WIDOWHOOD RITES AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING OF WIDOWS IN EKET LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF AKWA IBOM STATE

By

Usoroh, Comfort

And

Christian, Udeme B.
Department of Home Economics Education
Faculty of Vocational Education, Library and Information Science
University of Uyo, Uyo,

ABSTRACT

Widows are a vulnerable group globally. This study sought to investigate widowhood rites and emotional well-being of widows in Eket Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. The study which was conducted in Eket, was guided by three purposes and one hypothesis. Descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The population comprised of 820 widows from where a sample size of 260 widows was drawn for the study using multistage sampling procedure and snowball sampling technique. An adapted and restructured questionnaire titled "Widowhood rites and Emotional Well-Being of Widows Questionnaire (WREWWQ)", comprising of three sections and 15 items was used for data collection. The instrument were validated by three experts, all in the University of Uyo. The reliability coefficient of 0.84 was obtained using Cronbach alpha. Data obtained was analyzed using frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation while Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used to test the research hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that the prevalent widowhood rites in the study area was cutting of hair with a mean value of $x = 2.73$; the respondents also indicated that taking independent decisions with a mean value of $x = 2.82$ would enhance their well being. The result of the hypothesis revealed that there is a significant relationship between widowhood rites and emotional wellbeing of widows in the study area. This indicates that widowhood rites have a negative effect on the emotional wellbeing of widows. The study concludes that widowhood rites significantly affects the emotional well-being of widows in the study area and therefore recommends that culture gatekeepers in Eket and Akwa Ibom State in general should abolish widowhood practices because it impinges on human rights amongst others.

KEYWORDS: Widowhood rites, Widows, Emotional Well-Being

Usoroh, Comfort
&
Christian, Udeme B.

INTRODUCTION

The mistreatment and marginalization of widows have deep historical roots that span across centuries, entrenched in patriarchal social systems that subordinate women. Referenced continuously throughout ancient civilizations, widows were subjected to social ostracism, exploitation, and a denial of inheritance rights (Smith, 2021). In Africa, negative perceptions towards widows originated from indigenous belief systems, contributing to their status as one of the most vulnerable and destitute groups globally, irrespective of ethnic backgrounds (Sossou, 2022).

Widowhood, the loss of a spouse through death without subsequent remarriage, brings about significant life changes characterized by social, economic, and psychological impacts, particularly within patriarchal societies (Adekannbi, 2017). The experiences of widows across different cultures are heavily influenced by deeply ingrained attitudes, norms, and practices that perpetuate discrimination and exacerbate their vulnerabilities (Ewelukwa et al., 2019).

In Nigeria, widowhood represents a precarious status marked by heightened vulnerability, as highlighted in a qualitative study by Makama (2019) involving widows in Northern Nigeria. This research sheds light on the traumatic socio-cultural practices that widows face, including dispossessions, homelessness, poverty, and violations of their dignity. Customary norms that enforce practices like isolation, forced head-shaving, accusations of marital foul play, and the denial of inheritance rights all contribute to the myriad challenges confronted by widows in the region (Makama, 2019).

Widows encounter a multitude of challenges due to entrenched traditional practices, religious norms, and patriarchal societal structures. A study by the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) highlighted that 38% of widows in Nigeria reported experiencing physical or sexual violence, with forced marriages being pervasive, coercing widows into unions against their will, either with relatives or strangers. Dehumanizing rituals further strip widows of their dignity, perpetuating their vulnerability in society (ICRW, Year). This vulnerability is compounded by discrimination, social exclusion, and limited access to resources, all exacerbated by prevalent gender-based violence encompassing physical, sexual, psychological, and financial abuse (ICRW, 2016). Widows frequently encounter significant mental health challenges, as evidenced by studies that have identified elevated rates of depressive symptoms resulting from prolonged grief, solitude, and mistreatment (Ahoya et al., 2021; Lasebikan & Ayinde, 2017). Regrettably, research indicates that as many as 63% of widows experience clinical depression, a stark contrast to the 15% prevalence among married women, highlighting the profound effects of losing a spouse and facing societal marginalization (Onasoga et al., 2019). The unresolved trauma stemming from violence and coerced rituals often manifests as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with a majority of widows displaying symptoms of trauma (Eze et al., 2020).

According to Agu et al., (2022) widows experience feelings of sadness, worthlessness, fatigue, sleep disturbances, and suicidal ideation, further complicated by

limited access to counseling services or support groups to assist in the grieving process. The social isolation and stigmatization that widows endure exacerbate their mental health difficulties, while financial struggles and unmet basic needs significantly contribute to heightened levels of anxiety and stress (Samuel & Tawose, 2019).

Widowhood rites have severe consequences on the emotional well-being of widows, leading to grief, loneliness, depression, and anxiety as a result of their loss and associated challenges (Aryal et al., 2020). The burden of coping with gender-based violence and economic struggles further adds to their emotional distress and mental health issues (Samuel & Tawose, 2019). Studies underscore a strong association between widowhood rites and poor mental health outcomes among widows, accentuating the necessity to address these interconnected issues (Osuji & Okere, 2021). Given the stigma around psychological issues, access to mental health support remains hindered, with resources like counseling or psychiatric help often financially out of reach for impoverished widows (Eze et al., 2020).

Ewelukwa et al. (2019) analyzed widowhood practices in post-colonial Africa through a socio-legal lens and provides a comprehensive examination of the intersection between cultural norms, legal frameworks, and the experiences of widows in the region. The study also revealed the complexities of widowhood practices and rites, exploring how they are influenced by historical, social, and legal factors in the post-colonial context. These studies and other studies collectively convey a strong message about the multifaceted challenges faced by widows in various communities. They emphasize how cultural beliefs and traditional practices surrounding widowhood can significantly impact widows' access to resources, decision-making autonomy, social support networks, and overall well-being, highlighting the need for targeted support and interventions to address these issues effectively. Enwereji and Elom (2020) further highlighted the complexities of grief, social stigma, and financial struggles that widows in Nigeria encounter, as well as the strength and resilience they demonstrate in navigating these challenges. However, Chinwuba (2021) revealed that widowhood practices influence widows' access to resources, decision-making power, social support networks, and overall quality of life. The study also uncovered the stigmatization, marginalization, and discrimination that widows face as a result of cultural beliefs and traditional practices linked to widowhood.

In Eket Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, widows are expected to pass through certain rites and they experience inexplicable and dehumanizing challenges occasioned by the customs and traditions of the locality. The complex relationship between widowhood customs, gender-based violence, and emotional wellbeing is a significant issue that has informed this research with a view to gaining better understanding on the phenomenon and proffering probable recommendations that will act as support and ameliorate their condition.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of the study was to investigate widowhood rites and emotional well-being of widows in Eket Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. The study specifically sought to determine:

- Demographic characteristics of widows in Eket Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State;
- Widowhood rites prevalent in Eket Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State;
- Emotional well-being of widows in Eket Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State;

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study sought to provide answers to the following questions:

- What are the demographic characteristics of widows in Eket Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State?
- What are the widowhood rites prevalent in the study area?
- What are the emotional well-being of widows in the study area?

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

One null hypothesis was formulated to guide the study and tested at 0.05 levels of significance:

HO_1: there is no significant relationship between widowhood rites and emotional wellbeing of widows in the study area.

METHODOLOGY
RESEARCH DESIGN

Descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. A survey design is a systematic method for gathering information from a sample of entities for the purpose of constructing quantitative descriptors of the attributes of the larger population of which the entities are members (Siedlecki, 2020). Widows constitute a significant population in Nigeria in particular and Akwa Ibom State in general therefore, studying widows in Eket Local Government Area using a systematic method to gather information was deemed appropriate to reveal gender-based violence and emotional well-being of the target population.

AREA OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted in Eket Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. Eket is located in the coastal southern section of Akwa Ibom State (Udoh, 2019). The study area covers a total land area of 129 square kilometers with administrative headquarters

in the city of Eket (Nigeria Congress, 2017. The study area is bounded by Nsit Ubium to the North, Esit Eket to the East, Onna to the West and Ibeno to the south; it has 4 clans (*Afaha, Eket Offiong, Idua and Okon*) and 112 villages. Eket, also known as "_Idong Afianwe_" (Udosen et al., 2022), has a rich history and cultural heritage and identity. Ekid is the language spoken by the people. The area's economic potential lies in its abundant crude oil, clay, and forest resources, including timber and palm produce. The area is also known for seafood production and farm crops like yam, cassava, coco-yam, plantain, maize, and vegetables. Traditionally, the people of Eket engage in fishing, farming, weaving, and hunting. Tourist attractions in the area include privately managed hotels, gardens, and parks, which have made Eket a hub for international oil giants like Exxon Mobil. The presence of multi-national companies led to an increase in the population of the residents from other cultural affiliations, however, the indigenes still reside in the area. The study area provides an ideal environment for the study because of the presence of widows and a solid traditional belief system.

POPULATION OF THE STUDY

The population for the study comprised of 820 (Women Affairs Commission and Social Welfare, Idongesit Nkanga Secretariat, Uyo, 2023).

SAMPLE/SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

Two hundred and sixty (260) widows were used as respondents for the study. The sample was determined using (www.researchadvisor/samplesize.org, 2020). Thereafter, multistage sampling procedures, stratified proportionate, random and snowball sampling techniques were adopted to select the sample for the study. First, the study area was stratified into four strata on the basis of the clans; then two villages were randomly selected from each of the clans giving a total of eight villages. The third stage involved the use of a non-probability sampling techniques to select 33 widows from each of the eight villages in the four clans using snowball sampling method, a sampling technique that is suitable when the samples have traits that are rare to find. (Levine, 2020). The method required that each of the respondents referred the researcher to other respondents with similar characteristics.

INSTRUMENTATION

An adapted and restructured instrument titled "Gender Based Violence and Emotional Well-Being of Widows Questionnaire" (GBVEWWQ) was used for data collection. The adapted items were from Ihekwuaba & Anthonia (2019). The instrument had 3 sections A to C and 15items. Section A with 5 items dealt with the demographic characteristics of the respondents; Section B with 5 items focused on the gender-based violence on widows in the study area; Section C with with 5 items dwelt on emotional

Usoroh, Comfort
&
Christian, Udeme B.

wellbeing of widows. The instruments were rated on a four-point scale of Strongly Agree (SA); Agree (A) Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD).

VALIDATION OF THE INSTRUMENT

Face and content validation of the instrument was ascertained by three experts, one from the Department of Home Economics, Faculty of Agriculture; one from Department of Physical and Health Education and a Statistician from the Faculty of Education, all from University of Uyo, Uyo.

RELIABILITY OF THE INSTRUMENT

To determine the internal consistency of the instrument, the questionnaires were administered to 20 respondents from the same population of the study who did not constitute part of the main study. A reliability coefficient of 0.84 was obtained using Cronbach alpha, an indication that the instrument was reliable for data collection.

METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data obtained in the study.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What are the demographic characteristics of widows in Eket Local Government Area?

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage Analysis of the demographic characteristics of Widows in Eket Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State.

n = 260

S/N	Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Rank
1	Age			
	20 – 25 years	11	4	5
	26 – 35 years	88	34	1
	36 – 45 years	75	30	2
	46 – 55 years	43	17	3
	56 and above	40	15	5
	Total	260	100	
2.	Number of Children			
	0	3	2	4
	1 – 2	74	28	2
	3 – 4	154	59	1
	5 or more	29	11	3
	Total	260	100	

3.	Educational Level			
	FSLC	11	4	5
	WAEC, GCE, SSCE	82	82	2
	OND/NCE	98	38	1
	HND/BSC	40	15	3
	Higher Degrees	29	11	4
	Total	260	100	
4.	Employment Status			
	Civil Servant	113	43	1
	Self Employed	90	35	2
	Unemployed	57	22	3
	Total	260	100	
5.	Years of Widowhood			
	Less than a year	29	11	3
	1 – 4 years	147	57	1
	5 – 8 years	62	24	2
	9 – 12 years	13	5	4
	Over 13 years	9	3	5
	Total	260	100	

The demographic characteristics of the respondents revealed that 88 (34%) of the respondents were between the age of 26-35 years; 75 (30%) of the respondents were 36-45 years; 40 (15%) were 56 and above while 11(4%) were 20-25 years. Also, 154 (59%) of the respondents had 3-4 children; 74 (28%) of the respondents had 1-2 children, 29 (11%) had 5 or more children while 3(2%) had no children. The educational qualification of the respondents revealed that 98(38%) were widows with OND and NCE; 82 (32%) had WAEC, GCE and SSCE; 40 (15%) had HND and BSC; 29 (11%) had higher degrees, while 11 (4%) had FSLC. The employment status of the widows revealed that 113 (43%) of the widows were civil servants; 90 (35%) of the respondents were self-employed while 57 (22%) were unemployed widows. The years of widowhood revealed that 147 (57%) of the respondents were widows for 1-4 years; 62 (24%) were widows for 5-8 years; 29 (11%) were widows for less than a year; 13 (5%) were widows for 9-12 years while 9 (3%) were widows for over 13 years.

Research Question 2: What are the widowhood rites prevalent in the Eket Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State?

Table 2: Mean Analysis of widowhood rites prevalent in the study area.

S/N	Widowhood rites	X	SD	Rank	Decision
1	Cutting of hair	2.73	0.40	1	P

2	Staying with the casket	2.55	0.59	3	P
3	Drinking of water from late husband's corpse	2.42	0.68	6	NP
4	Marry of late husband's relative	2.39	0.77	7	NP
5	Wearing of specific clothes	2.62	0.47	2	P
6	Allowed to bath for certain period	2.48	0.64	5	NP
7	Crying every morning	2.36	0.74	9	NP
8	Sleeping on mat for a certain period	2.52	0.53	4	P
9	Restricted from going out	2.38	0.76	8	NP
10	Ritual bathing of cleansing	2.27	0.81	10	NP

N/B: P=prevalent; NP=Not prevalent

Table 2, shows the mean analysis of widowhood rites prevalent in Eket Local Government Area. Findings showed that cutting of hair was ranked 1st with a mean value of x = 2.73; wearing of specific clothes was ranked 2nd with a mean value of x = 2.62; staying by the casket was ranked 3rd with a mean value of x = 2.55; sleeping on mat for a certain period was ranked 4th with a mean value of x = 2.52; not allowed to bath for certain period was ranked 5th with a mean value of x = 2.48; drinking of water from late husband's corpse was ranked 6th with a mean value of x = 2.42; marrying of late husband's relative was ranked 7th with a mean value of x = 2.39; restricted from going out was ranked 8th with a mean value of x = 2.38; crying every morning was ranked 9th with a mean value of x = 2.36; ritual bathing of cleansing was ranked 10th with a mean value of x = 2.27 respectively. This means that cutting of hair was ranked as the highest prevalent widowhood rites in Eket Local Government Area.

Research Question 3: what is the emotional wellbeing of widows in Eket Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State?

Table 3: Result of Mean Analysis of emotional wellbeing of widows in Eket Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State.

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH EDUCATION AND MANAGEMENT SCIENCE, VOL . 6 NO. 1. JUNE ISSN: 2653-7446, UNITED KINGDOM

Usoroh, Comfort
&
Christian, Udeme B.

n = 260

S/n	Emotional wellbeing of widows	X	Rank	Decision
1.	Learning new skills	2.75	3	A
2.	Work towards achieving goals	2.63	4	A
3.	capable of making independent decisions	2.82	1	A
4.	Satisfied with current state	2.52	5	A
5.	Engaging in activities	2.77	2	A

Table 3, shows the mean analysis of emotional well-being of widows in Eket Local Government Area. Findings showed that independent decisions was ranked 1st with a mean value of x = 2.82; engaging in activities was ranked 2nd with a mean value of x = 2.77; learning new skills was ranked 3rd with a mean value of x = 2.75; work towards achieving goals was ranked 4th with a mean value of x = 2.63; satisfied with current state was ranked 5th with a mean value of x = 2.52 respectively. This implies that capable of making independent decisions was ranked as the highest emotional well-being of widows in Eket Local Government Area.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between widowhood rites and emotional wellbeing of widows in the study area.

Table 4: Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) Significant Relationship Test between widowhood rites and emotional wellbeing of widows

Variables	ΣX ΣY	ΣX^2 ΣY^2	ΣXY	r	p-value	Decision
gender-based violence	25.69	66.14	65.6485	-0.648		
emotional wellbeing of widows	25.5	65.3428			0.001	*

*Significant at p< .05 level of significance

Table 4, shows the summary of the Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPCM) test for significant relationship between widowhood rites and emotional wellbeing of widows. The result shows that the calculated r-value is 0.736. The probability value (p-value) is 0.001. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the alpha level, the result is statistically significant and the null hypothesis is rejected. Thus, there is a significant relationship between widowhood rites and emotional wellbeing of widows in the study

area. This indicates that widowhood rites has a notable impact on the emotional wellbeing of widows in the study area.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study sought to determine Widowhood Rites, and Emotional Wellbeing in Eket Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. Findings of the demographic characteristics of widows revealed that the majority of widows were between the ages 26-35 years, with a majority of them having 3-4 children. Educationally, the majority had OND/NCE, regarding the employment status, the majority were civil servants, and for the duration of widowhood the majority were widows between 1-4 years. This indicates that widowhood has no distinct demography.

Findings of the study also revealed that the most prevalent widowhood rite in the study area, was cutting of hair. This result agrees with the view of Adoghe et al. and Eweluka et al. who asserted that widows pass through coerced rituals such as cutting of hair, drinking bath water of the deceased husband, and having sex with a stranger unprotected because Widows in the study area are subjected to similar practices, which are not only harmful but also violate their human rights and dignity. The cutting of hair, in particular, is a widespread practice in this area, and it's alarming that it is still prevalent despite globalization and its negative consequences. Notably, the findings reviewed that the majority of widows who are subjected to the coerced ritual of cutting their hair are young and lack the knowledge, resources, and empowerment to fight for their rights. This vulnerability, combined with lack of education and enlightenment, makes them more susceptible to cultural and societal pressures that perpetuate harmful practices like hair cutting. The study is in tandem with the view of Akpabio (2017) who stated that hair cutting was emblematic of grief and transition, marking a widow's emotional and social journey following the loss of her spouse. Widows in the study area are engaged in hair cutting ceremonies not only representing their grief but also serves as a visible sign of their altered identity and status within the community. This ritual holds deep cultural and symbolic significance for widows in the study area, symbolizing their mourning process and transition into a new phase of life as widows.

Findings further showed that regarding the emotional wellbeing of the widows in Eket, majority of widows indicated that they were capable of making independent decisions. This finding agrees with Chen (2011) who aver that cultural norms and societal expectations often influence widows' decision-making processes. In some cultures, widows may face restrictions or stigmatization that hinder their ability to make independent choices. Also because widows often find themselves in positions where they must make decisions independently, ranging from financial investments to household management. This autonomy is crucial for their personal growth and empowerment (Koenig et al., 2004). The result is however at variance with Gurung et al., (2020), which stated that support groups empower widows to overcome practical challenges. By sharing

knowledge and solidarity, widows can collectively access justice, secure inheritance rights, and meet basic needs, while also strategizing safety from violence. In contrast this present study shows that widows take control of their lives and make independent decisions without relying on support groups. Widows in the study area lack basic social support and therefore to survive after the death of their spouse, they need to make independent decisions both for themselves and their children.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings the researchers conclude that widows in Eket are made to face unhealthy widowhood practices which undermines their human rights and affects their emotional well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the researchers recommend that:

- Cultural practices that are inimical to and debase human rights and dignity such as those practices under the guise of widowhood rites should be abolished by the Government and custodians of the culture.

- Implement policies and programs that promote independent decision-making for widows, ensuring their autonomy and agency in personal and financial matters

- All stake holders in community development should build strong social networks which are crucial for widows, offering emotional support and practical advice.

REFERENCES

Adekannbi, J. O. (2017). *The effects of widowhood on physical and mental health, health behaviors and outcomes*. 6(2).

Agu, O. A., Nweze, N. A., Eze, J. E., Ogu, G. O., Oguonu, C. H., & Onya, E. (2022). Depression among widows in a rural community in Enugu State, Nigeria. *Journal of Widowhood and Loss,* 2(1), 1-11.

Aryal, N., Regmi, P., Mudwari, N., Bhattarai, R., & Bhattarai, N. (2020). Gender-based violence against widows: A scoping review. *Journal of Global Health Reports,* 4, e2020043.

Chinwuba, O. P. (2021). "No one comes near me": Qualitative study on lived realities of widows in Southeast Nigeria. *SAGE Open,* 11(3), 1-13.

Enwereji, E. E., & Elom, H. O. (2020). Experiences, needs and concerns of spousal loss: An explorative, qualitative study of widows in Rivers State, Niger Delta of Nigeria. *SAGE Open*, 10(1), 215824401989956.

Ewelukwa, U. U., Onyema, M. C., & Ewelukwa, B. U. (2019). Post-colonialism, gender, customary injustice: Widows in African societies. *Human Rights Review*, 20(3), 271-293.

Eze, I. R., Obiebi, I. P., & Eseadi, C. (2020). Post-traumatic stress disorder among widows and their resilience: What health providers must know? *Annals of Medical and Health Sciences Research,* 10(1), 102-108.

International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). (2016). Economic Empowerment and Gender-Based Violence: A Review of Existing Evidence. Retrieved on 29/11/2023 from https:/www.icrw.org.

Lasebikan, V.O., Ayinde, O., Odunleye, M., Adeyefa, B., Adepoju, S., Fakunle, S., *et al*. (2018) *Prevalence of Alcohol Consumption and Alcohol Use Disorders among Outdoor Drinkers in Public Open Places in Nigeria*. BMC Public Health, 18, 400.

Makama, G. A. (2019). Patriarchy and gender inequality in Nigeria: the way forward. *European Scientific Journal, ESJ*, 9(17).

Onasoga, O. A., Afolayan, J. A., & Oladimeji, B. Y. (2019). Factors influencing emotional distress among widows in Nigeria: Examining the role of LGA of residence. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology,* 3, 138-150.

Osuji, C. A., & Okere, N. N. (2021). Gender-based violence and the emotional wellbeing of widows in Nigeria: Evidence from Enugu State. *Journal of Public Administration, Finance and Law,* 17, 80-91.

Samuel, O. M., & Tawose, J. O. B. (2019). The psychological effects of domestic violence on children and adolescents in Lagos, Nigeria: Emotional consequences and prospects for recovery. *Journal of Family Social Work,* 22(2), 165-179.

Siedlecki, S. L. (2020). Understanding Descriptive Research Designs and Method. *Clinical nurse specialist CNS* 34(1):8-12.

Smith, A. (2021). The mistreatment and marginalization of widows: A historical perspective. *Journal of Women 's Studies,* 15(3), 107-120.

Sossou, M. A. (2022). Widowhood practices in West Africa: The silent victims. *International Journal of Social Welfare,* 11(3), 201-209.