

Policy Response to Widowhood Rites among the Awori of Ogun State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines policy response to widowhood rites among the Awori of Ogun State, south west, Nigeria. The paper argues that widows form a significant proportion of the Awori population, yet, much is not known about their plight nor policy response to the practice of widowhood rites and its associated challenges among the study group. The paper examines the situational analysis of widows and existing widowhood practices. It identifies economic and psychological challenges faced by the widows with a view to suggesting the way forward. The functional theory serves as a guide for the sociological view point in this paper. The study rely on data from both quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (In-depth Interviews- IDI's) sources. It concludes with a critical examination of existing gender policies and response to widowhood rites in the Awori context.

Key words: Widow, Widowhood rites, Policy, Awori, Nigeria.

1.0 Statement of the problem

Lack of research on widows as victims of weak State patriarchal legislative structures is one problem that has received little or no attention. Existing legislation is often silent on widows' rights. In spite of global response to women's subordinate position in societies through the United Nations (UN) Women Decade (1975 – 1985) and International Conventions and Declarations, there seems to be no end to widows' plight especially in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, the UN World Conferences in Mexico in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985, and Beijing in 1995, and the ratification by many countries of the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) have not achieved any significant success. Of major concern is the fact that in Nigeria, response to the international conventions and declaration (especially as they relate to widows) is grossly inadequate as there is no unified national response. Despite diverse fora that try to highlight the plight of widows in Nigeria, there has been a lapse in the area of national consensus regarding the improvement of this aspect of women's existence in the country. Only a few States: Anambra (2005), Ekiti (2005), Enugu, Imo, Edo States (2004), Rivers (2003), Delta and Cross river State (2004) have signed into law the eradication of malpractices against widows/widowers. Surprisingly, most of these laws are mere window dressing as there are no supportive structures through which women can seek redress. A research in this field is therefore timely as it calls for an in-depth study that will bring to the front burner the plight of widows who have remained as silent victims of betrayals, distrust, enmity, suspicion, hatred and consequent denials of fundamental rights and social injustices. It is against this premise therefore that this paper examines the policy response to widowhood rites among the Awori of Ogun State, south west, Nigeria. The paper examines the situational analysis of the Awori widow, conceptual/social construction of widowhood, economic and psychological challenges associated with widowhood and concludes with a re-examination of the policy gaps and the way forward.

1.1 Situational Analysis of the Awori widows

The increasing number of widows globally has become an acknowledged social problem in spite of giant strides in medicine and science, death of marriage partners arising from illness/diseases, accidents, wars etc has not been eradicated. For instance, Potash (1986:1) opines that "widows make up about half the adult female population in Africa". Even though this view could pass for an over-exaggeration, one striking feature in most part of SSA is the fact that, very little is said about widows and their plight in any discourse.

In spite of existing cases of widows disinheritance and subjugation to harrowing widowhood rites in the 21st century, this segment of the population are barely mentioned in the literature of Gender and Development, except in the context of aging. Yet, this is a specific sub-group that should be targeted for intervention in a democratic dispensation considering the incidence of depression among them, the socioeconomic setback that the crisis of widowhood brings to them, and the sudden change in their status (Sesay and Odebiyi : 1998). In a study titled ‘Widowhood and Property Inheritance among the Awori of Ogun State, George (2010) found that widows of all age categories form a significant part of the Awori local group. More worrisome is the fact that, about sixty percent of the widows studied had no formal education in the 21st century yet, various forms of widowhood practices ranging from, confinement of widow indoor for a specified period of time depending on the community are glaringly enforced on widows. Other widowhood rites performed by the Awori widow include, sitting on a mat, wearing of dark clothing/accessories during the widowhood period, observance of vigil on the eight day, taking of special bath, and disposal of all items used at the expiration of the confinement period to mention a few. Details of the common widowhood rites among the Awori are found in subsection 1.3 of this paper.

1.2 Conceptual / Social Construction of Widowhood

Widows are essentially married women with/without children who loose their husbands as a result of death. In a similar vein, widowhood refers to the loss of a husband, companion, breadwinner and supporter. One of the events of life which many women go through is widowhood. For most widows, the death of the husband is not only a time for emotional grief, but also a time that severe torture and humiliation would be meted out to them by their in-laws. It is a time for scores to be settled with the deceased’s extended family.

Under normal circumstances, a widow is to be pitied, and helped out of the psychological valley into which the unexpected has plunged her. Unfortunately, this is never the case. In most African societies, she is stigmatized as the killer of her husband, oppressed, suppressed, afflicted, neglected, accused, openly insulted and consequently made to succumb to widowhood rites on account of customs and traditions. Usually, the widow’s ordeal begins the very moment her husband/spouse breathes his last as revealed by Dei (1995:6), The sympathy for her ends on the spur of the moment. Promises and assurances are made at the graveside. But as soon as the earth swallows the dead, the widow becomes a victim of neglect, accusation, and bizarre cultural practices. In most cases, the in-laws use the mourning period as an avenue to give vent to their anger and ensure that the widow’s solitary life is made more miserable. They strip her virtually of her self esteem and all the toil she had acquired with her spouse.

Consequently, the death of a husband dramatically alters a woman’s status and leaves her at the mercy of her husband’s relations who are customarily empowered to take decisions concerning her and the properties left behind by the deceased not minding her welfare and that of her children if any. As observed in *Women’s Rights Wake Up Call Assessment Report* (2001 : 202), the plight of widows is made worse by various widowhood rites though not uniform in all societies, but existing in one form or another almost everywhere. While it is more entrenched in the rural areas, the practice affects many urban women in African societies especially as it is common with those who die in the cities but are to be buried in rural areas (“hometown burial”). “As the prime suspect of her husband’s death, the widow is usually compelled to go through an ordeal to prove her innocence. In some cases, she is made to drink the water used to wash the corpse” (Kantiyok, 2000:61). “To express their grief, widows are sometimes required to sleep on the floor, abstain from taking baths, shave their hair, and wear dirty rags as clothes for as long as mourning lasts”. In a similar vein, “She is made to cook with broken pots and eat with unwashed hands” (Akumadu, 1998: 29).

For instance, Nna and Nyeke (2007:173) note that:

Widows all over the world face varying degrees of difficulties and untold hardship. Even though they tend to suffer in silence in most cases, the problems range from obnoxious legislation, which subsumes women under male dominance, of cultural practices such as widowhood practices and disinheritance which aggravates the poverty and social disempowerment of women.

These practices which stem from societal traditions and family perception are no doubt harmful to the health of the widow in question besides being extraordinarily harsh. Moreover, most of these rituals erode the dignity of the widows and also traumatize them. Besides exposure to diseases such as cholera, diarrhea, etc, occasioned by eating with unwashed hands, drinking water used to bathe the corpse is also poisonous. Worst still, any attempt to contest such practices is met with stiff resistance and sanctions.

The confined widows, in the wake of these treatments no doubt, suffer from social degradation, inferiority complex and low self-esteem.

1.3 Common widowhood practices among the Awori

During confinement occasioned by mourning and observance of widowhood rites, widows are forbidden from engaging in certain acts and practices which are considered detrimental. This section examines common widowhood practices among the Awori with a view to bringing to the fore, areas of differences and similarities in this aspect of African reality (George, 2010). Nwoga (1989) defined widowhood practices as a set of expectations as to action and behaviour by the widow, actions by others towards the widow, and rituals performed by, or on behalf of the widow from the time of the death of her husband. Similarly, Nwaogugu (1989) considered widowhood practices as one manifestation of the ritual cleansing which tradition prescribed for all members of the community following any death event or other influences regarded as corrupting. Below are some common widowhood practices among the Awori of Ogun State, Nigeria.

(i) Confinement Indoor

Essentially, confinement in this research refers to total restriction of the widow's movement within a particular place throughout the mourning period. This implies that the widow is denied freedom of movement except around the compound and sometimes within the four walls of a room in which she is confined. Confinement of the widow was found to be the commonest widowhood practice among the Awori. The practice among this sub-ethnic group is such that, on receipt of the news confirming the husband's death, staying indoor within the confines of the family house or the matrimonial home depending on the residential pattern in place, is mandatory for the widow in question. This is regarded as the greatest honour and mark of respect accorded to the dead. All forms of outings, business or social engagements are automatically suspended, outlawed and forbidden for as long as the mourning period lasts. For the Awori, confinement of a widow indoor has several socio-cultural implications, as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions revealed. Among the Awori, widows are confined to a room for specified periods to ascertain if the widow is pregnant and to discourage abortion. If the widow is confirmed pregnant within the period, arrangements are made for her up keep and that of the unborn baby by the deceased family. Another explanation given for a widow's confinement is to ensure proper guidance, monitoring and supervision throughout the mourning duration in order to avoid the negative consequences such as the abortion of the unborn baby and eventual death often associated with non-strict adherence to widowhood rites. For instance, among the Awori, it is believed that refusal of the widow to remain indoor during widowhood and exposure to sunlight or rainfall will amount to her untimely death.

(ii) Sitting on a Mat

This is another common widowhood practice among the Awori. On receipt of the news of spouse death, the widow is expected to replace chairs and foams in the living room with a mat, where she is expected to sit to receive visitors and well-wishers that come to condole with her. At night she is expected to sleep on the same mat to further express her mourning. Experience shows that sitting or sleeping on mats is a practice that is common among Muslims all over the world. As observed Focus Group Discussions and In-depth interviews, non-widows are not expected to sit on the mat used by the Awori widow. Only fellow widows are permitted to sit on such mats. The dominance of Islamic religion and the low literacy level prevalent in the sample may partly account for this finding. However, the remaining 10 percent who did not sit on mat stated their preference for stools, cushion chairs and foams. A widow in the study area had this to say:

"Me, to sit on mat when I am not a Muslim! No way! It will not be comfortable; I prefer a cushion chair or foam. Moreover, I am not responsible for his death. So! Whether I sit on a mat or bare floor it will not bring back my husband".

(iii) Observance of Vigil

On the eve of the 8th day after the dead has been buried, the widow is forbidden to sleep. She is expected to keep vigil as a sign of honour to the spouse. Family members, friends, fellow widows, preferably old and experienced ones, and other well wishers make it a point of duty to keep her company with songs, story telling, games and jokes. The night is programmed with these activities to ensure that no dull moment is experienced by the widow or widows as the case may be. If on the other hand, the widow refuses to co-operate and gives herself to sleep, it is believed that she may not live to tell the story.

According to a key informant, “*should the widow fall asleep on this occasion, she will join her ancestors*”. By implication, the consequence of the violation of this widowhood rite (vigil on the eve of 8th day) by the widow is death.

(iv) Taking of Special Bath

This is another unique and symbolic widowhood rite performed by the Awori widows. Taking of special baths in designated places such as in a river or at a particular place in the family house is carried out by the widow with the assistance of older and experienced widows. This practice marks the end of confinement and widowhood rites. Taking of special bath seems not to be prevalent among the widows sampled as 60 percent failed to include special bath as part of widowhood rites performed by them. The remaining 40 percent who took special bath stated that it serves as a means of total separation of the dead from the living wife or wives in the Awori tradition. In addition, special bath is accompanied by some rituals which mark the end of the mourning period and these include: exchange of mourning clothes with new sets of bright clothing or materials, disposal of all items used, preparation of special meals for the widow and well-wishers, prayers are offered for protection of the widow, the children and other family members of the deceased.

(v) Wearing of dark Clothing and Accessories

There is no consensus on the exact number of clothing the Awori widow wears during the mourning period. While some of the widows sampled stated that they wore just two sets of clothing, some others stated otherwise. One of the first signs of mourning, beyond weeping, wailing, staying indoor for a specified period and disengagement from all forms of social activities/gatherings is reflected in the dress pattern of the bereaved. The widow is expected to openly display her sorrow by the wearing of dark coloured clothing material or apparel. Among the study population, it was found that there is no hard and fast rule as to the exact colour of clothing to be worn by widows during the mourning period. One thing that is paramount is that, the clothing, apparels and accessories worn by the widows are usually dark coloured across the three major religions: Christianity, Islam and Traditional religion. The description of widowhood as is of a state of loss, bereavement and mourning of a spouse with whom the widow or widower is assumed to have shared the most memorable part of her life is largely reflected in the widow’s sense of dressing as revealed by this finding. This view is corroborated by Ore and Akin (1998) in their assertion that widowhood is not a thing of joy, yet nature has made it a necessary evil consequent upon the death of a spouse. Indeed, the state of widowhood can be considered as one of personal loss, encompassing everything from the immediate psychological impact of the loss of a partner to the material deprivation of an income, a home or of contributions to domestic economy (Olapegba and Chovwen, 2007:835-836).

(vi) Usage of separate utensils and items

In the Awori tradition, George (2010) found that the period of widowhood is one that involves a total separation of the widow from other members of the family. Besides confinement in a secluded place while mourning lasts, all utensils utilized including cutleries, plates, mats, and clothes are not to be shared with anyone except her fellow widows. This separation is extended to her food which must be prepared by fellow widows and is not to be shared with other family members including her children. Should the need arise for the widow to plait her hair or beautify herself within this period, only her fellow widows are permitted to perform these assignments. Anything contrary will attract the wrath of the land. The enforcement of these widowhood rites are by women against fellow women. This finding brings to the fore, the fact that women are the custodians of widowhood rites among the study population. They not only dictate expected widowhood practices to fellow women, they also ensure that the practices are carried out religiously. Usage of separate utensils is perceived to perform some significant roles for widows. For instance, among the study group, widowhood is considered as a period of total separation of the living from the dead physically. Thus, all items used by the widows must of necessity not be shared with anyone including the widows’ children except fellow widows who have experienced widowhood practices.

(vii) Disposal of all items used

This is carried out at the expiration of the mourning period. All material items used throughout the confinement period are neatly packaged and distributed to older widows specifically relatives within or outside the community. Majority of the Muslim widows sampled stated their preference to dispose the materials to the less privileged (beggars) in their community according to their Islamic injunctions.

There seems to be no consensus among the study population on the beneficiary of the material items disposed by widows. While some widows, on religious grounds, prefer the less privileged, others from the traditional point of view consider their fellow widows. But one thing that stands out clearly among the Awori is the fact that all material items used by the widows (cooking and drinking pots, cutlery and plates, clothing, mat and stool etc) from the beginning to the expiration of widowhood rites must be disposed of. These items are considered contaminated and are not to be used by non-widows. Conclusively, a key informant had this to say :

“if a widow refuses to mourn her husband by not performing the stated widowhood rites, she will be perceived as the killer of her husband. To avoid name-calling and stigmatization, a widow has to mourn either genuinely or pretentiously”.

1.4 Economic Challenges associated with widowhood practices

When one considers the long mourning period associated with widowhood and the various traditional rites which widows face and the consequent denial of their fundamental rights of freedom among others, one is tempted to state that widows are by this practice, rendered economically incapacitated and this aggravates their poverty. As part of the mourning rites, the widow in most Awori societies are not allowed to return to work for months for as long as mourning lasts. However, the mourning duration varies from one tradition to another. To corroborate this assertion, Olapegba and Chovwen (2007:837) opined that, “a widow that is confined, dethroned and disinherited may not see any support around her”. It is obvious that these cultural practices which erode the dignity and self-esteem of the widows are counterproductive. In a similar vein, Aderinto (2000:12) revealed that a drop in the economic well-being of women accompanies widowhood and adds that the situation is made worse when the woman has been deprived of access to the late husband’s savings and resources.

Other researches and analyses suggest a negative impact on the economic well being of women, particularly widowed women in old age (James, 1999; Hard and Wise, 1991; Williamson & Rix, 1999).

1.5 Psychological impacts of widowhood

Widowhood, though an inevitable status has impact on the lives of people when it occurs. The death of a spouse can be one of the most stressful role transition which results in profound change in the status, stability and security of the woman. The death of a spouse results in a problem of re-adjustment. Most times, the widow suffers from insecurity and wants especially with regard to the maintenance of the house and children. In the past, this role was a joint responsibility of the couple. The psychological impact on the surviving spouse who is deprived of the companionship of the dead may be the same all over the world, but the treatment meted out to widows are diverse among cultures. Lasebikan (2001:19) captures the situation of widowhood in her statement: “what the Igbo widow experiences during widowhood is better imagined than experienced”. Widowhood practices still exists in their bizarre forms in some parts of the world including some communities in Nigeria (HDI, 2005). This is premised on the fact that widowhood practices that invade the privacy of widows and violate their fundamental human rights are glaringly enforced. Literature shows that in many parts of Nigeria, widows are often debarred from enjoying any inheritance rights in property owned by their husbands. A widow thus loses her home, the land she has worked for subsistence as well as her household possessions (Oyekanmi, 2007).

Harmful widowhood practices such as confinement indoor for several days and months no doubt result in the denial of freedom for the bereaved women just as their businesses and careers are stalled and sometimes lost due to long mourning periods. These rites vary from one socio-cultural group to another. The above assertion no doubt, paints a gloomy picture of widowhood in the Nigerian context. Ironically, other women in the community especially relations of the deceased husband are those who execute and enforce harmful cultural practices. Among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, these women are called the ‘*Umuada sisters*’ which implies sisters in the family. This is the danger of the process of socialization or enculturation that is a by-product of gender relations. Such experiences again show that certain aspects of our culture inhibit development. According to UNDP Report (2004), “development that is not engendered is endangered”. UNICEF (2002) defines patriarchy as the male domination of ownership and control at all levels of society, which maintains and operates the system of gender discrimination. In most patriarchal societies, the roles of men and women are not only treated differently, but are often given unequal weights and value. The age long restrictions placed on women’s life choices and opportunities hinder not only their growth but the development of nations (Aina, 2007:1).

1.6 Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

In this paper, widows are primarily referred to as married women who have lost their husbands and have not remarried while widowhood is a condition or a state of being a widow. Policies are blue prints and clearly stated documents containing innovative ways of thinking and doing things to bring about improvement in standard of living of the generality of the people. Policies are usually formulated to bridge existing gap or improve the old ways of doing things. This study found that across the literature, there are no specific gender policies targeted at widows to interrogate their challenges. In spite of the economic, emotional and psychological problems associated with widowhood practices in many Nigerian societies. What exist is a number of gender policies at both local, national and international levels that addresses gender inequality and discrimination among women generally. The various traditional practices widows are subjected to in the name of culture by this vulnerable group are considered functional for the Awori culture. Observing widowhood rites by widows is a mark of respect, love and honour for the dead according to the Awori custom thus strict adherence to stipulated widowhood practices by the widow ensures the maintenance of status quo and social stability. The widower on the other hand may shy away from observing widowhood rites because of existing patriarchal structure which favours the men and put the women at a disadvantage. The paper support “The need for a change in African customs militating against widows must be seen in the context of the principle that equality means equality of opportunities, of rights and responsibilities for humanity, for the good of the society as a whole” (Oke, 2001:56).

According to the United Nations Beijing Declaration and platform for Action (1995), “Human rights and fundamental freedom are the birthright of all human beings, their protection and promotion is the first responsibility of Governments”.

Against this premise, the study recommends that gender equality policies and frameworks that positively affect women especially widows should be formulated to guide existing cultural widowhood practices that infringe on the fundamental human rights of widows. Among the Aworis examined in this paper, it is a common practice for widows irrespective of their age and socio-economic background to be confined indoor for a specified period in addition to observing all widowhood rites as dictated by cultural traditions even in the 21st century. Among the negative impacts of long mourning period is a reduction in the economic well-being of the affected widow who forbidden from all forms of outing including socio-economic activities and consequently, it pauperizes most widows as revealed by findings in this study. This is in addition to the emotional and psychological trauma widows experience under going bizarre widowhood rites in the name of cultural traditions handed from one generation to another. The influx of western education in many societies especially the urban centres have not made much difference because widows irrespective of the level of educational attainment still observe the stipulated widowhood rites. However, the level of conformity differ from one society to another.

It is therefore suggested that the long mourning period of an average of 41 days to 3 months and in some cases up to a year observed by the Awori widows should be reviewed downwards to a maximum of one two weeks or one month as the case may be. The study also recommends that women themselves should be active participants in issues relating to the enforcement of their fundamental rights. In as much as widowhood practices are considered as cultural practices transferred from one generation to another, obnoxious widowhood rites that traumatizes and devalue women emotionally and psychologically should be abolished. Finally, a widow center across the country where relevant data on widows can be accessed is very paramount both for research and policy interventions.

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