

Evil Widowhood Practices and Health Status of Widows in Uyo Local Government Area.

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Abstract

This study examine the extent of evil widowhood practices and health status of women in Akwa Ibom State. Two specific research objectives were formulated to guide the study. The research design adopted for this study was descriptive survey design. The population of the study comprised of all widows and widower using a stratified sampling technique. The instrument known as “Evil Widowhood Practices and Health Status of Widows Questionnaire (EWPHSWQ)” was used to collect the data. The instrument was subjected to reliability test, using test-retest method and it produced high average reliability coefficient of 0.82 to justify the use of the instrument. The analysis was done using appropriate statistical techniques such as Pearson analysis. The findings revealed that there are various form evil widow practice in Akwa Ibom State. Finally, there is significant relationship between evil widow practice and health status of widow. One of the recommendations was that public awareness should also be made by the government on the effect of evil widowhood practices on women.

Key Words: Evil Widowhood Practice, Health Status

Introduction

A widow is any woman who has survived or outlived the spouse. In a simple term a widow is a woman whose spouse is dead (Merriam-Webster). The state of having lost one's spouse to death is termed widowhood (Collins English Dictionary). These terms are not applied to a divorcee following the death of an ex-spouse. The term widowhood can be used for either sex, at least according to some dictionaries, but the word widowhood is also listed in some dictionaries. Occasionally, the word viduity is used. The adjective for either sex is widowed. Widowhood is not only a personal loss, but also a familial, social and sometimes financial loss. It is a personal loss in that the surviving spouse often loses a friend, companion, lover and sexual partner; familial, in the loss of a partner in parenthood and grandparenthood; social, in the loss of status through the move from couple hood to singlehood; and a financial loss due to a possible reduction in income and assets. Many years of shared married life generally result in the spouse becoming one of the main sources of meaning in life (Viorst 1987). When Rita Marley, the wife of the legendary Bob Marley, sang the song titled “who feels it knows it” after the death of her husband, she perhaps could really assess the suffering and the pains, the impact and the devastating effects of losing a dear one; while her opinions would represent to a large extent those of the widows of the world, who more often than not are at the receiving end and bear the brunt of the loss, worst still in Africa. Widowhood is an unpleasant experience. It is degrading when widows are subjected to untold hardship and

maltreated by the in-laws and by the society in general. Their situation is quite awful, they are poor and uncared for by people who are supposed to give them succor and help.

In most West African countries, widowhood is determined by cohabitation, customary marriage and marriage of ordinance. The marriage of ordinance refers to the Western type of monogamous marriage in a magistrate court, in a church or according to Islamic laws. By cohabitation, a woman could live with a man for so many years without getting married either customarily or legally. This union could result in having children or no children but upon the death of the man, the woman is expected to perform widowhood rites even though she may not be recognised as a 'proper wife'. Loss of spouse is one of the most negative life events, next only to the loss of a child (Bennett *et al.*, 2005). Ironically, the disorganization and trauma that follow the death of a spouse seem to be greater in women than in men whenever either loses their spouse (Fasoranti *et al.*, 2007). Women are more likely than men to be widowed for two reasons. First, women live longer than men (a fact highlighted by worldwide data regarding differences in life expectancies of men and women). In addition, women tend to marry older men, although this gap has been narrowing. Because women live longer and marry older men, their odds of being widowed are much greater than men's (Lee, 2002).

Statement of the Problem

In Nigeria, just like other patriarchal societies, women are regarded more as appendages to their husbands. They 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 their spouse 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.

In Akwa Ibom State, the death of a husband makes the wife lose some of her pride and glory, especially positions assumed after the husband's status. She becomes an object of maltreatment. The woman's status changes from womanhood to widowhood. The children too, who themselves have become less protected share in their mother's pain, especially when they are still young. In some cases, they are chased out of their father's house with their mother, after the death of their father. This poses a great problem to the larger society to which these children belong, as some of them may not continue with their education because of the financial constraint. Some may become violent due to harsh experience or take to some other social vices. It is on this ground that this study is carried out to examine the extent of evil widowhood practices and its resultant effects on health status of widows in Akwa Ibom State.

Objective of the study

The main objective of this study is to examine the extent of evil widowhood practices and health status of women in Akwa Ibom State. Specifically, the study is:

- i. To examine the extents of evil widowhood practices on widows in Akwa Ibom State.
- ii. To find out the relationship between evil widowhood practices and health status of widows in Akwa Ibom State.

Literature Review

i. Evil Widowhood Practices in some Nigerian Societies

Despite various changes in the modern Nigerian society, like many other traditional practices, widowhood practices have continued to exist silently or openly in spite of modernisation. In the Nigerian society, as in many other African societies, human greed exist in many families and the death of a male member of the family offers an opportunity to the other male of the extended family to increase their holding of the scarce and inelastic commodity 'land'. The commodity now in question can expand to other items of properties. Its acquisition, that is, the ownership of the scarce commodity, land, basically controls the treatment of widows. The implication of this is that, the in-laws could throw the widows and their children out or falsely accuse widows of killing their husbands so as to acquire the late man's properties and land. All other activities serve the same purpose and any mystification and other rituals and superstitious sanctions are geared towards the oppression of the widow. The Nigerian widow, in the course of fulfilling funeral rites, is subjected to a greater agony than the grief of the loss of her husband.

The harmful nature of these widowhood practices on the woman as an individual with rights. With over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups in Nigeria, the implication is that, there could be as many types and forms of widowhood practices in the country. These practices exist across the nation, but with differences in the forms and extent to which they can be harmful and detrimental to the widows. As Ogamba, Ebele (2000) puts it, "it is almost a common syndrome that widows are accused of being responsible for their partner's death". So they establish their innocence through certain acts. The travails of a widow begins immediately her husband breaths his last breath, she is made to go through various traditional rites, most of them very wicked and dehumanizing. These widowhood practices vary from one place to another.

ii. Evil Widowhood Practices in Akwa Ibom State

In Akwa Ibom State, according to their custom, there are two forms of widowhood rites which include:

- i. The Christian rites
- ii. Non- Christian rites.

The Christian Rites

The former involves 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 time until after the burial. One of the beliefs in this community is that, a man and his wife shared everything in common in their lifetime. In order to sever the relationship, her pubic hair is shaved, her finger nails cut and buried near the grave. During this ceremony, the following words are said: "this is your share from the body of your wife, so take and leave her alone for she has nothing in common with you as from this day that you are given your share" (African Guardian Magazine, 12/09/88:8-11). The woman will be bathed in public by other women as the final separation ritual. Rites were also performed to separate the children; she is asked to buy dead and dried young chick, which will be used to brush the children's body. Every part of the house would be swept and the rubbish thrown away at the foot of a plantain tree. These rites are being performed by the elderly widows of the family and it involved one bottle of hot drink, minerals, palm-wine and cooked food. The women camp

with the widow for three days. After the burial, items such as jar, plates, cups that belong to the husband will be packed away by his brothers. A little portion of land would be given to the widow if she has a male child.

Non-Christian Rite

However, in the Non-Christian rite, in the same community, a widow had to wear the same cloth for six months. After the burial, she will be “put into widowhood” by the older widows of the lineage. She had to wear a sack for six months. She will provide drinks, fowl, palm-wine and food. She will be asked to confess if she had sex with another man since her husband’s death. She will take an oath and then be able to bath every night if she is not guilty of sleeping with another man, but if she had sex with another man, that is another issue entirely. Again, she will not plait or comb her hair, after eating twice a day, she will not wash her hands until the following day. After the burial, she will not go to the market, farm for another six months. African Guardian Magazine (12/09/1988).

General Patterns of Widowhood Practices in Akwa Ibom State

Generally, most of these harmful widowhood practices examined in this paper include:

1. Shaving of Hairs
2. Wearing of Black/White clothes
3. Sleeping on the floor or mat
4. Refraining from taking bath for a period of time
5. Being made to swear with Husband’s corpse
6. Seclusion

1. Shaving of Hairs

This includes even the pubic hairs, with broken bottle for shaving the hair on her head and razor for the pubic hair. In some places, there will be certain designs on her head after literally scrapping off the hairs. The significance of this is that, since the husband is dead, there is nobody to beautify her hair for, at least for a period of time (Ilozue: 2007).

2. Wearing of Black/White Clothes

This is meant to indicate that the widow is mourning and to make the widow un-attractive as well as to let everybody knows that her husband is dead.

3. Sleeping and Sitting on the Floor or mat

The symbolic effect of this by a woman at the death of her husband is dethronement. Because a woman by marriage becomes absorbed into the husband’s family and is recognised by her role as a wife, therefore, the loss of her position and entitlements in the family, hence, the sitting on the floor or mat. Also, this act is a sign of mourning and grief. (Nzewi, 1981).

4. Refraining from Bathing for a Number of Days

Neglecting a personal appearance and hygiene is really a terrible practice as we know how bad people feel when they fail to attend to their personal hygiene; particularly for a woman. The widow will be forced to stay for a number of days without bathing. This practice is simply unspeakable, unimaginable and honestly cruel, for a woman that just lost a husband, who needs pity and not punishment. Yet, widows go through this particular rite for the love of their late husband’s though to their detriment.

5 Being made to Swear with Husband's Corpse

This is the worst of the practices and violations against women; though it is meant to prove if the women killed the husband or not either with witchcraft, poisoning and the likes; the act is simply disgusting. Once a man dies, the in-laws immediately accuse the wife and ask her to confess to the killing, and to prove her innocence, she must be made to drink the water used in bathing the corpse of the late husband. If she refuses, obviously, she killed the husband. Therefore, she must be punished; or the widow crosses the husband's coffin three times, if she dies before the mourning period is over, she will be thrown into the evil forest because her death confirms her a murderer (Nzewi, 1981).

6 Seclusion

Seclusion and general isolation of the widows for a certain period from the community is a widespread practice in Africa. But its intensity and duration varies. In the islamised communities of West Africa including the islamised sections of the Yoruba States in Nigeria, this period was known as 'Iddat'. The purpose behind 'Iddat' on widowhood is to determine the paternity, should the woman turn out to be pregnant and also intended to give the widow time to recover from her bereavement. For non-Islamic societies of Africa, the period is much longer depending on the particular society (Shirka, 1996). At this time, she is regarded as unclean, the knife or brown stick is also to protect her from the spirits, which may attack her during this period (Umejesie, 2002).

To aggravate the misery of widows, every movable items are often transported homewards by the in-laws, leaving the poor widow empty handed. The primordial notion is that, every asset in the family belongs to the husband, though this assumption is wrong in modern society in which both couples contribute to the family up-keep, but the in-laws will not hear of that, this act plunged widows deeply into poverty coupled with the grief of losing a husband. These double actions results into shock, emotional crack and temporary loss of sense or even relapse into a coma for days. Umejesie (2002).

iii. THE HEALTH STATUS OF WIDOWS

Owen (1998), recognized that widows through poor nutrition, inadequate shelter, a lack of access to health care and vulnerability to violence are very likely to suffer not only physical ill-health, but stress and chronic depression as well. According to Nnodim, (2012), he stated that there is a strong relationship between poverty and ill-health. Poverty results to ill-health, ill-health leads to poverty, while poverty breeds violence. Section 93 of the Beijing Women Conference Platform for Action did not note that some dehumanizing widowhood practices such as traditional mourning and burial rites could endanger the health of women and girls while articulating some traditional discriminatory practices in some countries of the world. According to Owen, the widows reproductive and sexual needs are often ignored also. For the fact that widows could be sexually active, they often become victims of rape which are usually overlooked.

Widowhood presents a myriad of economic, social and psychological problems, particularly in the first year or so after the death of the spouse. A major problem for both sexes is economic hardship. When the husband was the principal breadwinner, his widow is now deprived of his income and the nucleus of the family is destroyed (Fasoranti *et al.*, 2007). Many studies (e.g., Amoran *et al.*, 2005; Abdallah and Ogbeide, 2002) have concluded that a higher rate of mental illness exists among the widowed than their married counterparts. Even a study conducted by Chen *et al.*, (1999) concluded that widows had higher mean levels of traumatic grief, depressive and anxiety symptoms (compared to widowers).

United National Division for the Advancement of Women (2001), reported that African Widows are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS infections due to ignorance in most cases about the cause of their husbands' death or late information about it, which may also result to ill-health of the widow. According to the report, in many traditional societies, mourning rites may involve sexual relationship with husband's male relatives, or forced into levirate or second marriage with an infected heir or brother – in – law. Sex work may also be the only means of getting money or food for themselves and their families.

Widowhood often causes financial stress because a major income source is lost with the death of a husband. Widowhood is generally a greater problem financially for women than men, and economic difficulties can lead to lower psychological well-being. In most cases, a widow may have spent all she has on treating a dying husband and on the subsequent funeral rites and may have nothing to pay for drugs if she eventually fall sick of similar disease (Ishrat, 2000). On the issue of social health problem, Shehu et al (2010), opine that abandonment, negligence, humiliation and marginalization of widows would have a negative effect on their lives and health and the inability to feed and provide the basic human needs for herself and her children could lead to malnutrition and diseases infection. The biggest challenges' facing widows is loneliness, which may last beyond the normal period of mourning. This could result to depression and decreased life satisfaction (Wells and Browning, 2002).

Methods

Research design

Descriptive survey design was used for the study.

Population

The population of the study consisted of widows in Akwa Ibom State.

Sampling and Sampling Technique

The respondent in the study consisted of 200 respondents. These were obtained through the purposive sampling method:

Instrumentation

The researcher developed an instrument tagged, "Evil Widowhood Practices and Health Status of Widows Questionnaire (EWPHSWQ)".

Method of Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, Pearson Product Moment and Correlation analysis were used in analyzing the data. Hypotheses were tested at 0.05 alpha level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

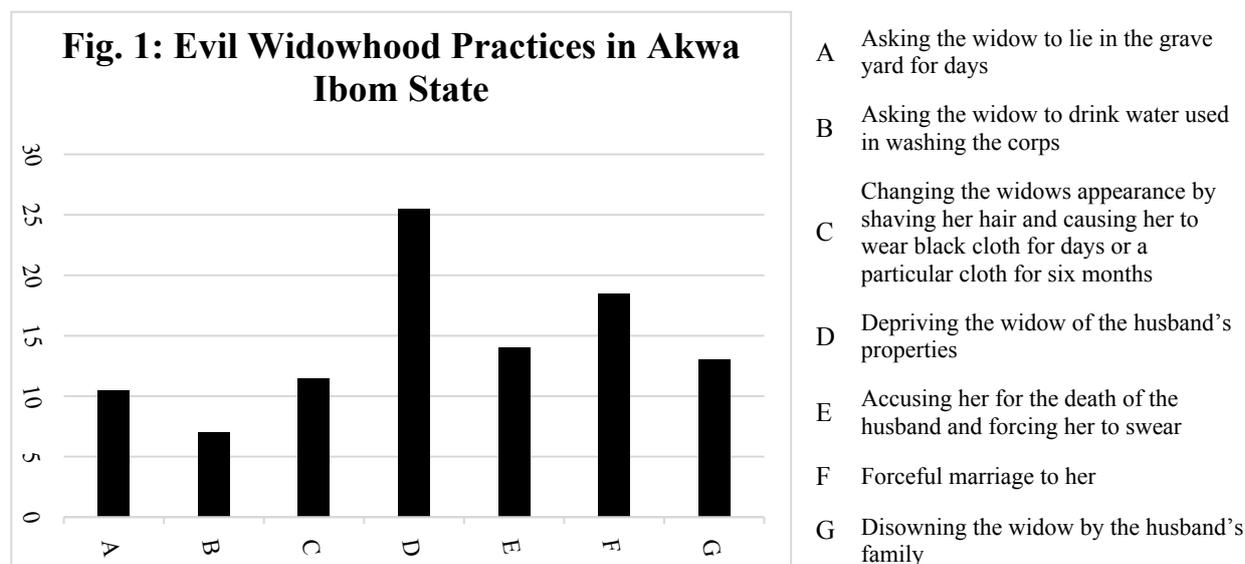
Research Question One

The research question sought to find out the evil widow practices in Akwa Ibom State. To answer the research question, percentage analysis was performed as can be seen in table 1 and figure 1.

Table 1
Percentage analysis of the evil widow practices in Akwa Ibom State.

| Evil widow practices in Akwa Ibom State | Freq | Percentage (%) |
|--|------------|----------------|
| Asking the widow to lie in the grave yard for days | 21 | 10.5 |
| Asking the widow to drink water used in washing the corps | 14 | 7 |
| Changing the widows appearance by shaving her hair and causing her to wear black cloth for days or a particular cloth for six months | 23 | 11.5 |
| Depriving the widow of the husband’s properties | 51 | 25.5 |
| Accusing her for the death of the husband and forcing her to swear | 28 | 14 |
| Forceful marriage to her | 37 | 18.5 |
| Disowning the widow by the husband’s family | 26 | 13 |
| TOTAL | 200 | 100% |

SOURCE: Field survey



SOURCE: Field survey

The above table 1 and figure 1 present the percentage analysis of the evil widow practices in Akwa Ibom State. From the result, it was observed that the highest percentage of the respondent 51(25.5%) said the evil widow practices in Akwa Ibom State includes depriving the widow of the husband’s properties, seconded by respondents 37(18.5%) who said it’s forceful marriage to her. This was followed by respondent who mentioned accusing her for the death of the husband and forcing her to swear 28(14%). Also 26(13%) of the respondents, as fourth in the list said disowning the widow by the husband’s family. This was followed by respondents 23(11.5%) who said changing the widows appearance by shaving her hair and causing her to wearing black cloth for days or a particular cloth for six months. The second to

the least respondents on the subject matter affirmed that asking the widow to lie in the grave yard for days 21(10.5%), while the least number of respondents 14(7%) said asking the widow to drink water from the corps.

Research Question Two

The research question sought to find out the relationship between evil widow practice and health status of widow in Akwa Ibom State. In order to answer the research question, descriptive analysis was performed on the data collected as shown in table 2.

Table 2

Descriptive analysis of the relationship between evil widow practice and health status of widow in Akwa Ibom State.

| Variable | N | Arithmetic mean | Expected mean | R | Remarks |
|----------------------|-----|-----------------|---------------|-------|---------------------------------|
| Evil Widow Practices | 576 | 16.35 | 12.5 | 0.90* | *Strong to Perfect relationship |
| Health Status | | 14.20 | 12.5 | | |

Source: Field Survey

Table 4.1 presents the result of the descriptive statistics of the relationship between evil widow practice and health status of widow in Akwa Ibom State. The two variables were observed to have strong to perfect relationship at 90%. The arithmetic mean for evil widow practices 16.35 was observed to be greater than the expected mean score of 12.5. In addition to that, the arithmetic mean as regards health status of widow 14.20 was observed to be higher than the expected mean score of 12.5. The result therefore means that there is significant relationship between evil widow practice and health status of widow in Akwa Ibom State.

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis One

The null hypothesis states that there is no significant relationship between evil widow practice and health status of widow in Akwa Ibom State. In order to test the hypothesis, two variables were identified as follows:-

1. Evil Widow Practice as the independent variable
2. Health Status of Widow as the dependent variable

Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis was then used to analyze the data in order to determine the relationship between the two variables (see table 3)

Table 3

Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis of the relationship between evil widow practice and health status of widows.

| Variable | Σx | Σx^2 | Σxy | r |
|----------------------------|------------|--------------|-------------|-------|
| | Σy | Σy^2 | | |
| Evil widow practice (x) | 3270 | 2840 | | |
| | | | 45590 | 0.90* |
| Health Status of Widow (y) | 54370 | 41300 | | |

***Significant at 0.05 level; df =198; N =200; critical r-value = 0.139**

Table 3 presents the obtained r-value as (0.90). This value was tested for significance by comparing it with the critical r-value (0.139) at 0.05 levels with 198 degree of freedom. The obtained r-value (0.90) was greater than the critical r-value (0.139). Hence, the result was significant. The result therefore means that there is significant relationship between evil widow practice and health status of widow.

Discussion of Findings

The result of the percentage analysis in table 1 and figure 1 show that the highest percentage of the respondent 51(25.5%) said the evil widow practices in Akwa Ibom State includes depriving the widow of the husband’s properties, seconded by respondents 37(18.5%) who said it’s forceful marriage to her. This was followed by respondent who mentioned accusing her for the death of the husband and forcing her to swear 28(14%). Also 26(13%) of the respondents, as fourth in the list said disowning the widow by the husband’s family. This was followed by respondents 23(11.5%) who said changing the widows appearance by shaving her hair and causing her to wearing black cloth for days or a particular cloth for six months. The second to the least respondents on the subject matter affirmed that asking the widow to lie in the grave yard for days 21(10.5%), while the least number of respondents 14(7%) said asking the widow to drink water from the corpse. The result was therefore in agreement with the research findings of Ogamba, Ebele (2000:15), who stated that “it is almost a common syndrome that widows are accused of being responsible for their partner’s death”. So they establish their innocence through certain acts. He also said that the travails of a widow begins immediately her husband breaths his last breath, she is made to go through various traditional rites, most of them very wicked and dehumanizing. Also, the result was in agreement with the write-up in African Guardian Magazine (12/09/1988), which carries all the general patterns of widowhood practices in Nigeria.

The results of the data analyses in tables 2 was significant due to the fact that the obtained r-value (0.90) was greater than the critical r-value (0.139) at 0.05 level with 198 degree of freedom. The result implies that there is significant relationship between evil widow practice and health status of widow. These negative physical implications could be attributed to a number of factors such as drinking the water used in washing the corpse, excess grief, incarceration, eating with unwashed hands, battering, levirate marriage, confinement, starrng and emotional violence. Another dimension to the ordeal of widows is the psychological health implications of widowhood practices. The result therefore was in agreement with the empirical evidence Agumagu (2007), Anakwe (2004) and Chima (1996), with abounds that most of these implications are as a result of forcing the widows to

marry their husbands relatives against their wishes, isolation much punishment, constant accusation, sleeping alone with husbands' corpses, forcing them out of husbands' house and disinheriting them and their children. The significance of the result caused the null hypotheses to be rejected while the alternative one was accepted.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the research work, it was concluded that there various categories of evil widow practices in Akwa Ibom State such as asking the widow to lie in the grave yard for days, asking the widow to drink water used in washing the corps, changing the widows appearance by shaving her hair and causing her to wear black cloth for days or a particular cloth for six months, depriving the widow of the husband's properties, accusing her for the death of the husband and forcing her to swear, forceful marriage to her and disowning the widow by the husband's family. It was also concluded that there is significant relationship between evil widow practice and health status of widow

Recommendations

The following recommendations are deemed necessary:

1. International training courses should be made available by the government on how to stop this disgusting act on widows.
2. Public awareness should also be made by the government on the effect of evil widowhood practices on women.
3. The in-laws should regard a widow not as an appendage but as part of the husband in order to help avoid malnutrition.
4. Financial help and drugs should also be made available by the government to help them survive because the loss normally lead to ill-health and lower physiological well-being of the widow.

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