



WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES IN IGBOLAND: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLIGHT AND PROSPECTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE OF WOMEN IN EKWULUMILI, ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines Widowhood practices in Igboland, with a critical analysis of the plight and prospects for social change in Ekwulumili, Anambra state. Widowhood has become a topical and sensitive global issue because of the ugly practice associated with it. Widowhood is a sensitive social status. It befalls a male or a female but it is generally used in reference to females who have lost their husbands, since most men who lose their wives soon abandon this' status by re-marrying. Widowhood practices in Igboland, particularly in Ekwulumili, Anambra State, Nigeria, have long been a topic of social, cultural, and academic interest. These practices are deeply embedded in the traditional customs and beliefs of the Igbo people. However, they often subject widows to various forms of discrimination and hardship, reflecting broader gender inequalities and social injustices.*

The objective of the study is to examine traditional widowhood practices in Ekwulumili, assess the socio-economic impact on widows, and identify the legal and Human Rights issues associated with the practice, evaluate efforts for social change and propose strategies for future interventions.

The methodology used in the paper is the historical descriptive research method. The paper will also involve data collection and analysis where necessary, case studies, comparative analysis etc. By employing a comprehensive historical descriptive research methodology that incorporates these components, the study can generate robust insights and recommendations to inform evidence based and programmatic interventions for addressing widowhood practices in Igboland with special concentration in Ekwulumili, Anambra state.

Findings in the study show that traditional widowhood practices in Ekwulumili subject women into forced seclusion, ritual cleansing, denial of inheritance rights, inhuman dress code pattern, social stigma, psychological stress, social isolation, economic hardship and human rights violations. Also current efforts for social change relating to the practice are: great awareness campaign, legal reforms, economic empowerment of widows, cultural dialogue, education awareness and establishment of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms by government.

The study concluded that Widowhood practices in Ekwulumili, Anambra State, represent a critical intersection of tradition, gender, and human rights. While these practices are rooted in cultural beliefs and customs, they often lead to significant hardships for widows. Finally, the study recommends that addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes legal reforms, community education, cultural dialogue, economic empowerment and government intervention.

KEYWORDS: Widowhood, Plight and prospects, Social change, Tradition, Igboland, Ekwulumili, Colonial.



INTRODUCTION

Ekwulumili people prize their womenfolk, yet a woman in Ekwulumili culture is not accorded full social recognition no matter her status in life unless she is married and bears children or at least a child. Ekwulumili women remain women of substance as long as their husbands are alive. If any woman loses her husband to death, her story changes automatically, she becomes a murder suspect in some places because death in most parts of the community is never deemed a natural occurrence. In pre-colonial Ekwulumili, the widow is seen as unclean and unholy; as a result of people's perception of the widow, certain harmful widowhood practices were meted out to her. These practices arise from the culture of the community. The Ekwulumili culture includes various customs, practices and traditions of the people. It comprises archaic practices as well as new concepts adapted into Igbo culture either through evolution or external influence.

In Igbo cosmology, community life embraces the living and the dead, and it is for these reasons that widowhood practices are put in place.¹ The Ekwulumili culture makes it incumbent on the living to respect the wishes of the dead, while the dead are compelled to protect the living. In Ekwulumili, widowhood practices are therefore integral part of the funeral rites accorded the dead. These funeral rites are aimed at guaranteeing the admittance of the dead people into the abode of the ancestors, who, they believe, will ultimately reincarnate into the community of the living. It must be noted that widowhood practices are not only prevalent in Ekwulumili community but in Igbo land at large, they are enforced in other tribes of Nigeria and also in most third world countries.²

Even in India, a widow becomes a focus of collective repudiation, seen as a bearer of bad luck, unclean, polluting and dangerous. She has to undergo rituals – many of them humiliating and some life-threatening – to symbolically 'cleanse' her in order to safeguard the community from her impurity.³ A widow cannot avoid standing out by the conspicuous clothing culture demands her to wear. This intense period of social rejection lasts for a relatively limited time, in some places six months while in others one year. In Ekwulumili, this traditional mourning period lasts for six months. These practices have far reaching consequences on the widow, her children and the community at large. Thus, these widowhood practices are referred to as inadvertent weapons of retrogression in community development because they are weapons unintentionally used to bring about backwardness in the community all in the name of culture.⁴

In Ekwulumili, a widow is a woman whose husband is dead and does not remarry and is referred to as (*nwayinkpe* or *nwayiajadu*). She can equally be referred to as a woman who has become single because her husband died and she remains unmarried. A woman becomes a widow when the man with whom she had planned the present and the future life is no longer available to share, shaping the hopes and the dreams of years ahead. She becomes helpless as she commences a lone journey full of uncertainties of life. She is seen as a liability, powerless, voiceless and vulnerable.⁵ In Ekwulumili traditional culture, a widow was like a melancholy bird that sits wailing all night, increasing her distress without redeeming features. She can also be seen as a woman who is done with her wedding affirmation of "till death do us path." This situation gives birth to widowhood. Hence widowhood can be described as a by-product of every enduring marriage which ends with a spousal (husband) bereavement.⁶



Following such a tragedy in Ekwulumili traditional societies, the woman resigns into a group of marginalized, powerless and voiceless invisible beings called widows. Widowhood involves a physical break in the family relationship and it is seen by widows as the most stressful and devastating event in life. This is because widowhood does not only involve the loss of the role of a wife to the husband but also the loss of a person most supportive of the woman, the person who has played a central role in the woman's life, the father of her children, the family breadwinner and the companion of the woman. ⁷This transition from wifehood to a widow happens so suddenly and swiftly that in one minute a woman who is a wife transits to a widow. It is at this moment that she starts to experience all the widowhood practices under discussion. Every society has its own rites for the dead which affect the wife of the dead and the children in some cases. In Ekwulumili, this unique phase of life is accompanied by certain socio-cultural practices which can be described as Sets of expectation as to the actions and behaviors by the widow, actions by others towards the widow and rituals performed by or on behalf of the widow from the time of death of her husband. Later phase of these practices may include issues of inheritance, the state of the widow and marriage or remarriage of the widow. ⁸

Widowhood practices can be seen as socio-cultural practices encompassing burial rites, mourning rituals, inheritance rights of the widow, her expected behavior towards others and other people's behavior towards her arising from the death of her husband. These practices are culture-bound because they reflect the prevailing values of a given socio-cultural milieu. ⁹It must be noted that the culture of the Ekwulumili people sometimes is held higher and given prominence above the word of God; although widowhood practices are common phenomena in Ekwulumili, the intensity is not the same in every town. These cultural practices have portrayed the Igbos of South-Eastern Nigeria in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States in a very bad light, particularly regarding the treatment of women who have lost their life partner, breadwinner, confidant and husband, all rolled into one. These practices make widowhood exhaustive and traumatic and are capable of making the widow lose focus. Thus the widow is frightened, lonely and grieving excessively. ¹⁰

In Ekwulumili culture, widowhood practice is an exclusive preserve for widows, not widowers, and the widower has no traditionally laid down laws governing his mourning rites. This period which is supposed to be a quiet and private time as the widow strives to accept her loss has been turned into a period of agony, anxiety, pain and insecurity for the widow in Ekwulumili. This is because it is usually a period the widow is subjected to psychological, social, physical and emotional torture as a result of her bereavement. ¹¹ In pre-colonial Ekwulumili, widows were excluded by their late husband's relatives from inheriting their husband's property thereby plunging the widows into a sudden state of powerlessness leading to lack of material resources and inadequate social participation and making contribution to community development difficult. ¹²

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In Igboland, death and mourning are important cultural practices that hold significant significance within the community. One of the most prominent rituals in Igboland is the mourning and remembrance of a widow, following the death of her husband. Widows hold a unique and revered position within the community, as they navigate the mourning process while adhering to the customary practices that are deeply rooted in Igbo culture. The practice of widowhood in Igboland is complex and varies among different communities, with



variations in the mourning and remembrance rituals. It is considered a time of intense mourning and sorrow, during which the widow is expected to perform various customs and rituals to honor her late spouse, demonstrate her grief, and show her commitment to upholding the traditions of her community.

One specific study of widowhood in Igboland is the town of Ekwulumili, where traditional customs play a crucial role in guiding the mourning and remembrance of widows. Ekwulumili is a community that upholds traditional Igbo values and practices, which are deeply rooted in the daily life and customs of its residents. The town's widowhood rituals are carried out meticulously with strict adherence to the prescribed customs and traditions of the community. Understanding the background and context of widowhood practices in Igboland, specifically in Ekwulumili, provides valuable insight into the integral role of cultural traditions in guiding the mourning and remembrance of widows. By exploring the customs, and rituals surrounding widowhood in this community, we can elucidate the significance of these practices in maintaining and preserving the unique cultural heritage of Igboland and Ekwulumili in particular.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aims and objectives of the study on widowhood practices in Igboland with special focus on Ekwulumili in Anambra state are as follows:

- i. To examine the traditional widowhood practices in the Igbo community in Anambra state;
- ii. To explore the impact of widowhood practices on widow's rights, well-being, and economic status in the Igbo community;
- iii. To investigate the prevalence of harmful traditional practices such as inheritance deprivation, forced remarriages or levirate marriage;
- iv. To assess the role of community leaders, traditional leaders, and the legal system in addressing and safeguarding the rights of widows in Anambra state and Ekwulumili in particular;
- v. To explore the perceptions and attitudes towards widowhood practices in Anambra state and their implications for policy formulation and social change; and
- vi. To propose recommendations for mitigating the negative effects of traditional widowhood practices and promoting gender balance and women's empowerment in Igboland.

RITUAL SECLUSION OF WIDOWS IN EKWULUMILI COMMUNITY (INONANSO)

This practice involves the widow being set apart in a most restricted and quiet manner because the widow is regarded as defiled and unclean. She does not enjoy the company of other free citizens until she is purified. The widow wails very early every morning before and after the funeral to the hearing of people in the neighborhood to demonstrate the depth of her grief over the death of her husband. The widow is compelled to sit on the floor by the daughters from the kindred "*Umuada*" as a sign of dethronement of the widow who has lost her status and pride by the death of her husband. Sleeping or sitting next to the corpse mandates the widow to sit by her husband's corpse or to lie down on a mat beside the



corpse.¹³ This is done to accord the dead respect and to enjoy his company for the last time. The widow is subjected to this practice by being forced to drink the water used in bathing the corpse. It serves as a proof of innocence either of the widow killing her husband or hiding his property from the in-laws. The practice of oath taking serves as a moral deterrent to other married women in anticipation of their own ordeal.

In Ekwulumili, it is a common belief that the beauty of a woman is for her husband only. Her hair is therefore shaved to make the widow feel less complete or less womanly since her duties as a wife are no longer useful. Most widows on their own see it as an outward show of their grief and so the majority of widows shave their hairs voluntarily. This shaving is often done leaving cuts in the scalp of the widow because it is roughly done.¹⁴

In pre-colonial Ekwulumili, a widow was expected to compulsorily mourn with a stipulated mourning outfit for six months or one year. This is an outward show of grief. One may wonder whether a widow ever stops mourning her husband except by being forced to do so. It is on record that monetary presents are dropped on the ground for the widow; she is not expected to stretch out her hands to receive them because she is too unclean to receive gifts from other people's hands. That way she is also forbidden from shaking hands with anybody.

Another widowhood practice in traditional Ekwulumili society is widow inheritance (forceful remarriage). This is called (*Nkuchinwanyi*) or forceful remarriage of a young widow to her husband's younger brother or a close relative. This way the widow is assured that she will not be disinherited of her husband's properties or driven out of her matrimonial home. This widow inheritance is called levirate arrangement.¹⁷ This arrangement has its own problems, because sometimes the children of the widow may not like it, and the first wife of the younger brother may feel threatened; however, this culture was practiced in traditional Ekwulumili and since black color is often associated with evil then the widow is expected to wear this outfit first to be noticed as a widow and secondly as someone who has an evil omen. However with the influence of Christianity in Ekwulumili customs, the Christian mothers now insist on wearing white instead of black.¹⁸

Whether it is black or white, there is no difference, since mourning outfits are the same because they have the same interpretation. In some families a widow is not allowed to inherit any property of her husband. Ekwulumili traditional society was mainly a patriarchal society in which a widow was seen as a chattel of her husband and his family. As a chattel, she is 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.¹⁹ This practice contradicts Section 36 of the Nigerian Marriage Act which stipulates that a widow with children is entitled to one-third of her husband's estate, 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. The customary law contradicts Section 36 of the Nigerian Marriage Act. Disinheritance of widows is one major problem suffered by widows across the board.²⁰



It must be noted that the factors that place widows in position of vulnerability to abuse in Ekwulumili arise from cultural expectations and assumptions about women's sexuality, which intersect with economic factors, these factors place widows in a position of disadvantage, in which their dependence on the support and goodwill of their in-laws is very high. They are thus acutely vulnerable to abuse. These factors however can affect a widow in different degrees. Scholars have observed that a widow is usually a woman who has fulfilled all, or many, of the expectations of society. She has married, given birth to children, nurtured and educated them, cared for her husband, and often many of his close kit and kin as well.²¹ In Ekwulumili community, a widow is in an anomalous social position; she is feared as a potential danger to social stability, because she is a single adult woman, whose sexuality is no longer contained within a marital relationship, to be controlled by her husband. Invitation to social events becomes few, because socializing is assumed to be based on the heterosexual couple. Ekwulumili widows are more vulnerable to ill-treatment because of their comparatively lesser bargaining power in society. The way widows are treated in Ekwulumili is an expression of the lack of value accorded to women, both by the wider society and also by the two families to whom they have close ties: their natal family and their in-laws. Daughters are often regarded as temporary members of their natal family, and wives are treated as secondary members of their husbands' family.²²

In such situations, the widow is no longer under the direct control of her husband, within the marital family, nor can she return to the status of a daughter in her natal family. Poverty can also be a reason for negative widowhood practices especially in the area of disinheritance of widows; however it has also been observed that even families that are well to do still get involved in the ill-treatment of widows sometimes in Ekwulumili and in that case, poverty will not constitute a reason for such ill-treatment.²³ In pre-colonial Ekwulumili, a widow is confined for eight days after the funeral of her dead husband, the master bedroom is locked when a man dies, her hair is shaved by the Umuada and the widow must go to a stream to wash off her uncleanness. Yet again is the fact that a widow has no inheritance right whatsoever. Her husband's property and farmland are automatically taken over by her husband's brothers, the sisters and their children. There was no decree or statement prohibiting widowhood practices in the constitution of Ekwulumili development association.²⁴

However, the situation has changed with the creation of the 2007 Ekwulumili Constitution which abolished all forms of discrimination against widows. It is believed that the culture and tradition of Ekwulumili are the perpetrators of the oppressive practices and widows comply with these inhuman practices to escape their consequences and thus comply with these cultures and superstitions. In traditional Ekwulumili culture, a widow sits and sleeps on a mat on the bare floor for seven native weeks (28 days) and wails twice, morning and evening, every day for 28 days. A widow in pre-literate Ekwulumili takes no bath until after burial of the husband, confined to a room for 28 days and in some circumstances made to take an oath before the village goddess if one is suspected to be responsible for the death of her husband. Some forms of sacrifices are performed to sever the link between the widow and the dead husband.²⁵

In pre-colonial Ekwulumili, a widow is regarded as unclean and untouchable for 28 days, denied some forms of personal hygiene, taking a bath, using chewing sticks, combing hair, washing and changing clothing. Widows were denied much basic comfort such as lying down when 'you feel' like it, and eating what you want, among others. Ekwulumili pre-literate



societies saw widows drinking washing water from husband's corpse, and crawling over husband's corpse, sitting on bare floor during the period of mourning, programmed to cry aloud to the hearing of the villagers to demonstrate grief. Also widows suffered restriction of movement to market, church, social events for the one year period of mourning. Another painful aspect of widowhood practice in pre-colonial Ekwulumili is loss of right of inheritance, if she has no male child, compulsory fasting on the day of her husband's burial and punishment for refusal to shave the widow's hair by the Umuada. It is also a tradition to stigmatize a widow who died within the mourning period and refuse her corpse burial rites²⁶

In pre-colonial Ekwulumili, Mr Eddy Umeh observed that the widow's ordeal begins immediately after the death of her husband is announced. The in-laws demand a list of the man's property, holdings, investments, and bank account. She is required to take an oath as proof that she has not concealed any relevant information of her husband's wealth. Such oath-taking, he continued, is not all that simple in nature. The oaths are taken as part of the widowhood rituals during which the society's expectations of the widow are spelt out to her. Such sets of expectations usually delineate the actions, the fate and the behaviors that are expected of the widow".²⁷ Dehumanizing widowhood rites and practices are prevalent gender-based violence practices extensively perpetrated against widows among the Igbos in South-Eastern Nigeria. Pointed out that because of the cultural and religious norms, superstition, fear, and traditional resistance to cultural changes, the victims who are women condone such violence and seem to be complacent. Secondly, women not only condone such violence but also perpetrate and perpetuate them by enforcing traditional laws and customs that infringe on the human and reproductive rights of widows²⁸

It must be noted that though Ekwulumili women are the victims of violence, they are surprisingly also perpetrators and astute enforcers of the practices, as well as those who vehemently oppose any form of change. It is important to note also that the Ekwulumili organized women groups, civil societies and even the churches and religious leaders also seem to lack the courage or initiative to tackle the problems because of anticipated or imagined obstacles, conflicts, recriminations or reprisals often associated with breaking through such age-long and deep rooted cultural structures. The case of widowhood rites is further complicated and shrouded by its association with death, burial, myths and superstitious beliefs. Women in Igbo land had made efforts to demand their rights in the past. The Aba Women Riot of 1929 is a typical example of such efforts when Igbo women confronted the British Colonial government in protest against the rumored plan of per capita taxation.²⁹ One therefore wonders why these women of Ekwulumili allow themselves to be traumatized, marginalized and violated all in the name of culture. These harmful practices and their persistence are also explained by the woman to demonstrate considerable public grief over the death of her husband. However in some cultures though, it is believed that the woman is usually responsible for the death of her husband hence the harmful practices are designed to elicit remorse, impose punishment on the woman as the culprit and also to purify the widow by means of these practices.³⁰ These practices are rooted in the belief that every death is unnatural and therefore the widow must pass through these rituals to prove her innocence and purify her and also protect herself from further defilement. Death stings and strips the widow bare and exposes her to humiliating physical and psychological violence, often in the name of culture, usually by those who should console her and support her in her time of bereavement. Because these practices are carried out as part of culture, anyone who



fails to fulfill the requirements of the rituals risks social exclusion from family or personal calamity.³¹

Widow's loss of a spouse is widely recognized as an extremely painful and distressing experience associated with risks and many challenges. After bereavement, there are likely to be accompanying disruptions of widow's social relationships, deteriorating health and physical capacity, as well as declining financial resources that compound the loss of a spouse. Mr S. Okeke stated that "always feel sad... I'm not doing well... Lately I can't join the living... No one needs me... No one seems to care. It should be noted that psychiatrists have reported that there is a common thread linking grief, illness and death to new widows. This is because their immune system decreases significantly."³²

SEXUAL CHALLENGES

Widows have sexual needs. Sexuality is not just all about the act but the tenderness, warmth, touching, and caressing by a husband. As long as a woman is healthy, her sexual urges and abilities remain active. Age and physical health are important factors affecting a woman's adjustments to widowhood. The older the woman, the less active she becomes sexually contrary to widowers of the same age. Also the older the widows are, the more reluctant they become to accept non-marital sex than men are. Widows also believe that sexual activities should end with menopause and so should suppress whatever sexual urges they may have.³³ Many widows generally attach more significance to physical appearance than men do, so they are reluctant to expose their aging bodies to sexual relationships. There are men however who think that what a widow needs is sex. They go after a widow and offer her their sexual services. As a result of changes in life especially after the loss of a spouse, widows sometimes sail smoothly and at other times encounter tempests and tidal waves. Sometimes they feel like giving up and others are encouraged. A widow needs God's help to bring up her children in God's own way. It is the power of God that penetrates a child's life when the mother prays. The continued permanent absence of the father places on the mother the principal responsibility for the child's socialization especially in the face of bereavement.³⁴

Unlike the child in the urban community, a child in the rural Ekwulumili community has surrogate parents in the form of other adults. Kinfolks contribute to his socialization other than the mother and from her, he/she receives his first experience of acceptance and love and also frustration and discipline. The single parent child concentrates on the mother first before interacting with others. Because he lacks a father figure, sextyping and sex identification may be lacking. The child may be less assertive and more dependent on peers. The single parent child is often at crossroads in terms of discipline because some widows are afraid of their child's anticipated misbehavior and tend to be too hard on the child, thus creating friction.³⁵ Some other widows in contrast may be permissive. In some cases, the child may feel rejected and develop an inferiority complex. This may affect his academic development and achievement.

Despite one's mode of marriage in Ekwulumili, it is believed that a woman is not just married to the man but to the family. To a large extent, in-laws have influence on the widow at the time of her bereavement. They are the perpetrators of widowhood practices. The widow of the 21st Century in Ekwulumili has greater advantage and opportunities of receiving justice than her counterpart a couple of years back. Widows should assert their rights in a most civilized manner, difficulties plague widows and because of the changing times and



expectations, the widow is expected to take care of herself without the work experience and the financial knowledge to do so. The reasons are that some deaths occur suddenly while others follow a long illness. Some marriages are short and sweet while others are long and bitter.³⁶ Some couples had discussed financial matters while others did not. No matter the widow's particular circumstance(s), financial challenges must arise and must be addressed.

Causes of financial challenge abound and may include prolonged and extravagant funerals. Low income or earning by the widow, no income at all fines imposed on the widow by "Umuada" disinheritance of the widow of her husband's estate by the in-laws. Widows are advised to begin early to prepare for the rainy days because no rainy days can be worse than the days of widowhood.³⁷ In Onitsha, the situation of widows is worse than what was practiced in Ekwulumili community in pre-colonial time. According to Mrs. Okoli, a widow from Onitsha, community, the following are some of the acts carried out on her:

- i. Wearing of white dresses from the burial day and throughout the period of mourning, and removing them only from 6pm daily.
- ii. Sitting on the floor and nodding head without talking or shaking hands or receiving anything from others from the day of burial until 4 days after burial and was forced to shave her hair immediately after burial.

During this period, she was not allowed to touch proceeds from funeral rites (money, food, food items), and also not allowed to eat food cooked for members of the family or others throughout the first 4 days of mourning. If money was needed for her own feeding, the condolence money must be changed before it could be used to buy food items or personal effects for her own use during this period. She was asked to do the cleansing rites called "ImepuAjadu" and when she objected to that, they threatened to ostracize her".³⁸ They (The *Umunna*) refused to perform the traditional marriage rites of her second daughter until after the mourning period of 6 months. Their reason was that without the "cleansing" no man would come into her house and if any dared, he would die. She noted that widows are ostracized throughout the period of mourning of one year especially if the widow refused to do the "cleansing rites" – (*ImepuAjadu*).

The "ImepuAjadu" is usually done after the first one month of mourning. This involved getting a dwarf from Nri town in Anambra state who would have sexual intercourse with the widow, after which she goes to the stream and takes a bath. This is usually done in the night and is always kept secret with the widow who is put under oath not to disclose what she went through to anybody, not even her children. Then the next day some celebrations are made with feasting after which the widow is proclaimed free to interact with anybody in the village and beyond. Her kinsmen are then free to liberally have sexual relationship with her and to even have more children or help her raise the children she had with her dead husband.³⁹

In Onitsha the treatment given to widows is not different from the Ekwulumili culture/custom. A widow is seen generally as somebody that should not be associated with, they are perceived as a bad omen, as a husband killer; to them widowhood is infectious and should be avoided by all means. The widow does not say or decide her fate. The experience is devastating no matter your relationship with your husband before death. A widow in Onitsha has this to say "I really thank God that I was able to pull through the experience which was not palatable at all. It is not what you wish for anybody, even your worst enemy. My story started on the 31st of January, 2003 when my husband suddenly took ill and died exactly one



week later on 7/2/2003 at UNTH Enugu. I thought the world had come to an end but I thank God for my first son who was there for me. My husband's death drew me nearer to God and I became mature overnight.⁴⁰ I didn't know a lot of things when he was alive but his death opened my eyes. In 2005 my first daughter got married and my husband's kinsmen took what would have been given to me as the mother of the bride. I ignored them and when they waited to repeat it in 2008 when my second girl was getting married I stood my ground that it won't be repeated.⁴¹ They were ready to fight anyone who wanted to help the family because to them I did not share my husband's benefit with anyone. They avoid me as one who has a terrible disease. No matter what you do the stigmas are there but God promised to give me a name by which I will be known and surely he will rewrite my story".⁴²

Another widow in Ekwulumili has this to say about her experience: "Widowhood is an awful experience, the worst thing one should wish for his or her worst enemy. To lose a life partner, particularly a husband, is usually traumatic. This is because it leaves the woman in a vulnerable situation especially where she had a very intimate relationship with the husband. It is always the woman that is subjected to dehumanizing and degrading treatments by way of customs and traditions. I was widowed at the age of thirty-nine years after twenty years of marriage. My late husband was the younger of his elder brother from the same mother. My ordeal was that of denial of rights and privileges. The two brothers with us, their wives and children lived in a communally/jointly built house of four-room apartment and a central sitting room in between each of the two rooms. One of my brother-in-law's rooms was used as the strong room for keeping valuables and the key was kept in an agreed place for accessing the strong room in case any of us came home on a visit. There was no distinction as to who had what. The intimacy was such that whenever we converged at home during festive periods the two brothers were served food together all the time. They remained very close until the demise of my husband to the extent that my brother-in-law was equally traumatized at his death. One would have expected that at least 50% of my brother in-law's love for the deceased brother would have been transferred to his wife and children.⁴³ To my utmost surprise, when I visited home after the burial I discovered that my brother-in-law had locked up the door linking us to the sitting room and restricted us just to the two rooms. Even when I forced the door open, I discovered that the key was no longer kept at the usual place making it impossible for me to gain access to the strong room. Instead, the only thing he brought out for me was just a brand new lantern which he knew that I was the one that bought it. Prior to his demise, my husband was building a new house in the compound which was at the decking stage. The framework for the kitchen pantry layers was set. This was the time that the rains were returning for the year.⁴⁴ I invited a mason who had to complete the work to safeguard the framework from rotting away to avoid incurring additional expenses to re-do it. This was because I had no plans of getting back home soon after the funeral ceremony. Do you know that this act was misconstrued by my brother-in-law who felt that the new building was more important to me than the demise of my husband? He felt that I should have waited for the brother to decay in the grave before thinking about the house. Such unkind thought and misinterpretation denied me a measure of peace and joy".⁴⁵

In view of the preceding discussions, reflections on various intervention efforts are necessary. First, Igbo Customary Law and Widowhood Igbo customary law is represented in ethnic groups to dictate to the people the way and manner by which the affairs of the people are to be run. There are various customs as there are ethnic groups with some similarities. Hardly would you find a group of people who conduct their affairs in the same manner except when



generic issues are to be considered. It is the same with the treatment of women who have lost their husbands to the cold hands of death. There are progressive customs and there are archaic and clearly backward customs that need to be revisited to protect the Ekwulumili widows. The thing to note is that these customs are not exactly universal with regards to the Ekwulumili people but their fundamental beliefs are the same. Igbo customary law has therefore not done much to help the widows; in fact its applications have affected widows negatively.⁴⁶

The law as espoused in Section 34 (1) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2011 as amended, clearly states that “every individual is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person...” and goes on to say in sub-section (a) that “no person shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment”. From the foregoing, it is clear that the grundnorm that is the Constitution, which is a set of laws that other laws must bow to, enshrines the fundamental right to dignity for any Nigerian, including widows. It is unlawful therefore for a widow to be treated in an inhuman way that diminishes her person and strips her of her dignity whether in Ekwulumili or anywhere in Nigeria because the Nigerian constitution protects the widow.

THE INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANITY ON WIDOWHOOD

PRACTICES IN EKWULUMILI

It is worthy of note that the Anglican Church has always been at the forefront of the fight against dehumanization of all kinds of harmful widowhood practices since its advent in Igboland in 1857. For instance in Ekwulumili diocese a number of mechanisms have been set up to support, defend and protect the widows from various obnoxious and barbaric experiences they are subjected to. The various women organizations such as Mothers’ Union, Women’s Guild and recently Young Wives Association have provided the women a platform to be empowered to be able to stand the tide of widowhood practices whenever it comes their way.⁴⁷

Recently, the diocese of Amichi, Nnewi in Anambra state set up a Committee tasked with the responsibility of entertaining complaints from widows who are passing through some bizarre widowhood experiences. They were also charged to investigate the same and recommend necessary steps that the Church would take to give the victims succor. Sometimes, legal actions have been taken on behalf of the Ekwulumili widows at no cost to them. This committee has long gone into action and it is yielding the expected results. At some point, the diocese had gone as far as re-uniting some widows with the family members of their late husbands and access to the properties of their late husbands restored.⁴⁸ It is also worthy of mention that the diocese built houses for some widows to enable them have a home of their own especially in case their late husbands did not build any house while alive. At Church levels which portend grassroot influence, the Anglican Church has clearly engaged in outright opposition to the cruelty against the Ekwulumili widows. In Ekwulumili, at the instance of any death of a husband, the members of the various women organizations of the Church arrange themselves in a form of roster to be visiting the bereaved member throughout the delicate period of the mourning. With this development they provide support to the widow and also defense against the perpetrators of the wicked acts.⁴⁹



In 2014, during the Synod of the diocese in Ekwulumili, it was resolved that a widow is empowered by the Church to mourn her late husband for one month. With this, the widow can leave for any economic activity in order to provide for the family. The diocese promised to stand to defend any widow that may be persecuted on account of that. It was also announced that wearing mourning cloth and cutting of hairs are no longer compulsory but by choice. If a widow wishes to do so, let it be. But if not any attempt to force her into it should be reported to the diocese. The legal department of the diocese has been charged to swing into action if the need arises to protect and support the widows.⁵⁰ The Ekwulumili diocese sees it as an aspect of evangelism and they are not leaving any stone unturned. Although their coverage for now is just within the members of the diocese, there is hope that in the future with a coalition of other interest groups or organizations; it may be extended towards those outside the diocese. However, despite efforts, the widows in Ekwulumili diocese are not yet completely supported, defended and protected but no doubt, the much the diocese has done is encouraging. There is no doubt that the way it is going, widowhood practices that are inimical, obnoxious, dehumanizing and barbaric will be reduced to the barest minimum if not completely wiped away in the near future.⁵¹

The Roman Catholic Church is also contributing to the widow's well-being in Ekwulumili. The formation of Widows' Association in every Parish/Diocese is a case in point. The Immaculate Heart Sisters Widows' Apostolate is doing a lot to help combat the dehumanizing treatment meted out to widows in our society. St Rita's Widows' Association in particular has created awareness of the needs of the widows and given them a sense of belonging and awareness of their human rights. It gives privilege to the widows to come together, discuss their problems and see how to solve them, sometimes by reporting to the Priests. However the attention paid to the widows by the church varies according to Diocese, Parishes, and Priests involved. The Catholic Church in Ekwulumili frowns at any custom/practices that infringe on the human rights of widows.⁵²

Additionally, the church has taken the towns/villages in Ekwulumili to court to defend the rights of their members/widows. In Awka Diocese for example, the church has gone the extra mile of fighting the practice of widows not seeing the corpses of their husbands, not actively participating in their burial, and throwing sand into the grave, among others. The church fought this battle and won against the villages in Awka where this is practiced. Another instance is that at Nanka, where Charismatics staged a solidarity march in support of widows who are being denied their rights. During this march, a lady called Austica, and another charismatic were shot by the villagers during the burial. However, the church stood beside the widow in participating in her husband's burial and thereafter erected a secondary school in honor of those who lost their lives for upholding of widows' rights.⁵³

In Ekwulumili, the Catholic Church has banished the wearing of black by widows for mourning. The widows can wear white. Also the shaving of the hair is not compulsory. The church does not want widows to be compelled to do this, unless the widows want to on their own accord or the family chooses to. This is also the case with the period of mourning (depending on the widow or the family). The Church is also trying to cut down on some unnecessary expenses made towards burial since such expenses will be to the financial detriment of the widow and family after the burial.⁵⁴



SOCIAL CHANGE INTERVENTIONS

Anambra State House of Assembly enacted a law known as the Malpractices against Widows and Widowers (prohibition) Law, 2005. Any person who discriminates, contravenes or conspires with, aids, counsels, procures or assists another person to contravene the provision of Section 4 of this Law commits an offense and shall be liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding N20,000.00 (Twenty Thousand Naira) or to jail term not exceeding six months imprisonment or to both such fine and imprisonment.⁵⁵ Ebonyi State also shares similar customs and tradition with Ekwulumili. Its status books states that any person who abets the commission of an offense has actually committed and shall be deemed guilty of an offense under this law. Such a person shall be liable upon conviction to a fine not exceeding N2000 (Two thousand Naira only) or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years.⁵⁶

Ekwulumili also has a cultural affinity with Enugu State which enacted a law known as Prohibition of Infringement on Widows and Widower's Fundamental Rights Law Cap.124. Anyone who contravenes or conspires, aids, counsels, procures or assists another person to contravene the provisions of this Law shall be guilty of an offense and liable on conviction to a fine of N5000 (five thousand naira) or imprisonment for two years.⁵⁷ Ekwulumili equally shares a cultural affinity with some communities in Imo State, and Imo state has a law that protect widows in the state known as a law to prohibit obnoxious customary practices against widows and for other matters connected thereto. This law may be cited as widows (Protection) Law, 2003. Anyone who contravenes this law shall be guilty of an offense and shall on conviction be liable to a fine of N10,000 or imprisonment for six months or to both such fine and imprisonment. It must be noted that Ekwulumili widows equally benefited from the First Widowhood Summit in Nigeria;; the wives of the Governors of South-South and South-East Geo-political zones of Nigeria have made significant impact towards alleviating the suffering of widows. ⁵⁸Ekwulumili widows benefited from the various judgments of the Supreme Court of Nigeria as it relates to the plight of widows. The Judiciary is the third arm of Government in Nigeria, with the Supreme Court as the Apex Court. Two cases discussed below clearly depict the position of the Apex Court on the Cultural infringements of women/widows' fundamental human rights in Nigeria and Igbo land in particular. Case One *Mojekwu v Mojekwu* (1997) 7 N.W.L.R. PART 512 P. 283 (Nigeria, Court of Appeal)⁵⁹

The summary of this case is that the appellant, Mr. Augustine Mojekwu, relying on the Ili-Ekpe custom of some parts of South-East Nigeria, had instituted action against the respondent, Mrs. Caroline Mojekwu, claiming that he was entitled to inherit her deceased husband's property. The basis for this claim was that the deceased, his paternal uncle, was survived by the respondent and two daughters. Being all women, they were excluded from inheriting property under the Ili-Ekpe customary laws applying to the deceased. The appellant's Counsel argued that the Ili-Ekpe custom allowed the deceased's closest male relative inheritance if he had no son. ⁶⁰The closest male relative would have been the appellant's father, who was also the deceased's brother. However, the appellant's father was dead and the appellant had become his heir. As a result, the appellant claimed ownership of the deceased's house situated in the town of Onitsha, which the deceased had built on the land he had acquired from the Mgbelekeke family of Onitsha. The respondent claimed that her son, Patrick, who had predeceased his father, had fathered an infant son who should inherit the property. Disputing this fact, the appellant claimed that Patrick had died without a son. ⁶¹



Based on the facts and evidence adduced, the Court of Appeal found that the Kola Tenancy (Kola Tenancy land tenure system effectively meant that a single premium was paid for permanent occupation. It is a Europeanized variation of the Onitsha version of pre-colonial Igbo land tenure rites which enable tenants to gain variable term use rights in a piece of land while the grantors retain their spiritual relationship with the Mother Earth Spirit of the space) governed the devolution of the house. As a result, despite the disputed fact whether Patrick had a son at the time of his death-recognizing the Kola Tenancy as the applicable customary law rendered the absence of a male heir irrelevant since it allowed the respondent's daughters to inherit their father's property. Furthermore, the Court determined the *Ili-ekpe* custom to be repugnant and applied the Repugnancy Doctrine. This doctrine prescribes that the courts shall not enforce any custom as law if it is contrary to public policy or repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience. The Court also pronounced the custom contrary to human rights guarantees in the Nigerian Constitution and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which prohibit discrimination on the ground of sex.⁶³

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Widowhood practices amount to violence against women. Violence against women by Article (j) of the protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, on the rights of women in Africa, accounts for all acts perpetrated against women which cause or could cause them physical, sexual, psychological and economic harm, including the threat to take arbitrary restrictions on or deprivation of fundamental freedoms in private or public life in peace time and during situations of armed conflicts or of war. When violence is directed against a woman because she is a woman or where such violence affects women "disproportionately," this has been described by the Convention on Elimination of forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) General Recommendation No. 19 (a) as Gender-Based Violence. This violence also includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty. Harmful widowhood practices come under these and hinder community development.

The role women play in community development can be very crucial to the health of a society. Women make many decisions that determine a household's participation in the community including healthcare, educational, and cultural decisions. Women often decide where the family will shop, what the family menu will be, the schools and activities the children will attend, and the extent to which the family will evolve.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To end the abuse of widows, the commitment and determination of everyone is required by adopting the following measures:

1. Fathers and husbands should endeavor to write Wills that state clearly how their properties should be shared in the event of death.
2. Joint ownership of properties is best for couples as letters of administration will not be required of one partner to claim the estates of the other partner in death.
3. Married men who still have their fathers, brothers and uncles as their next of kin should revisit and update such in view of what widows go through after the death of their



- husbands. Women need to be sensitized more to stop being the victims, perpetrators and hindrances to change. It must be pointed out that Christian mothers are stewards that should enrich the lives of others (widows).
4. The church should speak with one voice and come up with uniform policies against the infringement on widows' rights. The Christian Council of Nigerian (CCN) as well as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) should rule that their members be left out of these practices. In fact they should fight for all the women both Christians and non-Christians. By doing so, they may even win more souls.
 5. Confrontation will fail us but lobbying and advocacy can subtly change the minds of all the stakeholders.
 6. To ensure that knowledge of the law grows, selection committees of village leaders, local chiefs and clan heads should consider seriously the educated ones. This will enable them to gain knowledge of the law and put it into practice.
 7. Government must ensure that laws enacted also have clear structures of implementation at the grassroots.
 8. Women's education should be pursued vigorously to empower them with knowledge about how to assert their rights. No matter the challenges of a widow, coping is imminent and education is a sure tool for effective coping strategy.
 9. Government should involve community-based organizations as a task force to monitor and enforce sanctions on defaulters. The Ministry of Women Affairs in various States should scale up her activities to integrate and involve women groups at the grassroots to provide information to widows of whom to complain when harassed.
 10. Corporate Affairs departments 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.
 11. Obsolete laws on widowhood practices particularly the customary laws now require radical modifications in line with 21st century demands.
 12. The larger society is enjoined to join in the fight against harmful widowhood practices against widows, especially the educated elite.
 13. Departments of Adult Education in collaboration with the Agencies for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education should develop programmes on Probate Education to sensitize the polity on the rights of the widows.

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