

THE SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF WIDOWHOOD ON ELDERLY WOMEN IN NIGERIA

N. Kenechukwu Anugwom^a

^a Department of Social Work, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.

^a Corresponding author: keneeder@yahoo.com

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Abstract: The paper examines the social structured context and implications of widowhood in Southeastern Nigeria. It argues that in spite of the efforts by formal and informal agencies to alleviate the burdens of widowhood, the gender informed discriminatory practice of mourning which exacts a heavy toll on women persists. In this case, widows are exposed to harsh and often cruel mourning practices which are especially tasking for elderly women who have to contend with frail physical health, loss of partners and the mental, psychological and physical stress of widowhood. Therefore, while these practices are norm oriented they expose the elderly widows to psychological and social coping challenges. However, these elderly widows are also often led into activities and social strategies perceived as capable of alleviating the burdens of widowhood. Equally interesting is the finding that widows who are actively engaged and enjoy social support cope better with the challenges of widowhood than others. In view of the above, the paper argues for a more active role by social workers in informing care provisioning and policies for lessening the burdens of widowhood on elderly women.

Keywords: Social strategizes, widowhood, gerontology, socio-physiological impact

I. INTRODUCTION

The plight of widows has been a recurrent theme in the efforts to address perceived or real gender imbalance in African societies even in contemporary times. In spite of this the traditional conception of mourning which places a higher burden on women has obviously defied reform efforts. Hence the focus on widows actually derives from the traditional and patriarchal nature of African

societies in which women are often regarded as the silent role players. In such a situation a woman who loses her partner may confront culturally structured scenarios different from the case of a man in the same situation. Therefore, the imaginings of widowhood in African societies are socio-culturally structured and reinforced and generate significant gender imbalance.

Widowhood, meaning loss of one's spouse whether early or later in life entails a lot of things, mostly problems for the bereaved. Its effects may even be worse when the bereaved is an elderly person. Her self identity also changes in the sense that it brings on an era of identity crisis. This is because the widows feel that the real essence of their being married has been lost by the death of spouses. Coping with this identity crisis depends to a large extent on the individual's capacity and will. For traditionally oriented women, the role of wife is central to their lives, structuring their lives not only in their house holds but also on the job and in answering the question 'who am I' and these women often put 'wife of' at the top of their lists (Atchley, 1996).

Social recognition and acceptance also pose a problem to widows because often times, widowhood in African societies goes with the erosion of social recognition. Widows often face problems of declining social recognition and acceptance after the death of their spouses and this can be linked to their losing their central roles of 'wife'. In dealing with the societal attitude, these women get involved in other activities that they think will help them get recognition from the public and this can be seen in their active involvement in politics.

The elderly people in the society are often stereotyped as lazy, wicked, hard to please disgusting, sickly and sometimes even diabolical

(Korieh, 2005). This can be explained by the fact that they are viewed as burdens and distractions from one's immediate family and responsibilities. This stereotype is wrong because in the society, old people who are kind, peaceful and God fearing can still be found and this shows that one being evil or nice has nothing to do with age but the person's character and dispositions in life. According to Hazelrigg (1977), age by itself is not the cause of anything and it gets meaning only from how we use it to sort people. Thus, although age is used systematically to distinguish and categorize people, age in itself explains very little or nothing at all.

The loss of a spouse can be a very traumatic experience particularly for many older women who devoted most of their lives to their marriages, husbands and children. Widowhood has thus been called the exemplar of a stressful life event and perhaps requiring more adjustment than any other life transition. (Hatch, 2000; Gallagtor et al, 1983).

In addition to this, isolation and exclusion from the social environment sets in all in the name of widowhood practices and rituals and the woman is not expected traditionally to look after herself or freshen-up. This is often defined crudely as not bathing or combing her hair (See Basden, 1966). He aptly captured this practice in traditional Igbo society. According to him the woman mourning: "Moves from her deceased husband's house to a small hut in another part of the compound. While dwelling in this hut, she wears no clothes unless perhaps a rag; she must sit on a block of wood and nowhere else. Instead of a sleeping mat, a banana leaf must suffice" (Basden, 1966; 278).

A prominent theoretical orientation in gerontology, the activity theory of aging argues that normal aging involves maintaining as long as possible the activities and attitudes of middle age (See, Havighurst, 1963; Brehm, 1968). The basic assertion of this theory is that individuals should be just as active and involved in a variety of different roles and responsibilities in their later years as they were in their middle years. Judging by the loneliness and feeling of 'aloneness' these widows experience after living for decades with their spouses and losing them when their companionship is most needed- at retirement one would agree that the activity theory to a large extent captures the situation of these widow (See Atchley 1996).

Thus, according to Brehm (1968), except for the biological and health changes older people have essentially the same psychological and social needs as middle aged people. From our study, it was discovered that this activity theory is of very great significance as a reasonable number of elderly widows used in the study agreed that active

involvement in occupation helped them deal with widowhood and its related stress. For them, it helped them overcome loneliness, provide them with resources and kept time moving. This is in line with the contention of Kunkel (1979), that working class widows adjust better during bereavement than those sick, jobless or incapacitated.

Based on both the likely erosion of social recognition and insurmountable loss which widowhood occasions, widows have often had to face socio-psychological challenges. These challenges result from both the societal attitude to widows and more crucially the psychological and even physical health of widows. As the above discussion shows, the case of elderly women may be worse given the unexamined stereotype about their attitudes and behaviour (See Korieh, 2005).

Therefore this study sought to ascertain the socio-psychological impact of widowhood on elderly women in a typical traditional setting in Nigeria. Such an exercise has undoubted policy and research implications since discrimination against widows form part of the much decried harmful traditional practices against women. Hence the outcome of this study may be instrumental in informing social policies for protection of women as well as pinpointing empirical and theoretical social work response to the problems of widowhood.

The study was conducted in Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. Three quarters in the local government area viz Nkpunano, Nru and Ihe-owere were purposively chosen for the study. A total of 500 respondents were chosen through purposive sampling in the above three quarters. All the respondents were identified elderly widows above fifty years of age in these communities. The multi-stage sampling technique was used in actually selecting the above respondents while the questionnaire and interviews were used as instruments of data collection. The findings of the study reported below was based on a total number of 448 elderly women who fully responded to the study instruments.

II. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MENTAL/EMOTIONAL STRESS AND WIDOWHOOD IN ELDERLY WOMEN IN NIGERIA.

One glaring socio-psychological impact of widowhood identified in the study sample is mental/emotional stress. In the case, quite a good number of the respondents reported experiencing this type of psychological imbalance. As the table below indicates, the enormity of responsibilities widowhood lays on them triggers off mental/emotional stress in addition to physical stress.

Stress	Respondents	Percentage
Mental Stress	7	1.6
Physical Stress	280	62.5
None	161	35.9
Total	448	100

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents by Nature of Health Stress.

From the table above, apart from the 161 widows (35.9%) who declared they had no stress at all, 280 (62.5%) suffered from physical stress while 7 (1.6%) suffered from mental stress. This was as a result of the weight of responsibilities handed down to them after the death of their spouses. As has been indicated in the literature (See Basden, 1966), the isolation of the widow and the shabby treatment meted out to her in the name of culture in Igboland can generate and heighten emotional and mental stress. In fact as one of our respondents stated, "most of the times I fall sick, it is because I think of how to care for my family and I don't seem to come up with any solution". Therefore in the Igbo area of Nigeria generally, as our study reveals, widows are confronted by social practices and observances such as disinheritance, and isolation which have adverse effects on their mental and psychological balance.

Mental/emotional stress is a situation in one's mental well being or emotional state occasioned by tragedy (See Atchley, 1996). According to Atchley this stress can be manifested in the form of extreme anxiety, worries, frequent head-ache, high blood pressure, insomnia, heartache and regular hospital visits precipitated by mainly by worry.

In patriarchal societies, especially where the widows are suspected of killing their husbands widows are left entirely without social support (see Korieh, 1995). This is usually worse for the women who do not have adequate educational background or who were prevented from obtaining further education. According to one of our respondents, a close relative of her deceased husband tried justifying the treatment meted out to her by asking her "how come it was our brother who died?"

Therefore, the death of a woman's spouse in Igboland is usually a great psychological and physical challenge to the widow and her children. The woman who is bereaved is usually expected to be the chief mourner, assisted by relatives and friends, the wailing, weeping and hysteria are expected to go on

for days before the man's burial and even afterwards (Afigbo, 1989). As has been reported in the literature such wailings and bitter lamentations are culturally expected (Basden, 1966; Meek 1937 cf Afigbo, 1989). This practice of prolonged wailing and anguish enforced by culture may often affect the psychological and mental balance of the woman (See Afigbo, 1989). In addition to this, widowhood may also occasion psychological and mental imbalance in some women especially older women whose mental faculties and emotions have been weakened by the challenges of living.

Another key practice of widowhood in Africa which affects a woman's psychological balance is the compulsory period of seclusion and isolation (Nwoga, 1989). In this case, the woman is isolated from the community for a specified period. According to this scholar, the isolation is combined with a regime of total neglect of the hygiene and body needs of the woman and incidentally, the practice of widowhood known as Igba-nkpe' has also been noticed among Islamic communities. According to Trimmingham (1959), this period is known as 'iddat' or 'idda' among the Moslems and covers an average period of four months and ten days but in Igboland, the period lasts full 12 calendar months though radical Christianity has reduced it in some cases nowadays to six months.

Due to their ages also, there are more reports of depression, poor health or new or heightened illnesses among these widows than there is among non-bereaved elderly widows and some of them do not live longer than one year after the deaths of their spouses (Gallagher and Thompson, 2001). This is because depression sets in at the loss of a spouse and most of them tell themselves that there is nothing to live for anymore. At some other times, married women friends see these widows as threats to their own still existing marriages and as a result terminate their relationships with these widows at the death of their spouses.

Active Involvement	Respondents	Percentage
Yes	399	89.1
No	49	10.9
Total	448	100%

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Perceived influence of Active Involvement in Occupation on Coping

III. ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT IN OCCUPATION AND COPING WITH WIDOWHOOD AMONG ELDERLY WOMEN

Women across the globe have shown enviable courage, resourcefulness and resilience in carrying on despite the trauma caused by widowhood, the isolation imposed on them by widowhood and the difficult tasks of earning a living and protecting themselves and their dependent family members. These women work outside the home as the breadwinners, make decisions, head their households and sometimes organize other women in areas of public life (ICRC, 1999). The above is no less the case with elderly widows in Southeastern Nigeria whose burden may have been doubled by the reality of aging. However, the women as our findings indicate see maintaining a sense of balance through engagement in occupation or meaningful economic activity as critical to surviving the coping challenges of widowhood in old age. Therefore, as can be noted from the table below, most of the widows were actively involved in one form of occupation or the other in order to earn a living for their families, and maintain some level of socio-economic functioning considered necessary to coping with widowhood.

It can be noted that 399 respondents (89.1%) stated that active involvement in occupation helped them deal with the stress of widowhood. This is in agreement with the literature which asserts that active involvement in occupation assists widows to deal with widowhood (See Kunkel, 1979). These widows when further questioned expressed different reasons for their involvement in active occupation but given that finance usually is a big problem to widows, 126 (31.6%) and 154 (38.6%) respondents respectively believe in active involvement because it provides money for the upkeep of the family and prevents too much thinking for the widows.

Apart from involvement in occupation, these widows engaged themselves in some sort of social activities. These they did most times to get their minds off their problems especially at those periods the pains of loss of a love one and maltreatment by in-laws were very intense. The table below goes to show that a reasonable number of widows get themselves occupied socially in one thing or the other as a way of avoiding being engrossed in the throes of pain or endless contemplation of life without one's partner.

Given that most of the respondents were Christians, it was not out of place to discover that majority of them adopted or resorted to prayers as a social strategy to cope with widowhood. In the interviews as well, it was observed that a good number of them adopted church activities as a solace from the loneliness and difficulties associated with widowhood. Apparently, the widows as the interviews revealed held strongly to the popular notion that when all things fail, God never fails. One of them said in vernacular, "Ekpere bu ikem". 'Chukwu bu onye nkwado m'. This simply means in English, "Prayer is my strength", God is my provider".

From the foregoing therefore, the study revealed that most of the elderly widows at one point or another adopted economic strategies to help them cope the hardship associated with widowhood. Such strategies ranged from petty trading down to taking up additional jobs. On the other hand, they also adopted social strategies to assist them in their daily affairs as widows. These women's involvement in occupations and church activities as means of coping or overcoming widowhood are largely in agreement with the views of some scholars who have written on widowhood (see, Kunkel, 1979; Atchley, 1997).

Importance of Active Involvement	Respondents	Percentage
Prevents loneliness	56	14
Prevents thinking	154	38.6
Provides money resources	126	31.6
Keeps time moving	63	15.8
Total	399	100

Table 3: Distribution of Respondents by Importance of Active Involvement in Occupation.

Social Strategy	Respondents	%
Active involvement in meetings	77	17.2
Stepped up interaction with family	42	9.4
Move involvement in religion	259	57.8
Introversion	14	3.1
Just keeping busy	56	12.5
Total	448	100

Table 4: Distribution of Respondents by Social Strategies Adopted by Elderly Widows

IV. SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND THE ALLEVIATION OF PROBLEMS OF WIDOWS IN NIGERIA

As the study revealed, widowhood in Southeastern Nigeria poses a variety of problems to women ranging from low social prestige, disinheritance, and forceful remarriage amongst others. Widows in Southeastern Nigeria often encounter the most severe forms of these discriminations in spite of the increasing modernity of all spheres of the society.

One dimension of this gender discrimination is that once the man dies, the widow faces the incidence of disinheritance by in-laws. In western societies, a woman is entitled to all she ever had or shared with her deceased husband but as this study found out in Southeastern Nigeria widows, though preferring to continue to work on the lands owned by their late husbands cannot do so because land inheritance is impossible for them as a result of cultural norms which forbid this (Korieh, 2005). According to Oluwa (2005), though in paper the statutory and

customary laws indicate that widows should inherit or be sole beneficiaries of their dead husband's properties (especially where children exist), this does not apply in practice. Rather in some cases where the woman is desperate for these lands and property, she is forced to conform to the tradition of widow inheritance. In this case, the woman is treated as part of the properties of the dead men and is also available for inheritance. She becomes the legal wife of her inheritor and the children inherited and those born by the inheritor are considered to belong to the new husband (Evans – Pritchard, 1951).

The study also discovered that for fear of ostracism and related punishments, widows suffer in silence, especially when they are denied traditional sources of support. This usually causes economic hardships and deprivation. They lose their honour and respect as soon as they lose their husbands. Their husbands being traditionally their main sources of honour and respect, once dead gives room for them to be treated with disregard as humans especially by in-laws (ICRC, 1999). This can be explained by the popular

Igbo adage which says that “Di bu ugwu nwanyi”, (a husband is a woman’s honour).

It was further discovered that widowhood in Igboland is usually a great psychological and physical challenge to the elderly widow. The wailing, weeping and hysteria are expected to go on for days, before the man’s burial and even after wards; as is obvious in the literature, such wailings and bitter lamentations are cultural expected (Basden, 1966, Meek, 1937 of Afigbo, 1989) and this prolonged wailing and anguish enforced by culture may often affect the psychological and mental balance of the woman.

The list of problems is almost in exhaustible and these call for the intervention of social work services to help alleviate if not eradicate them entirely. From the study it was noticed that those widows who involved themselves in occupation cope better than those who did not. Social workers should therefore take cognizance of the need to sensitize the idle widows to get busy in order to overcome both the financial and emotional hazards of widowhood rather than wallowing in self pity. In this case social workers can go the extra mile of linking widows with systems or organizations where these jobs no matter how small can be found.

They can also act as advocates for these widows on the issue of in-laws maltreatment. This role of advocacy should be extended to the policy makers bringing to their notice the ills suffered by the widows especially the elderly ones so that ways of enforcing already existing policies will be found and new ones established. These policies should cover areas such as Medicare for widows, living arrangements (this can be achieved by building low cost houses), changing or eradication of harmful widowhood practices etc.

Perhaps beyond the above public policy responses is the critical need for a widow oriented social work practice which while cognizant of the socio-cultural and psychological burdens of widowhood in Southeast Nigeria sees the elderly widows as a special group. Basically, aging and its resultant physical infirmities and socio-psychological withdrawal makes the elderly widow particularly vulnerable to widow induced stress. Hence, social workers acting in their capacities to function as enhancers of coping capacity, linking agents and promoters of effective humane operation of social systems (see, Ekpe & Mamah, 1997 on the functions of social work) can do a lot to improve the situation of elderly widows in a male dominated society like the Igbo Southeastern Nigeria.

The re-examination of the main findings of this study indicates that the situation of elderly widows can be explained along the lines of the popular continuity

theory in social work. According to this theory the individual in the course of growing older is predisposed towards maintaining stability in the habits, associations, preferences and lifestyle that he/she developed over the years (Peterson, 1976; McCrae and Costa, 1984). According to these Scholars, people’s habits, preferences, associations, states of health and experiences will in large part determine their ability to maintain their lifestyle while retiring from full time employment and perhaps adjust to the death of a loved one.

Therefore in accordance with our findings in the study, it can be inferred that activity at old age helps the elderly overcome loss of their loved ones especially their spouses and this activity if possible should be in the areas preferred and chosen by the individual with which he/she had been accustomed to over time.

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