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Problems of widowhood: a study of widows in a tertiary institution in Ibadan, south west Nigeria

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Summary

This study is part of a larger multi-centre survey on widowhood in Nigeria. Information was gathered using a structured self-administered questionnaire from 42 widows who are working at the University College Hospital and the College of Medicine, in Ibadan, capital of Oyo State in the southwest of Nigeria. The findings reveal that the majority of these widows are middle aged, between 35 and 55 years of age, with little or no prospect of remarriage. Almost half of them had only primary education and are of low professional status; 48% of them earn very low salary, and had a high parity, having 5 or more children. The problems identified by these widows in order of priority include financial/economic hardship (69%), absence of husband's will resulting in the loss of properties to husband's relations (55%), loneliness and depression (41%), poor relationship with in-laws (41%), difficulty in social interaction (21%), and poor housing (17%). Recommendation for alleviating the hardships of widows suggested include encouragement of female education, enhancement of women, economic empowerment, improving availability and effective utilization of family planning services and encouraging men to write their wills early in marriage. Also, through advocacy and public health awareness campaigns, to enlighten the masses about the plight of the widows, in order to eliminate the dehumanizing traditional practices to which Nigerian widows are often subjected.

Keywords: *Problem, widowhood, tertiary, family*

Résumé

Cette étude fait parti d'une enquête plus étendue, de veuvage au Nigeria. Les informations ont été recueillies ramassé à travers des questionnaires auto-administrés aux 42 veuves travaillant au centre hospitalier universitaire et l'institut de médecine d'Ibadan, la capitale de l'état d'Oyo au sud ouest du Nigeria. Les résultats montrent que la plupart de ces veuves avaient le cinquantaine, entre 35 et 55 ans avec peu ou sans perspectives de remariage. Presque la moitié d'elles avait la formation primaire et avait un statut professionnel bas ; 48% d'elles gagne un salaire très bas avec une parité très élevée et ayant 5 ou plus d'enfants. Les problèmes identifiés par ces veuves en ordre de priorité inclus : difficulté économique/financière (69%), manque de testament de leur mari engendrant une perte des biens au profit des parents de la famille du mari défunt (55%), la solitude et la dépression (41%), pauvre rapport avec les beaux-parents (41%), interaction sociale (21%), problème de hébergement (17%). Les recommandations suggérées pour alléger les difficultés des veuves inclus, l'encouragement de la formation des femmes, l'encouragement de l'émancipation économique des femmes, l'amélioration de la disponibilité et utilisation effectives des services de planning familial et l'encouragement

des hommes à faire leurs testaments très tôt dans le mariage. Aussi par la préconisation et les campagnes de sensibilisation de la santé publique, visant et à éduquer la masse populaire des difficultés des veuves afin d'éliminer les pratiques traditionnelles déshumanisantes auxquels les veuves sont assujetties.

Introduction

Widowhood, the death of a spouse, is often considered one of the most stressful events in a person's life [1]. Several studies attest to both the physical and psychological consequences [2-4]. Reported physical consequences which have been encountered include increased risk of physical symptoms [2,3], new illnesses [4], hospitalizations [3], use of medications [3,4], lower perceived health status [5] and mortality [6-9].

Psychological effects of widowhood reported include increased risk of depression, psychological symptoms and mental illness [2,4,10-12]. Widowhood has been described as a multifaceted tragedy especially in the African environment [13]. Kitzinger [14] remarked that women's rights have always been ignored, denied or invalidated under heteropatriarchy. The widow is unequivocally the most marginalized of women in most cultures. Widowhood practices in most parts of the world reveal atrocious social injustices. In some part of Nigeria, the widow is force to drink the water with which the corpse of her dead husband is washed, as proof that she had no hand in the man's death [13]. The Indian widow, many years ago, faced being burnt alive at the cremation ceremony of her deceased husband [15]. In Ghana, Zambia, as well as Nigeria, the widow suffers an indescribable emotional violence, as her husband's relations swoop on the dead man's property in the zealous and scandalous scramble for his property [13].

Given the realities of the developing countries in which many are war-ravaged, economically depressed and politically unstable, it is now apparent that cultural change has become inevitable. Obnoxious and outmoded traditions that compound the problems that a widow has to contend with must be discarded. For example, in the USA and England and some other European countries, widows are taken care of under the social security scheme or social services allowance scheme. A somewhat welfarist widow's scheme has also been adopted in Pakistan, in what is known as Zakat fund [13]. In Nigeria, attempts have been made by various religious groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to introduce measures which may alleviate some of the problems arising from widowhood, and encouraging results have been reported following such interventions [16,17].

However, there is still much to be done to protect the right of widows, as the issue has not been adequately and openly addressed by the society [18]. Even the existing legal rights and religious doctrines which specify how widows should be protected and assisted are often sidetracked or even overturned by the social norms and adverse traditional practices [17]. Furthermore, conditions of widows are generally quite precarious, as they are particularly vulnerable.

Widowhood is assuming increasing importance in

Nigeria, with increasing frequency of road traffic accidents and the rise in incidence of mortality from myocardial infarction and cerebrovascular accidents among others. There is now a need for the gathering of scientific information about this category of women in order to develop appropriate policy about their welfare.

The International Conference on Population and Development has addressed the fact that development can only be meaningful if it puts the people first [19]. To achieve this, it is necessary to identify the people, their specific needs in order to know how best to meet these. Nwoga as observed that there is paucity of studies on widowhood practices in Nigeria [20].

This present study therefore is undertaken to identify demographic characteristics of widows in a tertiary institution in the southwestern part of Nigeria. It also seeks to identify the social problems they encounter, with a view to obtaining suggestions, which can address the adverse effects of widowhood on the socioeconomic status of these women. It is envisaged that the information thus gathered would not only serve as a template for larger community, state and national studies, but will also assist in formulating and establishing appropriate programmes to alleviate some of the problems faced by widows. It is also hoped that the data gathered will assist legal experts, policymakers and all well-meaning voluntary groups in advising the government on policy decisions concerning effective legal enforcement of the rights of widows.

Materials and methods

This study, which is part of a multi-centre prospective survey in Nigeria involving both the urban and rural areas, was carried out in Ibadan, Oyo State, over a one-year period, between 1998 and 1999. Contact was established with widows through the Personnel/Establishment Offices of the College of Medicine and the University College Hospital, Ibadan. The heads of the various departments in the College and Hospital were also contacted. The list of widows identified was then compiled. The widows were all registered with the Family Care Project, a non-profit and non-political, non-governmental organization (NGO) established in June 1996 to cater for the welfare and well-being of widows who are staff members of the above-mentioned institutions and their children.

The identified widows were subjected to a pretested structured self-administered questionnaire, with assistance from a trained interviewer. The questionnaire was designed to include information on socio-demographic characteristics of the widows and the social problems as perceived by the widows themselves. The completed questionnaires were then analyzed by frequency distribution, and the test of significance using Chi-square.

Results

A total of 42 widows completed the questionnaire. Table 1 gives a profile of the socio-demographic characteristics of the widows. 14 (33.3%) are within the 46-50 year age group, followed by 9 (21.4%) in the 41-45 year age group. Majority (81%) of the widows belongs to the middle aged, 36-55 years group (Table 1). Nineteen of the 42 (45.2%) widows had only primary education, whilst 15 (35.8%) had post secondary education.

With regard to their professional/occupational status, majority of them are semi-skilled, with 17 (40.5%) working as hospital ward assistants. Seven (16.7%) are nurses, while another 7 (16.7%) are secretaries / clerical assistants (Fig. 1).

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of the widows (n=42)

Age of the widows	Age (yrs)	Frequency	%
	26-30	1	2.4
	31-35	2	4.8
	36-40	6	14.3
	41-45	9	21.4
	46-50	14	33.3
	51-55	5	11.9
	56-60	3	7.1
	61-65	1	2.4
	66-70	1	2.4
	Total	42	100
Educational status	Highest educational level	No	%
	Illiterate	1	2.4
	Primary completed	17	40.4
	Secondary uncompleted	4	9.5
	Secondary completed	3	7.1
	Post Secondary (Nuring)	12	28.6
	Laboratory Technician etc.	3	7.1
	Polytechnic	1	2.4
	University	1	2.4
	Total	42	100
Annual income	Annual income (Nigerian Naira)	No	%
	N12,000 - 24,000	10	23.8
	N24,001 - 36,000	13	31
	N36,001 - 48,000		
	N48,001 - 60,000	5	11.9
	N60,001 - 72,000		
	No response	9	21.4
	Total	42	100
Religion	Religion	No	%
	Islam	3	7.1
	Christianity	39	92.9
	Traditional Religion	-	-
	Total	42	100
Ethnicity	Ethnicity	No	%
	Yoruba	26	61.9
	Efik	4	9.5
	Edo	4	9.5
	Igbo	2	4.8
	Hausa	2	4.8
	Others	4	9.5
	Total	42	100

FIGURE 1: PIE DIAGRAM SHOWING THE OCCUPATION OF WIDOWS

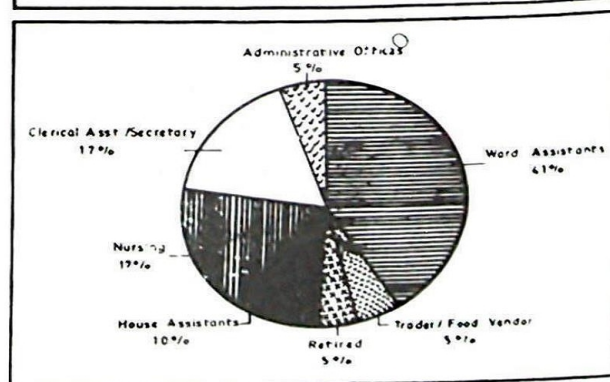


Table 1 also reflects the income of the widows, 23 (54.8%) earn less than 4000 Naira (N) (US \$40) per month or N48,000 (US \$480) per annum, while 10 (23.8%) earn less than N2000 per month or N24,000 per annum. Thus, 75% of the widows, judging from their income, belong to the low socio-economic class. The ethnic distribution of the widows reveals that 26 (61.9%) are Yoruba. The geographical location of the study reflects the ethnic dominance, as the Yorubas are located in southwest Nigeria. Table 1 also shows that 39 (92.9%) of the widows were Christians.

Table 2 shows the ages of the widows when their husband died. Sixteen (38%) were 36-40 years old, while 2 were under 30 years old when the event occurred. The table also reveals that 13 (31%) had spent between 11 and 15 years with their husbands before the husband's demise, while another 10 (23.8%) had spent 16-20 years.

Table 2: Age distribution of the widows as at the time of husband's death.

Age when husband died	Age (yrs)	Frequency	%
	21-25	1	2.4
	26-30	1	2.4
	31-35	6	14.3
	36-40	16	3.8
	41-45	7	16.7
	46-50	6	14.3
	51-55	4	9.5
	56-60	1	2.4
	Total	42	100
Number of years of marriage before husband died	Years of marriage	No	%
	0-5 yrs	0	0
	6-10 yrs	3	7.1
	11-15 yrs	13	31
	16-20 yrs	10	23.8
	> 20 yrs	14	33.3
	No response	2	4.8
	Total	42	100

Table 3 illustrates the income distribution of the widows in relation to the number of children they have to cater for. The majority of the low income widows, 15 out of 17 (88%) had four to six children to cater for, significantly more children than widows with higher income ($P < 0.01$).

Table 3: Distribution of children related to the widow's annual income.

Income of widows	1-3 children		4-6 children		Total No. of widows	
		%		%		%
N12,000-24,000	2	11.8	15	88.2	17	100
N24,001-48,000	6	40.0	9	60.0	15	100
N48,001-72,000	7	70.0	3	30.0	10	100
Total	15	35.7	27	64.0	42	100

1 USS = N100

$\chi^2 = 9.49$ $df=2$ $p = 0.0087$

Table 4: Widow's self assessed problems*

Perceived problems	No. of widows (n=42)	%
Financial	29	61
Husband died intestate (i.e did not write a will)	23	55
Poor (non-cordial) relationship with husband's family	17	41
Loneliness/depression	17	41
Difficulty in social interaction	9	21
Grossly inadequate housing	7	17

* = multiple responses

Table 4 gives a breakdown of the type of social problems that the widows encounter. The majority, 29 (69%), identified financial problem/hardship as the most serious problem they face. Twenty-three (55%) observed that the death of their husbands intestate (that is, the husband's failure to write a "will" before his death) resulting in the loss of the husband's properties to his relations, as another significant serious problem. In addition, loneliness and depression occurred in 17 (41%). Other problems identified include: poor relationship with the in-laws, 17 (41%); difficulty in social interaction, 9 (21%); and inadequate housing in 7 (17%) of the widows. Tables 5a, b and c give the breakdown of the variables age, educational status and income in relation to their perceived problems. It would have been worthwhile if the values obtained in connection with perceived problems in respect of the variables we subjected to appropriate statistical test in order to find out whether any significant difference exists between the various categories. However, this is not feasible given the fact that some of the values associated with the variables for some of the categories are few, less than 5.

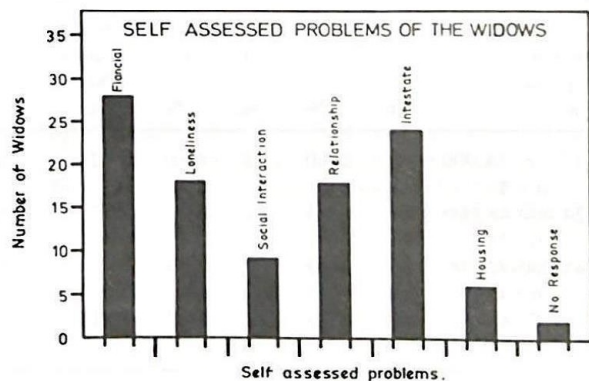


Fig. 2:

Discussion

This study has shown that the majority of the widows are in the middle aged group, with more than 80% being over 35 years of age as at the time of the husband's death. This finding is in agreement with the observations of Smith and colleagues in the USA [21]. The critical age is the period when the widows are often saddled with the responsibility of not only looking after

Table 5a: Perceived problems of widows related to their ages (n=42)

Age (yrs)	Financial		Husband died interstate		Non-cordial relationship with husbands's family		Loneliness		Difficulty in social interaction		Grossly inadequate housing	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
31-40 (n=10)	2	20.0	4	40.0	6	60.0	7	70.0	5	50.0	2	20.0
41-50 (n=23)	12	52.2	20	87.0	14	60.9	13	56.5	12	52.2	1	4.3
51-60 (n=9)	3	33.3	4	44.4	4	44.4	4	44.4	3	33.3	1	11.1

* - Multiple responses

Table 5b: Perceived problems of widows related to education (n=42)

Highest educational level	Financial		Husband died interstate		Non-cordial relationship with husbands's family		Loneliness depression		Difficulty in social interaction		Grossly inadequate housing	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Illiterate (n = 1)	1	100.0	1	100.0	-	0	1	100.0	1	100.0	-	100.0
Primary education (n = 17)	6	35.3	11	64.7	12	70.6	12	70.6	8	47.1	2	11.8
Secondary education (n = 12)	6	50.0	5	41.7	5	41.7	6	50.0	7	58.3	2	16.7
Post Secondary (n = 12)	5	41.7	11	91.7	7	58.3	7	58.3	6	50.0	1	8.3

* - Multiple responses

Table 5c: Perceived problems of widows related to their income (n=42)

Annual Income **Annual income in Nigeria Naira	Financial		*Perceived problems Husband died interstate		Non-cordial relationship with husbands's family		Loneliness depression		Difficulty in social interaction		Grossly inadequate housing	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
≤12,000-24,000 n = 5	1	20.0	2	40.0	2	40.0	2	40.0	1	20.0	1	20.0
24,000-48,000 n = 28	13	46.4	19	67.9	17	60.7	18	64.3	17	60.7	3	10.7
48,000-72,000 n = 6	3	50.0	5	83.3	3	50.0	4	66.7	2	33.3	-	-
72,000 + n = 3	1	33.3	2	66.7	1	33.3	1	33.3	1	33.3	-	-

* Multiple responses

** N100 = US\$1

the children, but also looking after their aged parents. Therefore, for most of the widows, the prospect for remarriage is neither contemplated nor desired, because of the increased demand from their dependants.

Smith *et al.* [21] also observed that middle aged widows with dependent children have lower rates of remarriage, even though remarriage is one of the most important determinants of the physical and economic well-being among

the widowed.

Information on the widows' self-assessed problems is quite revealing in this study. Financial hardship was the most commonly identified problem. The impact of their financial problem can be further appreciated when it is realized that up to 75% of the widows are of low professional status and on a low salary grade level. In the face of ongoing structural adjustment programme and sky-rocketing inflation, it is extremely difficult for these widows to cope financially, with the enormous family commitments such as feeding and clothing the children, paying school fees, buying their school materials and paying house rents. If adequate provision was not made prior to the husband's death, the family may suddenly be plunged into a state of impoverishment. The widows' culturally mandated long periods of confinement in mourning also prevent them from going out to work to support themselves, as has been previously observed [17]. The low educational status of the widows in this study is not in favour of their self-reliance and self-sufficiency after the death of the husbands. About 50% of widows in this study had only primary education which can only provide them with low skilled labour and low salary, in the event that they have to work to support themselves and their children. Choudhury and Leoncio [22] in their study of life-cycle aspects of poverty among older women in USA, found that, whether women are impoverished or not by adverse life events such as widowhood depends on their economic resources, just prior to the event, which in turn depends to a large extent on the widow's education and occupation.

When respondents' income is viewed in relation to the number of children being taken care of by each widow, it was observed that those with low salary had more children than those with relatively higher salary. This finding is similar to

that found in the general population in which the less educated and poorly paid tend to have more children than the more educated upper income group [23]. This underscores the importance and the urgent need for aggressive family planning education campaign, and the provision of accessible and culturally acceptable family planning services.

Another major problem identified by the widows is the non-provision of a "will" by the husbands. This is due to the wrong attitudes of many Nigerians (including educated ones) who do not believe in making a will. Indeed, many communities frown at the idea of a person discussing the eventuality of death and if a wife should keep on reminding her husband of the need to write a will, she may be alleged to have an ulterior motive, or may even be accused of planning the death of her husband. The serious consequences on the wife, of the husband dying inter-state, are enormous.

A woman's gender-constructed role makes her inferior in many respects, in the African society, but widowhood adds another oppression. Her problems are often compounded in a country like Nigeria, as in many other countries in Africa, by ethnically based, age-long customs and traditional practices which have adverse effect on the health of the woman [17]. A widow is presume to have forfeited all her rights within the society because 'she has allowed her husband to die'. It is thus very clear that the widow is traumatized and that she is made to suffer tremendously in many respects, physically, socially, economically and psychologically. Physically, her health is impaired through poor and irregular feeding. She also suffers socially as a result of the prolonged solitary confinement. In addition, she becomes economically deprived since her period in mourning prevents her from going out to work to support

herself and her children, thus worsening her already precarious economic state.

In this study, significant psychological problem was identified among the widows. About 50% of them identified loneliness/depression as a major problem. It has been observed that in the Nigerian cultural environment, the loneliness and depression is usually aggravated by the fact that that widow is often a suspect if she tries to interact socially with couples in the neighbourhood, and may be accused of having illicit amorous affairs with the males in the area, if she gets too familiar [13]. Thus, the widow tends to be rather withdrawn, become introverted, keeping much to herself. Similar observation about psychological problems in widowhood has also been reported in the study of Pakhlava and associates [24] in Finland. In this study, the occurrence of major depression among the widows studied was reported among other findings. Similarly, Avis and colleagues [25] from USA reported that following the death of their spouses, the percentage of widows reporting psychological symptoms increased. Grimby and Wikland [26], in their study correlated widowhood with loneliness and financial discontent.

In conclusion, the terrible plight of the widows particularly in the context of African customs and traditions cannot be over-emphasized. Hence, the widow needs a great deal of support, physically, financially, socially and psychologically. More often than not, she is denied this much needed support by her in-laws; and her own family members are usually too pre-occupied with their own personal problems to be of help. This study has revealed that there is an urgent need to address the problems of widows in Nigeria. Thus, the burden of the care of widows and their children has to fall on the government, non-governmental organizations, the mass media and well-meaning individuals and philanthropists.

The following recommendations are suggested for the Government:-

- 1) Ensure that the fundamental human rights stated in the declaration signed by all members of the United Nations are observed.
- 2) Ensure that there are laws that protect the rights of widows and encourage widows to stand up for their rights.
- 3) Provide tax relief for the widows.
- 4) Promote female education through award of scholarships and bursaries
- 5) Promote economic well-being of the widows through women empowerment programmes.
- 6) Promote family size limitation by encouraging effective utilization of family planning services by couples; while;
Non-governmental Organizations and Parastatals should:-
- 7) Intensify efforts in the area of advocacy at all levels to highlight the problems of widows.
- 8) Promote psychological well-being through organized social activities.
- 9) Encourage men to write their 'Will' early in their marital life to protect their families.
- 10) Encourage women to develop good interpersonal relationship, particularly with their in-laws.

It is hoped that these efforts will help to abolish the adverse traditional practices and minimize the hardship of widows and their children, thereby giving them hope for a happier and more fulfilled life.

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