

Widohood Practice: A Menace to Women's Struggle For Development In Nigeria.

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Abstract: The moment a woman's husband dies, she is considered unclean and likely to contaminate those around her. She is not to be touched apart from fellow widows who are believed to be defiled too. (Lutch, 2012). Widowhood has changed the fate of several women and most especially women in cultural settings indeveloping countries, Nigeria not different. This work shows the level of violation of widows through traditional practices and how these practices affect the woman both mentally and socially. Liberal Feminist Theory was adopted based on the "belief that women as well as men, are rights bearing, autonomous human beings". (Cain, 1993). Conclusively, widowhood is a phenomenon that touches all directly or indirectly. One must not experience it to believe and accept that these practices do exist. Findings shows the death of a man is not seen in the in this part of the world as a natural occurrence and ordeal of a widow begins with accusations and victimizations by the next of kin of her spouse who holds the view that the widow is responsible for the death of her husband. We recommend that outdated laws on widowhood practices particularly the customary laws should be modified in relation to our society today. Wives under customary marriage should be given equal rights with their counterparts under statutory Marriage Act.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Widowhood has changed the fate of several women and most especially women in many cultural settings in developing countries. Nigeria not different to be precise. In Igbo Land; the death of a man is never seen as a natural occurrence. (Erinosho, 2000) narrated that the ordeal of a widow begins with accusations and victimizations by the next kin of her spouse who holds the view that she (the widow) is responsible for the death of her husband. She may be forced to swear before a family shrine and drink water that has been used to wash his corpse in order to prove her innocence.

And as a result of this perception, harmful widowhood practices are taken out on her such as proving her innocence by drinking the water with which the corpse was washed, eating kola nut offered by the elders or the high priest or being locked up with her husband's corpse. These practices are psychologically demoralizing as they affect the woman's mindset and her outlook on life. The experiences widows go through make them vulnerable and deprived of love, affection and support both from the communities they live in and unfortunately their family members also have a hand in this in most cases.

From the moment a woman's husband dies, she is considered unclean and likely to contaminate those around her. No one is allowed to touch her apart from fellow widows who are believed to be defiled too. She is given a piece of stick to scratch herself because she is considered to be unclean at the death of her husband(Lutch, 2012). Also in case of natural body irritation, she is given oil palm chaff to wash her hand periodically in order to reduce her uncleanness. Her food is cooked separately and eaten from a new plate where no one else is meant to eat from. The day before the burial of her husband is horrible for the widow as she is made to stay in the room where the corpse is kept and stay awake all night with bitter kola in her mouth to remind her of the bitterness of her husband.

Not just in a culture but generally in the society we live in, the subservient position of women during their husband's lifetime is exploited upon by family members after the death of her husband and she is expected to obey all instructions concerning the traditional rites, in whatever way they might come. This is done notwithstanding the provisions of local statutes, such as the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN) 1999 (as amended), and the Malpractices Against Widows and Widowers (Prohibited) Law of States of the federation and the International Instruments on human rights ratified by Nigeria, which guaranteed human rights to all citizens, such as right to life, equality of all men and women, dignity of all human persons, freedom from discrimination etc. The above legislations are in place, but they are hardly enforced and their actualization remains elusive and very far- fetched, in relation to widowhood and their varying practices.

Therefore this research work seeks to identify the interventions of the ministry of women and children's affairs on widowhood practices in southeast Nigeria.

Widowhood in Nigeria has become a thing of concern, most especially when it involves the welfare of women who bear the brunt of it all. Presently in Nigeria, the victimization and discrimination of widows is real as they are still treated as outcasts in a patriarchal society like ours and are made to succumb to those harmful practices. This is done irrespective of the treaties and conventions put in place as their actualization in enforcement of these laws are still farfetched.

The experience of the widow is such that women dread to be widows as they go through a lot of hardship that stems from the society, the husband's family as traditionally stated. Widows are reluctant to discuss the issue of inheritance and the possible cause of death of their partners for fear of repression. This research work shows the level of violation of widows through traditional practices and how these practices affect the woman both mentally and socially using the Society at large. Hence this research work on these objectives like: revealing the human rights of a woman that are violated during the harmful practices of widowhood, examining the societal effects on widowhood, and to analyze these traditional practices and how they affect the mentality of a widow.

Nigerian Constitution on Human Rights

Violence against women imperils gender inequality in Nigeria. It is one of the most visible outcomes of gender inequality and women's lack of empowerment. Therefore, it is impossible to achieve the third Millennium Development Goals as long as such inequalities exist.(Olomjobi, Human Rights on Gender, Sex and the Law, 2015)

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) is the basic and organic law of the land and all other laws take effect from it. This constitution contains the human rights provisions which are enshrined in chapters II and IV. Chapter two contains the Fundamental Objects and Directive Principles of State Policy (sections 13-24). These sections contain the non-fundamental and non-justifiable rights. While chapter IV contains the civil/political rights and said to be the fundamental and justifiable rights (sections 33-46). The human rights as enshrined in Chapter IV of the Constitution include the right to; life, dignity of human person, personal liberty, fair hearing, private and family life, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of expression and the press, peaceful assembly and association, freedom of expression, freedom from discrimination, acquire and own immovable property anywhere in Nigeria, and such property cannot be compulsorily taken over except under certain conditions. Citizens are also given rights to enforce the above stated rights (sections 33-46)(Nwogu M. I., *The Legal Anatomy Of Cultural Widowhood Practices In South Eastern Nigeria: The Need For A Panacea*, 2015).

The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) stipulates to the effect that no one should be subjected to torture, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment based on community, ethnic group, place of origin, sex or religion. Such inhuman treatment includes slavery, forced labor, marriage or acts and compulsory labor. In addition, section 42 of the Constitution provides that no one should be subject to discrimination. These sections are supposed to provide powerful backing to widows and their rights in Nigeria.(Olomjobi, Human Rights on Gender, Sex and the Law, 2015)

Widowhood and Various Ideologies and its Practices

An ideology is a body of doctrine, myth, belief, etc. that guides an individual, social movement, institution, class or a large group. There are several views and perceptions on widowhood and how they are accepted and dealt with in different countries, cultures as well as persons. For Instance in Ghana; Widows are subjected to brutal cleansing rituals, which must compulsorily include sex with strangers. For widows who are members of certain ethnic groups in Ghana, such as the Ashanti, the days following a husband's death are taken up with elaborate cleansing rituals meant to rid the widow of the spirit of the deceased. According to a report prepared for the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex in Brighton, U.K., activities range from bathing in cold water, sitting naked on reed mats, ritual scarring, head shaving, and even having sex with a designated individual. That man can be a brother-in-law or even the "first stranger met on the road."(Donnelly S. , 2017).

These practices even continue despite a 1989 amendment to Ghana's penal code, which criminalized acts of brutality against widows. In Nepal, once a woman becomes a widow she is subjected to the belief that she has become a witch and is possessed by dark powers. She faces discrimination ranging from spiteful glances from neighbors and friends to violent beatings. So widespread is the discrimination against widows that the government of Nepal proposed offering incentive payments to single men who married widows and helped re-integrate them into the society. Even though many traditional Women in Nepal tried to protest and do a march round the offices of the Nepal Government chanting 'We don't want government dowries, don't put a price on your mother'. Nepal's Supreme Court eventually blocked the proposal(Donnelly S. , 2017).

When a woman in Bangladesh finds herself widowed, she often has to turn to her children for support that's if she is even lucky enough to have any. According to the Loomba report, a periodical of the Loomba Foundations which fights for the rights of widows; 'Impoverishment and vulnerability of widows appear to be the single greatest motivational force for women's oft-states preference of having a son'. This means that a woman faces pressure to have a large family from the outset of her marriage, in order to ensure her own survival should she outlive her husband. And should she become a widow while her children are relatively young, she may make the heart wrenching decision to pull her children out of school in order for them to start working to support the family.

As if the shock of losing a spouse was not devastating enough, many Kenyan widows also face losing their homes, livestock, and livelihoods. A study on violations of women's property rights in Kenya conducted by Human Rights Watch found that "[m]any widows in Kenya are excluded from inheriting from their husbands. When men die, widows' in laws often evict them from their lands and homes and take other property, such as livestock and household goods." She may, however, be allowed to remain in her home if she assents to being 'inherited' by one of her dead husband's male relatives. Similar to Ghanaian widowhood practices, she must also partake in a ritual cleaning, "which involves sex with a social outcast, usually without a condom," a tradition that has helped HIV/AIDS maintain a devastating foothold in the region (Donnelly S. , 2017)

Widohood in Developing Countries

In many traditional communities of developing countries (especially on the Indian subcontinent and in Africa), widowhood represents a "social death" for women. It is not merely that they have lost their husbands, the main breadwinner and supporter of their children, but widowhood robs them of their status and consigns them to the very margins of society where they suffer the most extreme forms of discrimination and stigma (Dreze, 1990). Widows in these regions are generally the poorest of the poor and least protected by the law because their lives are likely to be determined by local, male- controlled interpretations of tradition, custom, and religion. Unmarried women are the property and under the control of their fathers; married women belong to their husbands. (Widows in Third World Nations). The grief that many third world widows experience is not just the sadness of bereavement but the realization of the loss of their position in the family that, in many cases, results in their utter abandonment, destitution, and dishonor.

They are painfully absent from the statistics of many developing countries, and they are rarely mentioned in the multitude of reports on women's poverty, development, health or human rights published in the last twenty-five years. According to reports, Widows in developing countries are most neglected. In many developing countries the exact numbers of widows, their ages and other social and economic aspects of their lives are unknown.

However, many widows in developing countries, in areas of conflict or in communities ravaged by HIV/AIDS are young or middle-aged. Widows, of all ages, are often evicted from their homes, stigmatized and physically abused—some even killed. (The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics, December 2001). Widowed mothers, as sole supporters of their children, are forced to withdraw these children from school and to rely on their meagre savings. The daughters of widows may suffer multiple deficiencies, increasing their vulnerability to abuse. The extreme plight of child widows in Asia and Africa has yet to be researched and addressed by agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) committed to safeguarding the rights of the child. (Owen, 1996). (The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics, December 2001) Described the situation of widows across the globe, particularly in parts of the developing world where the problem is more acute.

Widohood in Developed Countries

Almost worldwide, widows comprise a significant proportion of all women, ranging from 7 per cent to 16 percent of all adult women. However, in some countries and regions the proportion is far higher. In developed countries, widowhood is experienced primarily by elderly women, while in developing countries it also affects younger women, many of whom are still rearing children. In some regions, girls become widows before reaching adulthood (women, 2001).

Although Social rules vary, all cultures have rules which govern the lives of women. Across a wide range of cultures, widows are subject to patriarchal customary and religious laws and confront discrimination in inheritance rights. Many of these widows suffer abuse and exploitation at the hands of family members, often in the context of disputes surrounding whether it should be allowed for a woman to own the properties left behind by her husband.

Theoretical Framework

The Liberal Feminist Theory the term feminism as noted by (Thompson, 2001) is:

A social enterprise, a moral and political framework concerned with redressing social wrongs. It is an ethical stance in that it starts from and continually returns to questions of value, of good and evil, right and wrong, of what is worthwhile and significant and what is not.

Feminism can also be said to be the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes. It promotes the fight for women's rights and women's liberation and the participation in the activities of their communities without discrimination in whatever form. It is a range of political movements, ideologies and social movements that share a common goal to define, establish and achieve rights for women. These rights are inclusive of political, economic, personal, and social rights.

The Liberal Feminist Theory is based on the "belief that women as well as men, are rights bearing, autonomous human beings. Rationally, individual choice, rights and opportunities are central concepts for liberal political theory." (Cain, 1993). Widows are women whose husbands have died and have not remarried. The principle of this theory implies that individuals including widows should not be deprived of their rights to equality, as citizens and women. The assessment of the Nigerian patriarchal system is abhorred and this theory is built with the intent to dismantle it. All people are created equal and should not be denied equality and the access to their freedom. Liberal Feminists focus their efforts on social change through the construction of legislation and regulation of employment practices. Liberal feminist theory campaigns for rights for women based on the constitutional principle of equality of opportunity and free freedom which they are restricted from having when they are forced to swear to oaths, marry in laws, coerced to sleep in a particular place on the floor (Olomofe, Human Rights on Gender, Sex and The Law in Nigeria, 2015). This theory is based on the proposition of John Stuart Mill in his work: 'The Subjection of Women'. He argued that women should have equal rights with men in terms of education, family, work and political representation. (Mills, 1869). Women in the diverse cultural practices in Nigeria are disinherited when their husbands die and this is not the case vice versa. Brothers or male family members of the dead husbands are automatically caretakers of his property, not his widow or his daughter, this is gender inequality.

Criticism of the Liberal Feminist Theory

Critics of Liberal Feminism argue that its individualist assumptions make it difficult to see the ways in which underlying social structures and values disadvantage women. They argue that even if women are not dependent upon individual men, they are still dependent upon a patriarchal state. One of the more prevalent critiques of liberal feminism is that it, as a study allows too much of its focus to be diversified and in doing so disregards the significance of the traditional role of women. One of the Leading Scholars who have critiqued liberal feminism is radical feminist Catherine A. MacKinnon, who views liberalism and feminism as incompatible (Catherine A. MacKinnon, 2005).

Widowhood Practices in Nigeria

In certain parts of Nigeria, the maltreatment of widows is common. In-laws and the community subject them to physical and emotional abuses such as being made to sit on the floor; being confined for a month to one year; having their hair literally scraped off with razors or broken bottles; not being allowed to bath; being made to routinely weep in public; being forced to drink the water used to wash their husband's corpse; crowned by the loss of inheritance rights and eviction. (Alphonsus, 2009)

Widowhood practices in the South East are considered part of cleansing rituals designed to remove the bond that links a living spouse to a dead one. These practices are carried out as part of culture. Therefore, anyone who fails to fulfill the requirements of the rituals risks social exclusion and family or personal calamity. The Igbos of South-Eastern Nigeria comprising Imo, Ebonyi, Abia, Enugu and Anambra States respectively all indulge in various measures of traditional rites. Widowhood practices however impact immensely the life, health and wellbeing of women. (Ojigho, 2009)

Widowhood Practices Amongst The Igbo Culture.

The concepts of traditional widowhood practices are based on superstitious beliefs and are accepted by the community, they are followed strictly because of the strong belief of the people in their truth and power. The Igbo's believe that every individual belongs to a *Chi* or an *Onye-Uwa*, the guardian spirit who stand responsible for his or her earthly existence. The *Okuku-Onye-Uwa* ceremony, as an aspect of the Igbo Marriage ceremony, is intended to give recognition to this link between the bride being married and her *Onye-Uwa* (Nwoye, 2011). When her husband dies, it is therefore assumed that she must have done something abominable which made her *Chi* or *Onye-Uwa* to abandon her, after which calamity befell her.

Ezeanya observes:

"We notice that the unflinching fidelity to the various religious practices is motivated not so much by the love of the divinities or ancestors as the fear of the consequences that might result from failure to perform certain rituals demanded by the gods" (Ezeanya, 1969).

Scholars have tried to understand and explain the rituals imposed on widows, yet there are few answers. Social Scientists, Joseph Therese and Shirley Ardener, likened the mourning period to the Igbo Calendar year ("*mgbah*") which is 9 months long. "It can be as a ritual assertion of the continuous informing and reforming dimensions of a woman's life." (Agbasiere, 2000).

Among the Igbos of South-Eastern Nigeria, a widow's head is shaved immediately upon the death of her husband. In addition, a widow is expected to use sticks in scratching her body from time to time during the mourning period. Besides, she is restrained from washing herself. These practices are rooted in the belief that every death is unnatural. Therefore a widow must pass through these rituals to prove her innocence and purify herself and at the same time protect herself from further defilement(Okoye, 1995). At the death of a husband, the mourning period ranges from a week to a year with activities that differ from one community to another.

In most Igbo communities, a woman is expected to dress in the mud cloth called "*OgodoUpa*" for a period of seven days to a year depending on the emphasis of the community. In other communities, a woman is expected to wail three times a day or once in a day for three or seven days. In addition to the woman's hair being entirely shaven, she would sit on a mat surrounded by sympathizers and clad in black attire for seven months during the mourning period(Breeze Magazine, 2012).

Widohood Practices Amongst the Yoruba Culture.

Among the Yoruba of South-Western Nigeria, widowhood practices are generally characterized by human greed, superstitious beliefs and religion, (Afolayan, 2011). This assertion holds true for other ethnic groups in Nigeria as well. The extent and intensity of these practices are influenced by modernity, the teachings of Islam and Christianity and the economic status of the widow. Among the Yoruba's, widowhood in its raw cultural manifestation without the moderation of modernity, "is an enduring period of deep-rooted agony, exclusion, anxiety, as well as a period of restriction, isolation, trauma, insecurity and pain" (Afolayan, 2011).

These widowhood practices also vary from community to community throughout Yoruba land. In some communities, widows are required to recite incantation in thick forests at night for the purpose of self "cleansing"(United Nations, 2001).

Many of these ethnic groups as Yoruba, Igbo and minority groups as the Tiv, Idoma, Urhobo, Isan and including those in Edo and Delta States observe a mourning period that differ only in degree. This may range from a few days to a year. During this period the widows' appearance is distinct by dressing in white or black attire accentuated by a grieving expression. The Igbo's shave the widow's hair while the Tiv only cut the hair low. In most of the cultures, the widow is a suspect in the death of her husband and is made to undergo widowhood rights in atonement and purification. There are two other elements in widowhood practices that are widely shared; levirate marriage and disinheritance for the widow. After the mourning period, the widow in Yoruba, Igbo or Tiv ethnic group is expected to remarry a relative of her late husband. In general, this practice is on the decline due to modernity and Christian religious influence (Akumadu, 1998). Widows are also made to drink the water used to bathe the corpses of their deceased husbands; they are shaved and kept in seclusion for months while consultations are on as to the real cause of death of the man. The widow is not expected to receive condolence visits from sympathizers during the period of mourning, she is to be re-married by a relative of the late husband, she is to sit on the floor or be naked during any period of the husband's burial rite, weep and wail loudly at intervals, she must remain in confinement after the death of the husband for the given period dictated by tradition. In most cases, she must vacate the matrimonial home for the relatives of the man(Akujobi, 2009).

Widohood Practices Amongst the Hausa's.

Among the Hausa-Fulani community with the presence of the Islamic religious element, mourning and purification rites are also imposed and adhered to. A Muslim widow in Kano undergoes a 4-month mourning period and observes reasonable number of days in seclusion. In the Northern Region of Nigeria, attribution of death is to God and the widow traditionally is expected to mourn her late husband (tabaka) for a specified period of time. The mourning period is four lunar months plus ten day and till the day of delivery or weaning of her new baby for a widow not pregnant before the death of her husband and the pregnant widow respectively. The widow after the mandatory mourning period could stay and remarry in the same family or go elsewhere for the same purpose. In order to survive the harsh financial situation faced in Plateau and Bauchi States, Muslim widows observe 40 days of mourning and 30 days of seclusion which run concurrently (Emery, 2003).

Widohood Practices Amongst The Minority Groups And Other Cultures.

Among the Tiv, the widower could be seen with the children is any dressed in a particular cloth on the day burial ceremonies are to take place. Thereafter, the widower may choose never to adorn the attire (Genyi, *Widohood and Nigerian Womanhood: Another Context of Gendered Poverty in Nigeria*, 2013).

In Afemai land of Edo State for instance, widows are treated as outcast, it is always that the woman knows something about her husband's death, either through adultery or witchcraft and for this reason, she is often humiliated, she is not allowed to have a bath, or wash her hands after eating. She is not to change her clothes or underwear. She will have to sit and sleep on the bare floor during her period of confinement. Widows are also made to drink the water used to bathe the corpses of their deceased husbands; they are shaved and kept in seclusion for months while consultations are on as to the real cause of death of the man. The widow is not expected to receive condolence visits from sympathizers during the period of mourning, she is to be re-married

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In Rivers State South-South Nigeria, practically every community subjects the widow to various rites at the demise of her husband. The general practice though is to swath the widow in black from head to toe, irrespective of the fact that society knows that "black" is a bad conductor of heat. The widow is expected to be in black for at least one year, and in some communities she is kept indoors from the date of her husband's death till his burial, irrespective of the fact that she may have very young children to take care of or that she may be claustrophobic.(Effah, 1995)

Common in Rivers state is the practice of a widow having to prove that she is innocent of her husband's death. To do this, various rites have to be conducted. These include bathing the anus of the corpse and giving the water to the widow to drink, as practiced by the Emohua people submerging the widow in a river as done in Opopo area; and making the widow swim across the bottom of a boat as done by the Kalabari people. In Ndoni area of the state, throwing the widow across the deceased's coffin several times, without her leg striking the coffin, proves her innocence.

Widows Inheritance

In Nigeria today, the disposition of property or succession to a deceased's property is by will or by customary and traditional practices (intestate).

Across the world gender inequality remains the norm and women have continued to encounter discriminatory practices as a result of religious and cultural practices. In some parts of the world, particularly Africa, women are still treated like minors and sometimes as second class citizens that are only to be seen and not to be heard.(M, 2007)

The situation is often compounded in many parts of Africa where the patriarchal tradition undermines women's fundamental rights. 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 modernization. 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 hold over the land owned by the family. 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(Olukayode, 2015).

Contrary to Article 21 of the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, many widows are denied of their right to inheritance. Since they are perceived as property being inherited as well according to the customary laws, it goes without saying that have no entitlement to property ownership at the occasion of the death of their husbands. This is, especially, the case if the widow has no grown up male child. That women and girl children, traditionally, have no property inheritance right in many parts of Nigeria is not news.

The types of property widows are denied also include land, houses (including matrimonial homes), cash and other assets. In rural areas where most women depend on sale of agricultural proceeds for a living, such act of disinheritance obviously rob them and their young children livelihood. This is even a greater form of human rights violation(Ezeji for A. , 2011).

The only possessions that can really be labelled as the property of a wife are her basket, calabash, cocoa farm, cooking utensils and water pot(Nwogu M. , 2015). This is to say that there is really no regard for the right to inheritance for the woman herself.

An Igbo widow is most times deemed incapable of owning or inheriting a property but she qualifies to be inherited herself. The only exception is if the woman has a living male child who can inherit part of his father's property and through him the mother may benefit. It is worse in a matrilineal society where the members of the man's maternal family particularly the man's brothers, sisters and their children dispossess the dead man's biological children of their father's property. This practice contradicts section 36 of the Nigerian Marriage Act which stipulates that:

- a) *"A widow with children is entitled to one-third of her husband's estate.*
- b) *Where the widow has no child, she is entitled to half of her husband's estate."*

The above therefore indicates that on paper, a widow and her children are entitled to inherit from the dead man's estate as sole beneficiaries. In practice this is not the case. Disinheritance of widows is one major problem suffered by widows in the South Eastern Part of Nigeria(Oreh, 2014).

The type of marriage celebrated also determines what is given to a woman at the demise of her husband. Under the Nigerian legal system three forms of marriages are celebrated namely; marriage under the Act, Customary Law Marriage and Islamic Law or Moslem Marriage. If a marriage is contracted under the

Act and in the absence of any valid will the widow is entitled to one-third (1/3) of the deceased husband's property, while two-third (2/3) goes to their children in equal shares.

Where there are no children to the marriage, the widow takes half the estate (Marriage Act 2004, Administration of Estate Law of Anambra State 1991). The above provision is considered unfair; the widow should inherit the entire estate which will then be delegated to her children in equal shares. While the widow inherits half as stated above, the widower inherits, all, if the wife dies without children. The above provision is thus discriminatory and should be amended.

II. DISCUSSION BETWEEN INTERVIEWER AND RESPONDENTS

Research Objective one: Reveal the human rights of a woman that are violated during the harmful practices of widowhood.

Interviewee 1:

My Human Rights were violated when:

I was forced to marry my husband's brother two days after the death of my husband. I was very sad as everything was taken from me and my husband's mother began to torture me as I and my children were left with nothing.

Also few days after the death of my husband, all hairs on my body were shaved including the public and private parts as well as facial and body hair after the burial of my husband.

I was made to wear black for 9 months compulsorily to show that I was mourning my husband and to show how much I love and respect him.

My Husband's brother also began to beat me up and maltreat me, leaving I and my children helpless.

Interviewee 2:

When my late husband's family heard of the death of their son, my husband; they took away every single thing and left nothing behind, even a broom. They also requested for his salary from his workplace. They denied me of my right to have any of my late husband's property just because I had a female child. They claimed that assuming my child was a boy, they would have acknowledged that and given me something but considering I had a girl, it was in my place to take care of her. Also because of my status as a widow, I was treated like an outcast in church as I was not allowed to participate in the family outing because of the absence of my husband.

Research Objective two: Examine the societal effects on widowhood.

Interviewee 1: *We were all treated like outcasts in our own community as they took everything from us and did not associate with us or my children.*

Interviewee 2: *In our church, we were victimized as we were told not to participate in any of the family outing activities. Also because of the female gender of my child, we were not given any money or compensation for the death of my child.*

Research Objective three: Examine the effects of intervention from the ministry of women and children's affairs on widowhood practices.

Interviewee 1: *Project Alert has helped me in so many ways. It is necessary for people to know about this Organisation as they provided a safe haven as a shelter for me. The society should consider our plight and make provisions for us that have no husbands and are left alone to fend for ourselves.*

Interviewee 2: *Project Alert provided me with all the help I needed. They even provided me with legal assistance to have some benefits over what the members of my late husband's family collected. They helped me stand on my feet again as I had nowhere to turn to.*

Research Objective four: Analyze these traditional practices and how they affect the mentality of a widow.

Testimonials Of Victims Who Experienced Victimization As Widows And Were Also Victims Of Harmful Widowhood Practices.

These testimonials were taken with the consent of the victims; as well as the questions asked. For the purpose of this research, the victim's vernacular language was translated for better understanding as they came from the South- East. The Interviews took place at **Project Alert**, a reputable Non- Governmental Organisation who have zero tolerance against the abuse of women in any form and provide a safe haven and beacon of hope for these women who have been victimized.

1. MRS. GOODNESS AMADI, A 35 year-old Nursery school janitor.

My name is Goodness Amadi, I am from Okwu- Amaraihe community in Imo State. I have three girls (two twins and a girl). When my husband died; I still had a month old baby. My husband, who hails from Abia State, died on the 6th of March, 2006. I was forced to marry my husband's brother two days after the death of my husband. I was very sad as everything was taken from me and my husband's mother began to torture me as I and my children were left with nothing. I wailed throughout the night my husband died and almost entered the grave as a result of shock. Few days after the death of my husband, all hairs on my body were shaved including the public and private parts as well as facial and body hair the day after the burial of my husband. This shaving

must be done in the backyard of the house as no one is meant to see me. The shaving was done compulsorily by fellow widows or women of the husband's family (members of the *umuada*). The shaving is done with a razor blade which must be sharp and firewood must also be burning in the backyard to burn all the hairs. All the dishes and plates I use during this period must be touched by no one and thrown away immediately I was done. I was made to wear black for 9 months compulsorily to show that I was mourning my husband and to show how much I love and respect him after which everything would be burnt. A couple of days after the burial rites of my husband, I was told that I must marry my husband's brother as it was necessary to continue the family's lineage. I had to marry the brother who took all the property my husband had left behind. Everything went well for a while until I found out that this man I married; my husband's brother had another wife outside, he just wanted to marry me for the property and inheritance. He began to beat me up and maltreat me. He did not sleep in the house leaving I and my children helpless. My children miss their father and keep asking me 'Where is daddy daddy?'. I lost all hope until I heard of **Project Alert**, who helped me and my children survive and even brought my late husband's brother for questioning after much forceful deliberations agreed to pay half of their school fees even though he left me and gotten married to another woman.

Due to the sensitivity of this topic, Mrs. Goodness Amadi requested the interview be stopped for a while as she had become emotional and started crying.

2. This respondent requested that her name be withheld for confidential reasons, just her testimonial was given.

My husband died on the 20th of November, 2008. He wasn't sick, he complained of a serious headache with which he drove himself to the hospital. He died climbing the staircase and when his family members heard of this news, they took away every single thing and left nothing behind, even a broom. They requested for his salary from his workplace and when I confronted them about their behaviors, they simply said it was because I have a female child; that assuming if my child was a boy they would acknowledged that and given me something but considering I had a girl; it was in my place to take care of her. I begged and pleaded with my late husband's family members but they accused me of killing him as he was not sick when he died.

They even gave me a deadline that I would die within three years but I thank God that this is the ninth year since my husband died and I am still alive. My girl child would be fifteen by next month. It is just unfortunate that she had to grow up in such circumstances as I had to quit my daily job to take care of her. I face several challenges daily because of my status as a widow. There was a particular day we had family outing in church and it was just those women who had husbands that were allowed to do anything. I cried so much that day that 'how could such happen in a church'? The rest of us widows were told to sit down and not participate. I really miss my husband but all the same I thank God.

III. SUMMARY

The traditional practices carried out on widows in the South Eastern part of Nigeria which in many ways infringes on the rights of those widows as women of Nigeria as detailed in the earlier course of this project remains of great concern. These unwholesome cultural practices render many widows unsecured economically, socially and otherwise; making support and adjustment systems inevitable for survival. This paper frowns at women victimization and discrimination as they are seen as lesser beings in a male dominated society.

IV. CONCLUSION

Widowhood is a phenomenon that touches every individual directly or indirectly. One must not experience it to believe and accept that these practices do exist. Due to the findings gathered, it is quite obvious that the death of a man is not seen in the in this part of the world as a natural occurrence as the ordeal of a widow begins with accusations and victimizations by the next of kin of her spouse who holds the view that the widow is responsible for the death of her husband. Widowhood for the victims should be a phase whereby the victims believe that there would be a light at the end of the tunnel as they heal and live their lives without any problem whatsoever, instead it rears its ugly head as a disease, a stigma in cultures dominantly in the society which have societal and psychological effects on the victim.

Finally, this project, in conclusion, refers strongly to the Bible verse of Exodus 22:22 – 24 which reads; "Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless".

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The harmful practices and traditions should be modified or completely banned. There are processes and implementations that can assist in curbing these traditional excesses such as the national laws in Nigeria, as well as the treaties and conventions that are against the violation of women rights.

Suggested recommendations in the course of my research work:

- The society, creating awareness to the traditional communities and the Elders in the South Eastern part of Nigeria, about the consequences of these practices and how they adversely and psychologically affect the children and the mother, is necessary to curb this dilemma.
- The Ministry of Women Affairs in various States should integrate and involve women groups at the grassroots to provide information to widows of whom to complain when harassed. The Corporate Affairs Department that register major community based associations such as town unions must go through their constitution to ensure that the issue of widowhood practices is captured there.
- The laws should be interpreted in such a way that it is in line with the constitution in respect of the rule of law and fair hearing to the widows, and non-violation of their human rights.
- If these right judgments/ decisions are made by the courts, the same courts will ensure their enforcement, consequently the society will be free of these harmful practices and the issue of inequality and discrimination against widows will be laid to rest.
- In a family, Husbands are encouraged to write their wills which state clearly how their properties should be shared in the event of death. Joint ownership of properties is best for couples as there would not be any problem in the case of death.
- Outdated laws on widowhood practices particularly the customary laws should be modified in relation to our society today. Wives under customary marriage should be given equal rights with their counterparts under statutory Marriage Act.

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