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An Appraisal of the Prevailing Widowhood Practices in South-East, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated the prevailing widowhood practices in South-East Nigeria. Three research questions guided the study. The design employed for this study was mixed-method. The study sampled 354 widows in South-East Nigeria. Structured Questionnaire and an open-ended interview were the instrument of data collection for this study. Mean and standard deviation as well as thematic analysis was used to analyze data. The study found that the prevailing widowhood include: compelling widows to mourn for a period of one year after death of husband, separate plate for eating during the period of mourning, shaving of hairs, the widow is not allowed to go to the market or attend any ceremony, among others. The perceived causes of widowhood practices include cultural beliefs, inheritance disputes between the widow and relations of the late husband, lack of cordial relationship between the widow and her in-laws, quarreling between the spouses before the death of the husband, among others. The health implications of widowhood practices include: infectious diseases from drinking corpse bath water, infections due to not taking bath, depression from maltreatment and seclusion, high blood pressure and heart attack. Based on the findings, the authors recommended that the local government and women's rights organizations can initiate and advocate for the implementation and enforcement of laws that protect the rights of widows and prohibit harmful widowhood practices.

Keywords: Marriage, Widowhood, Practices, South East

Introduction

Marriage is a vital aspect of the society. Thus, the family that emerges through marriage processes is a microcosm of society (Iffih & Ezeah, 2020). Marriage is defined as a personal association between a man and a woman and a biological relationship for mating and reproduction (Wimalasena, 2016). Marriage unites and brings peace and joy to the society. When couples are being joined together, they normally exchange marriage vows in which they promise themselves to remain together and love each other until death do them part. However, marriage has its associated challenges which include childlessness, incompatibility among the spouses and losing one's spouse. Of all the challenges, the death of one's spouse is usually a traumatic and disorganizing experience. For many women in the contemporary Nigerian society, losing a husband is almost like the end of the world (Iffih & Ezeah, 2020).

When a woman loses her husband, she faces emotional trauma, grief, pain, confusion and dejection (Oreh, 2018). However, what remains a general fact is that in addition to her loss and its attendant consequences, the widow is subjected to the whims of a culture she has no control over and to which she must submit herself. Widowhood practices entail the observance of certain rites by the woman. These rites and practices differ from culture to culture in Nigeria. Even among the Igbo of the South East under consideration, there are

slight observable differences evident from the duration of time the widow is expected to mourn to what is expected of the widow to do upon the demise of her husband.

Widowhood rites are enforced on widows because of the patriarchal nature of the traditional Igbo society which seem to promote male dominance by virtue of some cultural practices that place women in subservient positions (Nwaogu, 2015). The subservient nature of women during their husband's lifetime are carried into the death of their husbands and thereafter. The subjugation of women is deeply rooted in the culture and tradition emanating from the alleged inferior status of women, unstable character and impropriety of women political and social participation, stretching also to economic circles (Nwaogu, 2015). Predicated on these, women are also regarded as objects of rights, rather than subject of rights (Otaluka, 2022). This belief manifests in the way women are maltreated when they lose their husbands.

Widows are made to suffer the pain of losing their husbands and sometimes going through some excruciating cultural rites of proving their innocence in the death of their husbands (Arinze-Umobi, 2018). Olukayode (2015) identified the following as general widowhood practices in Nigeria; they include shaving of hairs, wearing of black or white clothes, drinking of remains of bath water used to wash the husbands' corpses, mourn her husband for about one year and half, deprived right of inheritance, not allowed to bath, clean their surroundings during mourning periods, or on rare cases, one bath in one week, among others. These widowhood practices are dehumanizing, degrading, barbaric obnoxious, anachronistic and grossly immoral (Nwaogu, 2015). These practices are somewhat cultural in nature because it is done in accordance to the customs and traditions of the society.

In addition to the practices outlined above, the woman is expected to wail and cry loudly at her husband's death, and show deep sense of grief. In some cultures, the widow is forced to cry aloud morning and night. Where the widow is accused of having a hand in the husband's death, she may have to prove her innocence by drinking the water with which the corpse was washed; eat kolanut offered by the elders or the high priest or being locked up with her husband's corpse over the night. The above practices are unconscionable, barbaric and dangerous. The woman drinking bath water from a corpse may die as a result of the disease contracted from the water or psychological trauma and not necessarily because she killed her husband. In some parts of the south eastern Nigeria, 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 come to shave her hair, bath her in an open compound, only having the privacy of being surrounded by the 'Umuada'. Apparently oblivious of the tragic loss which every widow suffers on the death of their husbands, callous in-laws conspire to apply vicious burial rites to dehumanize the embattled widow.

The widows are forbidden to touch themselves with their hands in some cultures. Hence, they were given piece of sticks to scratch their bodies, while their food is also cooked in old pots rather than those normally used for cooking for other members of the family. Some widows are not allowed to visit their work place or shops and will not go to church throughout the mourning period. In addition, they are to wear white clothes which would be burnt at the end of the mourning period. If a woman dies during the one-year mourning period, she is perceived as being responsible for her husband's death and therefore commits an abomination. Some of these practices are variously described as barbaric, atrocious, backwards, immoral, commoditization and an abusive violation of the sexual and human rights of the powerless" (Ihekwuaba & Amasiatu, 2016).

The justification for these widowhood practices is deeply inscribed on the belief systems of those cultural groups that practice it. Customs and traditions are main justification given for this practice (Donnelly, 2016). People adhere to this practice because it is part of

their culture and fulfilling this practice gives them a sense of pride and satisfaction. The greatest challenge for widows after the death of her husband is the widowhood practices involved. It is in this light that this study intends to appraise the prevailing widowhood practices, the perceived causes of widowhood practices, and the health implications of widowhood practices in South-East Nigeria.

Methods

This study adopted a mixed-method design. The sample for the study consisted of 354 widows drawn from the population of the study using the purposive sampling technique. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled Widowhood Practices Questionnaire (WPQ) and an interview guide. The instrument is divided into three clusters in line with the research questions. Cluster A was to generate responses on the prevailing widowhood practices, Cluster B elicited information on the perceived causes of widowhood practices while Clusters C collects information on the health implications of prevailing widowhood practices. Options or alternatives are provided for each respondent to pick or tick one of the options on a four point-likert scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. The interview guide was structured to ascertain information based on the research questions. The questionnaire was validated by three experts, from Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. They were asked to examine the instrument for data collection, its appropriateness, and language, to ensure that it is fit and appropriate for the expected respondents. The reliability of the questionnaire was ascertained through trial-testing of the instrument to determine the internal consistency of the items. The reliability coefficient was determined using Cronbach Alpha. The overall reliability coefficient of 0.75 was obtained indicating that the instrument is reliable. The data collected were analyzed using mean (x) and standard deviation (SD). Mean benchmark of 2.50 and above was accepted while a mean score of 2.49 and below was rejected. Thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data.

Results

Table 1: Mean Responses and Standard Deviations of the Respondents on the Prevailing Widowhood Practices in South-East, Nigeria

S/N	Item Statements	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Crying every morning till after the burial of the husband	2.11	0.43	Rejected
2	Crying every night till after the burial of the husband	2.24	0.75	Rejected
3	Drinking the bath water of the corpse of the deceased	2.47	0.83	Rejected
4	Compelled to mourn for a period of one year after death of husband	3.06	0.45	Accepted
5	Jumping over the corpse of late husband	1.60	0.95	Rejected
6	Not taking bath until husband is buried	1.77	0.93	Rejected
7	Seclusion from people	2.35	0.89	Rejected
8	Separate plate for eating during the period of mourning	2.79	0.65	Accepted
9	Shaving of hairs	2.94	0.65	Accepted
10	Sleeping on bare floor throughout the period of mourning of my late husband	2.29	0.83	Rejected
11	Sleeping with corpse of late husband overnight	2.04	1.00	Rejected
12	Subjected to take bath in an open place	2.37	0.98	Rejected

13	The widow is not allowed to go to the market or attend any ceremony	2.55	1.01	Accepted
14	Walking naked to a particular tree where three roads joined at night with the company of other widows only	1.98	0.47	Rejected
15	Wearing of black dress or white dress	3.36	0.48	Accepted
16	Widows are not allowed to cook or set up fire for cooking especially before and during the burial of the husband	2.79	0.68	Accepted

Table 1 shows the responses of respondents on the prevailing widowhood practices in South-East Nigeria. Results show that the prevailing widowhood practices include compelling to mourn for a period of one year after death of husband, separate plate for eating during the period of mourning, shaving of hairs, the widow is not allowed to go to the market or attend any ceremony, wearing of black dress or white dress and widows are not allowed to cook or set up fire for cooking especially before and during the burial of the husband.

Table 2: Mean Responses and Standard Deviations of the Respondents on the Perceived Causes of Widowhood Practices in South-East, Nigeria

S/N	Item Statements	Mean	SD	Decision
17	Cultural beliefs	3.15	0.72	Agree
18	Inheritance disputes between the widow and relations of the late husband.	2.69	1.09	Agree
19	Lack of cordial relationship between the widow and her in-laws	2.89	0.75	Agree
20	Lack or inadequate education of the widow	2.36	1.28	Disagree
21	Quarreling between the spouses before the death of the husband.	2.61	0.65	Agree
22	Suspicion of infidelity of the wife to the husband	2.67	0.62	Agree
23	Ensuring the woman has no hands in the death of her husband.	2.81	0.55	Agree
24	Show of respect to the dead	2.51	0.76	Agree
		Cluster Mean	2.71	0.80
				Agree

Table 2 shows the perceived causes of widowhood practices in South-East, Nigeria. Results show that the causes include cultural beliefs, inheritance disputes between the widow and relations of the late husband, lack of cordial relationship between the widow and her in-laws, quarreling between the spouses before the death of the husband, suspicion of infidelity of the wife to the husband, ensuring the woman has no hands in the death of her husband and show of respect to the dead.

Table 3: Mean Responses and Standard Deviations of the Respondents on the Health Implications of Widowhood Practices in South-East, Nigeria

S/N	Item Statements	Mean	SD	Decision
25	Drinking the water used to bath the corpse can cause infectious diseases	3.11	0.62	Agree
26	Insomnia can result because of humiliation received when mourning late husband	2.40	0.85	Disagree
27	Depression as a result of maltreatment	3.44	1.03	Agree

28	Long period of not taking of bath can cause infections to the widow.	3.17	0.79	Agree
29	Seclusion of the widow from mixing up with others can cause depression.	2.80	0.68	Agree
30	The way my inlaws treated me made me to develop high blood pressure	2.71	0.56	Agree
31	Widows develop heart attack	3.14	0.72	Agree
	Cluster Mean	2.96	0.69	Agree

Table 3 shows the responses of the respondents on the health implications of widowhood practices in South-East, Nigeria. Results show that the health implications include infectious diseases from drinking corpse bath water, infections due to not taking bath, depression from maltreatment and seclusion, high blood pressure and heart attack.

Summary of Qualitative Findings

Theme One: Widowhood practices that exist in South-East Nigeria

The respondents pointed out some of the widowhood practices that exist in South-East Nigeria. They acknowledged shaving of hair twice (during the burial process and after a period of one year), walking naked to a particular tree where three roads joined at night with the company of other widows only, staying at home compulsorily for one year, wearing of white or black dresses for one year. Other respondents also pointed out that “widows are not allowed to cook or set up fire for cooking especially before and during the burial of the husband, the widow is not allowed to go to the market or attend any ceremony, and have a separate plate for eating during the period of the mourning and crying morning and night till after the burial of the husband”.

Theme Two: Causes of widowhood practices in South-East Nigeria

The respondents agreed that some of the causes of these practices are culture, and “to know whether the widow killed the husband, and also find out if the widow will die after the one-year period of mourning to ascertain her innocence”. Another respondent uniquely mentioned “to show respect to the dead” as one of the causes of these widowhood practices. Another respondent also added that “the practices are put in place whenever husbands die suddenly as well as when the in-laws dislike the wife”.

Theme Three: Health implications of widowhood practices on the widows in South-East Nigeria

Some respondents pointed out that these practices could make some widows develop heart attack because of the way they were accused of the husbands’ death, they got depressed and almost got mental problem as a result of over thinking resulting from the way they were treated. Other respondents mentioned heartbrokenness because they did not believe they could be accused of the death of their spouse. All of the respondents generally mentioned that the practices make them prone to illness at that time period due to the exposure to harsh environmental and weather conditions. Some other respondents pointed out that they lost blood during the shaving process.

Discussion Findings

The study found that the prevailing widowhood practices in South-East, Nigeria include compelling the widow to mourn for a period of one year after death of husband, separate plate for eating during the period of mourning, shaving of hairs, the widow is not allowed to go to the market or attend any ceremony, wearing of black dress or white dress and widows are not allowed to cook or set up fire for cooking especially before and during the burial of the husband. This is in line with Okoye (2021) who states that the widow's hairs are shaved. These findings are also in consonance with Olukayode (2015) who reported that in some Yoruba communities, a widow is expected to eat from broken plates and cook with broken pots, and on the seventh day, her hair is shaved to serve as the bond between her and the dead husband. In line with the findings, Dube (2023) and Wimalasena (2016) noted that in Ghana, widows are forced to undergo purifying rituals that range from bathing in cold water, sitting naked on reed mats, ritual scarring, head shaving, and even having sex with a designated individual.

The qualitative results showed that some of the widowhood practices are cutting of hair by widows related to the husband at night, walking naked to a particular place at night with company of other widows, staying at home compulsorily for one year, wearing of white dresses for that one year period, not cooking or setting fire, not going to the market or any other occasion and different eating plates, burying of hair after cutting and cutting of the hair for the second time after the one year time period has elapsed and crying morning and night for a time period. This findings validates Ugwukah and Ume-Ezeoke (2024) who reported that widows are kept in dark rooms for days and are sometimes deprived of access to food, they are forced to weep daily, sleeping on mats or old banana leaves, eating from broken pots, forced to drink the water used in bathing their husbands' corpse, they are compelled to mourn the husband with black clothes and also expected to allow the (Umuada) married daughter of the community to shave the hair on their head and pubic with razor blades, to prove their innocence in relation to their husband's death.

The study found that the perceived causes of widowhood practices in South-East, Nigeria include cultural beliefs, inheritance disputes between the widow and relations of the late husband, lack of cordial relationship between the widow and her in-laws, quarreling between the spouses before the death of the husband, suspicion of infidelity of the wife to the husband, ensuring the woman has no hands in the death of her husband and show of respect to the dead. In conformity, Ogbodo (2025) confirms that women's illiteracy position perpetuates poor health, inadequate diet, early entering into motherhood, frequent pregnancies and continued cycle of poverty.

Qualitative results revealed that some of the causes of these practices are culture, and to know whether you killed your husband, and also find out if you will die after the one-year period of mourning to ascertain your innocence, to show respect to the dead and tradition Okonkwo (2024) further pointed out that illiteracy of widows in this part of the country has put them at disadvantaged position.

Finally, the study found that the health implications of widowhood practices in South-East, Nigeria include infectious diseases from drinking corpse bath water, infections due to not taking bath, depression from maltreatment and seclusion, high blood pressure and heart attack. In line with the above findings, Eche (2021) stated that widowhood is also associated with intense grief and anger expression, especially among more widows than the divorced

when compared together. Many widows are diagnosed more hypertensive due to the burden they bear alone (Yvonne & Browning, 2002).

Qualitative results showed that these practices could cause baldness of head and also heart attack, depression, mental problem, heartbrokenness and proneness to illness at that time period. In line with these findings, Umejesie (2022) opined that these double actions result into shock, emotional crack and temporary loss of sense or even relapse into a coma for days.

Conclusion

Based on the findings the study highlights the prevalence and health impact of harmful widowhood practices in South-East, Nigeria. The findings reveal a range of dehumanizing practices that affect widows' physical and mental health. Cultural beliefs, inheritance disputes, and suspicion of infidelity are among the perceived causes of these practices. The health implications are severe, including infectious diseases, depression, high blood pressure, and heart attack. Based on the findings, the study recommended that local governments and women's rights organizations can initiate and advocate for the implementation and enforcement of laws that protect the rights of widows and prohibit harmful widowhood practices. This can include legislation against inheritance disputes, discrimination, and maltreatment based on widowhood.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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