards unravelling (Elochukwu 2021; Chimeziem and Samuel 2009).

The Old Testament is believed to contain narratives that concern the treatment of vulnerable women and girls, and even so the protection of widows. In the words of Kaveny (2005), the prophets of Yahweh in the Old Testament railed against widespread oppression of the widows, as could be seen in Isaiah 1:17, 23; 10:2, Jeremiah 7:6; 22:3, and Ezekiel 22:7. The cloak of a widow was not to be taken in pledge as mentioned by the deuteronomist in Deuteronomy 24:17; along with orphans and strangers, she is to receive a share of the tithe collected every third year (Deuteronomy 14:29; 26:12–13) and has a claim on the fruits and grain that fall to the ground during harvest time (Brown 1970). This indicates that

since the beginning of the Old Testament, widows have always had their rights protected. Isaiah 1:17 provides a formidable base towards understanding the need for the protection of widows. In ancient Israelite society, widows were among the most vulnerable members of the community. Without the protection and provision traditionally afforded by husbands, widows often faced economic hardship, social marginalisation, and legal vulnerability. Therefore, the mention of widows alongside the oppressed and fatherless in Isaiah 1:17 underscores God's concern for those who are marginalised and disadvantaged.

The command to "plead the case of the widow" emphasises the importance of advocating for the rights and well-being of widows. This includes ensuring they receive fair treatment, protection from exploitation, and access to resources necessary for their survival and dignity. The resolve against injustice implies a broader societal responsibility to address systemic inequalities and discrimination that widows may face. Overall, Isaiah 1:17 underscores the moral imperative for individuals and communities to actively engage in acts of compassion, advocacy, and social justice, particularly on behalf of those who are vulnerable, such as widows. It calls believers to emulate God's concern for the marginalized and to work towards a society characterized by fairness, equity, and care for all its members.

Widows' mistreatment has been a long-standing custom in most communities in eastern Nigeria. Those who carry out these obnoxious practices have no idea why. They only know they met them and believe their fathers did the right thing. Gender socialisation categorises men and women into distinct gender domains in society, with each domain forming individuals with its own set of attitudes and expected behaviours (Nwakanma and Erundu 2021:60). Others also perform them for their own selfish gain and depravity (Okoli *et al.* 2021). The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of widows by analysing the culture and values among Igbo women in eastern Nigeria.

## **Methods**

This is a qualitative study which was conducted using a phenomenological approach. The essence of the phenomenological design is to provide a subjective analysis of the study. Phenomenology is a form of qualitative research that focuses on the study of an individual's lived experiences within the world (Neubauer *et al.* 2019). Data for the study were derived from in-depth interviews (ID) with selected fifteen (N=15) informants in eastern Nigeria that were selected purposively. Out of the fifteen informants, three were males and twelve were females. The fifteen informants were purposively

selected. Secondary data were also gotten from relevant academic literature. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

## **Results**

The data from study informants presented below show the stigma attached to widowhood in eastern Nigeria.

### ***Widow accused of killing the husband***

Informant F6 reported that she experienced attacks and condemnation for causing the death of her husband. She said:

I was questioned about the death of my husband. I was accused of killing my husband. My husband's corpse was hidden from me. They said it was because I have a boyfriend, which is why I killed my husband.

Another informant (F2) mentioned that she was made a scapegoat because:

I usually had problems with my husband. This is because my husband was having an affair with someone on my street. I had reported his behaviour to his relatives and even to leaders in the church. When he died, I was surprised that it was the people that I reported his womanising acts to who were the first to accuse me of killing my husband. The relatives insisted that there is nothing I would say that would change their mind that I did not kill my husband.

Women have always been victims of marital issues, except for some exceptions where some of the women are the architects of their scapegoating.

### ***Hostile to the husband when he was alive***

Some women are usually not friendly with the relatives of their husbands. In the words of F4:

There was a woman that when the husband was alive, she was treating the relatives of the husband anyhow. In fact, she was the breadwinner of the family, so when the husband died, she was harsh to all of us. The relatives of her husband waited for him to die before they dealt with her. She was made to shave her hair.

Another informant (F9) reported that:

Some of the relatives, once you do not allow them to control your husband, will say you are hostile. Most times, they will be coming to borrow money from your husband, and when you refuse to give it to them or allow your husband to give it to them, they will start complaining.

Informant F8 reiterated:

Some women are the ones who created their own problems. Some of them seem to be hostile to their husbands' relatives, particularly if they are wealthy. They alienate their husband's brothers, sisters, friends, and other family members.

The hostility that a woman portrays may be due to her behaviour, which the family of her husband perceives as positive or negative.

***Naked and physically abused***

Once a man dies, the woman is taken through excruciating physical and mental torture. According to informant F1:

My hair was shaved. I was forced to wear black clothes. I wore this cloth this morning. I was not allowed to take my bath. At midnight, I was taken to the river, where my hair was shaved. The river is not a close river as such. People were not supposed to see them while they were travelling because, before shaving, they would stand by the river naked and declare they weren't responsible for their husband's murder.

Another informant (F5) recalls thus:

It was while I was in quarantine; I did not bathe for weeks. I cannot even remember the number of weeks. Visitors were not allowed to see me. Unfortunately, women were the ones who enforced the ill-treatment on me. It is also at the point that your husband's friends will deal with you if you insist on not having sexual relations with them.

Informant F7 further noted that:

My friend, whose husband died, was forced to drink the bath water from the dead husband. Sometimes, kola nuts will be dipped in the water used to bathe the dead husband and the woman will be forced to chew them. Also, the woman is made to embrace the corpse of her husband three times and swear that she did not kill him.

Informant F10 on her part lamented that:

When my husband died, all of my brothers-in-law fought vehemently for a piece of my body. When I continuously refused their advances, trouble ensued, and I never felt at ease again. I was forced to bathe in flood water. Sometimes I was forced to use water from any dirty gutter around.

It is this physical and mental abuse that is meted on the widow who has been constructed as wretched. The widow becomes helpless in the midst of all the daunting challenges.

***Financially wrecked***

Due to the physical and mental abuses of the woman, the widow loses a lot of things including money. In the words of F3:

My friend was told to bring all the documents of the things owned by her husband. These included the land, television, and radio; everything in the house was taken away from her. She was made to swear an oath that she did not know anything about his bank accounts or any other property.

Informant F11 further reported that:

Some women are forced to buy white goats after the death of their husbands. Whether she has money or not, that is not their concern. She is also forced to buy palm wine, which they say will be used for cleansing.

The widow is made to suffer financially. There are instances where the widow borrows from her friends and ends up in a huge debt.

***Isolation***

The woman is forced to stay alone and stopped from having a relationship with anyone. According to F12:

I was made to cook in my own pot and eat alone. I was considered a bad person, which is why they made me sit alone. I was made to sleep in one room. Initially, I was forced to sleep in the same room as the corpse of my dead husband.

Another informant (F10) asserted:

The widows are forced to sleep on old mats. Some are also made to sleep on wooden boards. These they do all alone. Once the period of mourning is over, the wooden board or old mats are burned. This is because it is believed that the woman is evil; hence, nothing associated with her is to be used by anyone.

### ***Suicidal thoughts***

Informant F6 reported contemplating suicide after the death of her husband:

At some point, I wanted to kill myself due to the frustration I was going through. But I told myself that I had to be alive for the sake of my children and also myself. Were it not for that, I would have killed myself. At that point, even your friends are frustrating you; your immediate family members also abandon you. It is a serious challenge.

Confirming the above revelation, informant F9 asserted that:

I have only female children. When my husband died, I was told that, since I did not have a male child, I had no business remaining in that house. It was very difficult for me. I tried to persevere but I got to a point where I could not endure anymore. I took rat poison to drink it, but I dropped it. I told myself that it would be well soon.

Suicide attempts among widows are on the rise due to a range of issues including cultural factors. Widows often contemplate taking their lives when they fail to endure the frustration directed at them.

### **Discussion**

This study shows that widows in eastern Nigeria are suspected of killing their husbands. This is consistent with the findings of Anzaa *et al.* (2018), who found that widows are among the most neglected categories of people and are denied their husbands' earnings. Additionally, Ezejiofor (2011) stated that widows are occasionally accused of witchcraft and of killing their husbands, which is a premeditated tactic employed by the deceased man's family to get rid of the widow's guardians. The results also show that the character of the woman before her husband died affects the way people treat her when the husband dies. Onyima (2015) noted that public perception of the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in Nigeria is generally negative and fraught with distrust, tension, and conflicts. A strained relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law is a common phenomenon in Nigeria. Further, Nwaugo (2018) noted that a woman is considered wicked if she fails to

bear children for her late husband. She will be accused of being a witch, which is why she is depriving her mother-in-law grandchildren.

The study further shows that widows are physically abused. This resonates with the study of Dasgupta (2017), who found that widows have been victims of a patriarchal system without challenging it due to the culture of silence among the dispossessed, which perpetuates their oppression. Dasgupta (2017) further stated that such oppression denies widows a sense of awareness to respond to their situation; it also takes away their power and the basic vocabulary to expose it. Widowhood, essentially, represents the historical power imbalance between men and women. Mishra *et al.* (2016:186) argued that widows are not allowed to wear adornments or colourful clothing, are served a limited amount of food, forgo a hot meal, and do not apply *sindoor* (a mark of marriage). These practices exclude the widows from the cultural practices of everyday life – separating them from their fellow women of the same age and social group. The life of a widow becomes more problematic if she is illiterate, doesn't possess any wealth, and presumably relies on others (Shekhar and Gouda 2016).

Findings further showed that most widows are financially wrecked due to their isolation from the people. Sabri *et al.* (2016) aver that cultural and superstitious beliefs and the overall community perceptions of widows result in their psychological abuse and deprivation of financial entitlements. Igoma (2022) argued that though inevitable, the death of a husband is considered an irreparable loss, and for many widows, what comes after are life-altering experiences that strip them of their dignity and right to survival, thus leading to a life of deprivation and descent into poverty. Conversely, Bridget (2009) showed that the advent of Christianity changed some unsavoury practices that prevailed in Nigeria, especially in the eastern part of the country, where widows were almost treated as lepers when they lost their husbands. Ajayi (2020) noted that because of greed, many family members still rob widows of their late husbands' property, disinherit them, and take lands and houses belonging to their husbands, not minding that they have children.

Suicidal thoughts were also reported among widows in eastern Nigeria. A study conducted by Mamun (2022) found that the prevalence of suicidal ideation ranged between 5% and 19% and the rate has increased over time since the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. Significant risk factors concerning suicidal behaviour included factors related to socio-demographic variables: female gender, being divorced or widows or widowers or single in marital status, having lower levels of education, being in urban residence, belonging to a higher socioeconomic class, being unemployed, and having no children.

Yankauer (1981) opines that suicides occurring during the crisis of widowhood are really due to domestic anomy resulting from the death of a wife. However, Sydney-Agbor (2021) reported that there was a strong inverse association between psyche and perceived social support, time of widowhood, and age of husband's death.

#### Conclusion

This study examined the experiences of widows in eastern Nigeria, including the stigma and social pressures they undergo in the course of their widowhood. Gender-based violence has dehumanised widows in Igbo land which has led to their death in the long run. This is due to poverty, ignorance of human rights laws against gender-based violence, and under-reporting of gender-based violence against the women. Culturally, widows are supposed to be cared for so that they can be psychologically and physically healed. However, in Igbo land widows are subjected to traumatising experiences such as shaving of hair on the head and pubic region, drinking of remains of bath water used to wash the husbands' corpses, denial of the right of inheritance, and not taking bath. The advent of Christianity, education, and modernisation has not deterred the perpetrators from continuing with these dehumanising practices. In order to stem violence against widows, there is need for a serious campaign for the protection of widows in eastern Nigeria by traditional rulers, church leaders and faith-based organizations.

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