

## Widows' Perception of Widowhood Hardships in Patriarchal Society of Benue State, Nigeria

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**ABSTRACT:** The study investigated widows' perception of widowhood hardships in patriarchal society. The study was conducted in Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria; and adopted survey design. Two research questions and one null hypothesis guided the study. A sample of 210 widows, comprising 123 widows each with male children, and 87 widows with only female children, was selected randomly. The instrument was developed by two professionals, one in Sociology of Education and another in Measurement and Evaluation. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS IBM version 20. Research questions were answered using means and standard deviations, while the null hypothesis was tested at  $P < 0.05$  level of significance, using t-test. The study found that widows are often accused of practising witchcraft and for being responsible for the killing of their husbands. Widows are among the most neglected set of people, and are deprived of their husbands' incomes. In addition, they are ejected from their matrimonial homes, and also forced to marry their husbands' brothers. Based on the findings, the researchers recommended that Government should enact laws that prevent the male counterparts from falsely accusing widows of witchcraft practices and for being responsible for the killing of their husbands. Also, the national government, non-governmental organizations and wealthy individuals should provide widows with economic support to alleviate their sufferings.

**KEYWORDS:** *Widows, widowhood, hardships, patriarchal society.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Widows worldwide constitute a significant proportion of all women ranging from 7 to 16 percent of adult women (Trivedi, Sareen & Dhyani, 2009). However, in some countries and regions, their proportion is much higher. For example, India has the largest recorded number of widows in the world – 33 million, representing 10 percent of the female population as compared to only 3 percent of men. Fifty-four percent of women aged 60 and over are widows as compared to 12 percent of women aged 35-39, but only 10 percent of widows remarry after the death of a husband (Chen, 2000).

Widowhood is the state or condition in which a widow or widower enters into after the death of one spouse. It is a state that brings a lot of hardships to both widows and widowers. Neither the widows nor the widowers find it easy to cope with the hardships which widowhood brings. Though widows and widowers both suffer hardships, it appears in the patriarchal society, widows suffer more than widowers. A widow is a woman who has lost a husband and has not remarried, while a widower is a man whose wife has died and who has not remarried. The hardships that widows undergo in the patriarchal society are many worldwide and similar, but some differences exist in some societies. For example, in India, widows are not allowed to remarry even if they are still young. They are restricted to their homes and are not allowed to attend social, religious and cultural ceremonies (Anji & Velumani, 2013). But this is not the case in Tiv culture, a subculture of Nigerian society. Although Tiv is a patriarchal society, the Tiv people allow widows who want to remarry to do so, and widows are free to attend social, religious and cultural ceremonies. Nonetheless, this observation requires empirical evidence to substantiate it.

A patriarchal society is a male-dominated society where women can only play the second fiddle to men. It is also a society where high-status positions are allocated to males while low-status positions are conferred on females in all fields of human endeavour except domestic chores. It is a society that gives preference to the male child over the female child. Hence in a patriarchal society like Nigeria, a widow without a son may likely suffer more hardships than a widow who has at least a son. This is understandable because in Nigeria, a son is regarded as the future head of the family (Anzaa, 2013) and is expected to take over the leadership of his

father's family after his father's death, especially if the son is an adult. In addition, he is expected to inherit all the landed assets and money.

## II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Widows in Nigeria and other patriarchal societies suffer a lot of hardships. According to Ezeiofor (2011), every woman in Nigeria whose husband has died is expected to adhere strictly to the unwritten ordinances and rituals of widowhood, which are imposed on her by the culture and tradition. Such widows are subjected to different forms of inhuman treatment which include rejection, abuse, denial, oppression, subjugation, and defilement. Division for Advancement for Woman (2000) maintain that at the time of the death of the husband, the widow is seen as unclean and not "pure," that she is subjected to customs that even undermine her health, and the situation is worse if she does not have a son. She may be ejected from their house and the late husband's house and land will be inherited by his brothers. In most cases, the husband's kin do not provide the widow with any economic support, particularly if she refuses to remarry one of her husband's brothers. To crown it all, widows are thus exposed to all kinds of untold hardships such as homelessness, insecurity, hunger, poverty, illness and rejection. Nonetheless, it is assumed that widows with sons will likely experience less hardship as compared to widows who are without sons. This is because the widow's son is unlikely to fold his hands and watch his mother undergo hardships under the guise of culture and tradition. This is likely if the son is a grown-up. However, this assumption has not been investigated, particularly in Kwande LGA of Benue State, Nigeria. Therefore, the main problem of this study is: Do widows' perception of widowhood hardships differ between widows with only male children and those with only female children?

## III. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Widows worldwide are found to face difference forms of hardships due to the doctrine of patriarchy (Anji & Velumani, 2013). Anji and Velumani contend that among the widows, the most vulnerable groups are those who have been living alone or staying with unmarried children. According to them, some of the major hardships widows suffer include responsibility of child-bearing, lack of companionship, violence against them, hindrance in remarriage, control over sexuality, victimization, and psycho-social adjustment with her own family and society. They pointed out that in all developing countries, millions of widows and their children live in the condition of acute insecurity, deprivation and violence.

In the view, of Trivedi and Himanashu (2009), widows are the most neglected set of people. They are painfully omitted in the statistics of many developing countries, and they are rarely mentioned in the multitude of reports on women's poverty, development, health or human rights published in the last 25 years. The most difficult time for a widow is after the funeral (Scannell, 2005). Scannell asserts that young widows often have no peer group. Compared with the older widows, they are generally less prepared emotionally and practically to cope with the death of a husband. Besides, widows suffer many forms of hardship ranging from social, economic to psychological, more especially in the first year after the death of a spouse. For example, if the husband was the breadwinner of the family, his death may deprive the widow of his income, and the nucleus of the family is destroyed (Fasaranti & Aruma, 2007). Some studies have shown that a higher rate of mental illness exists among the widowed than their married counterparts (Amoran, Lawoyin & Oni, 2005). A study conducted by Chen et al (1999) showed that widows had higher mean levels of traumatic grief, depressive and anxiety symptoms as compared with widowers. Another adversity a widow faces is loneliness. This occurs especially in the family where the spouse does not have children. The widow does not have anybody to share her grief or sorrow; somebody she can discuss with and momentarily forget the death of her husband. In the night, she suffers the fear of being alone and may even have terrible nightmares.

In India, thousands of widows live in abject poverty and degradation. It is reported that in Vrindavan alone, an estimated 20,000 widows struggle for survival (Division for the Advancement of Women, 2000). Again, in India, widows are discriminated against by their family members. They are not allowed to wear coloured sarees and bangles, but are forced to wear unattractive garments, ornaments, hairstyles, etc. They are prevented from attending social, cultural and religious ceremonies (Anji & Velumani, 2013). This is not all. Indian widows are often regarded as "evil eye," the purveyors of ill fortune, and unwanted burden on poor families (Division for the Advancement of Women, 2000). Bill (2006) reported that widows in India are disowned by their relatives and thrown out of their homes in context of land and inheritance disputes. Widows without education are exploited, and resort to doing domestic chores or turn to begging and prostitution. Younger widows are forced into prostitution while older ones are left to beg and chant for alms from pilgrims and tourists. In spite of the day-to-day suffering of the Indian widows who are emotionally, physically and sexually abused, and who migrate to cities to live on streets and beg, their hardships remain largely hidden (Bruce 2005; Damon, 2007; Division for the Advancement of Women, 2000).

In Nigeria, the Division for the Advancement of Women (2000) reports that the low-status, poverty, and violence experienced by widows stem from discrimination in inheritance, custom, the patriarchal nature of the society, and the domination of oppressive traditional practices, which take precedence over constitutional

guarantees of equality, modern laws and international women's human rights standards. If the widow has no grown up son, she and the girl-children traditionally have no property inheritance right in many parts of Nigeria. The property which widows are denied access to include land, houses including matrimonial homes, cash and other assets (Ezeiofor, 2011). The findings of the Korich's study (1996) indicated that in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria, one widow was forced to handover the pass book (bank savings book) of her husband by his relatives after they had ordered her from Lagos to explain the cause of his death. It was even worse for another widow whose entire property was confiscated. Her husband's relatives sent a lorry from home to pack all the electronics and machines in his supermarket.

In addition, a widow is accused of practising witchcraft and for killing her husband. A widow is also forced to shave her hair. She is stigmatized with a particular mourning dress and forced to sleep on the bare floor and stay many days without taking her bath. Evidence also shows that widows are forced to wail aloud a practice which may make them injure themselves in the process. Besides, widows are forced to bathe with the water used for washing their husband's body or have sexual intercourse with their husband's surviving brothers (Ezeiofor, 2011).

#### IV. PATRIARCHY

Patriarchy, according to Stopler (2008), is the manifestation and institutionalization of males' dominance over females in the society. Many patriarchal societies prefer to have boys over girls. Consequently, married women prefer to have boy-children. For example, Poston (2001) found in China that women whose first child was a daughter have a significant probability of going on to have a second birth. This finding suggests that married women in China who have one child are more likely to experience the hazard of having a second child if the first birth was a girl than if it was a boy. The same study revealed that having a daughter as the first child instead of a son increased the hazard of having a second child by 18 percent.

Similarly, El-Gilany and Shady (2004) found that in Mansoura, Egypt, 2.3 percent of 400 pregnant women interviewed did not prefer any sex for their baby. On the other hand, 57 percent and 40.8 percent of them preferred a son and a daughter respectively. In addition, their study indicated that the percentage of women who wanted another pregnancy was significantly higher among mothers who preferred sons (91.7 percent) as compared to mothers who did not (84.7 percent). In Nigeria, a study by Anzaa (2013) showed that parents in Tiv preferred to send a boy-child to school rather than a girl if the resources were limited. The same study found the reasons parents preferred to have a boy to a girl to include: a girl will eventually marry outside the family; the benefits of educating a girl go to her husband; girls are not future heads of their families; girls are not future breadwinners, and there is no continuity of family name through a girl.

The foregoing literature review shows that widows in patriarchal societies worldwide including Nigeria suffer much adversity. Nonetheless, none of the studies reviewed has shown how widows with sons and widows without sons perceive widowhood hardships in patriarchal society, and whether the widows with sons' and widows without sons' perception of widowhood hardships in patriarchal society differ in particular, in Kwande LGA of Benue State, Nigeria. As a result, the researchers are motivated to fill the gap.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The main purpose of this study was to investigate widows' perception of widowhood hardships in patriarchal society of Benue State. Specifically, the study was designed to:

1. Determine the perception of widows with only male children about widowhood hardships in patriarchal society.
2. Verify the perception of widows with only female children about widowhood hardships in patriarchal society.

#### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the perception of widows with male children about widowhood hardships in patriarchal society?
2. How do widows with only female children perceive widowhood hardships in patriarchal society?

#### **Hypothesis**

The following hypothesis was formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance:

1. The perception of widows with only male children and widows with only female children in patriarchal society does not differ.

#### V. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted descriptive survey design. This method was considered suitable because the participants were allowed to answer questions administered through questionnaire and interview schedules (Hale, 2011). The study was conducted in Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria, and covered two Council wards namely Mkomon and Barakuv. The population of 516 widows was identified at the various meetings of Widows Associations held in the two council wards. The population of the study is made up of two categories of widows: Widows who had only male children and widows who had only female children. However, the researchers purposively selected a sample of 210 widows comprising 123 widows with only male children and

87 widows who had only female children. These categories of widows were purposively selected for the study because the researchers want to ascertain whether there is gender bias in widowhood hardships between two categories of widows.

The researchers developed an instrument entitled *Widowhood Hardships Questionnaires* (WHQ). The instrument is a structured questionnaire, also adopted for interview schedule. The questionnaire was broadly divided into two parts, A and B. Part A contained the bio-data of the respondents, while part B had 20 items designed to elicit information from the respondents about widowhood hardships, between widows with only male children (WMC) and widows with only female children (WFC). The instrument adopted four-point Likert scale format: Strongly Agreed (SA), Agreed (A), Disagreed (D) and Strongly Disagreed (SD).

The instrument was validated by professionals one each in Sociology of Education, Gender Studies, and Measurement and Evaluation at the Nasarawa State University, Keffi (NSUK), Nigeria. The drafts of the questionnaire were given to the validators along with the purpose of the study, research questions and hypothesis to assess contents and face-validity of the instrument. Based on their suggestions and amendments, the new version of the instrument was structured. The reliability of the instrument was determined by conducting a trial-test on 20 widows with only male children and widows with only female children; outside the target population, and adopting Cronbach alpha procedure, the reliability coefficient of 0.82 was obtained. This is considered appropriate.

## VI. DATA COLLECTION

The researchers employed and trained two research assistants who understand English Language and Tiv Language very well. The researchers and the research assistants teamed up and administered 210 questionnaires on the respondents, and interviewed the illiterate widows. The well completed questionnaires were all collected on the spot. Thus, 100 percent retrieval rate was recorded. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS IBM Version 20. Mean and standard deviation were used for answering research questions, while the hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance using t-test.

### Results

The data collected for the study were analyzed using SPSS-IBM version 20, and presented in tables as follows:

#### Research Question One

What is the perception of widows with only male children about widowhood hardships in patriarchal society?

**Table 1:** The perception of widows with only male children in patriarchal society

| S/N | Widowhood Hardships   | N   | Mean | St. Dev. | Remarks |
|-----|---|-----|------|----------|---------|
| 1   | Widows are rejected by their people                                       | 123 | 3.11 | 2.42     | Accept  |
| 2   | A widow is seen as a witch  | 123 | 3.32 | 2.62     | Accept  |
| 3   | A widow is accused of killing her husband                                 | 123 | 3.36 | 2.66     | Accept  |
| 4   | A widow is not provided with economic support                             | 123 | 3.18 | 2.47     | Accept  |
| 5   | A widow is exposed to hunger  | 123 | 3.26 | 2.65     | Accept  |
| 6   | A widow is exposed to poverty   | 123 | 3.28 | 2.57     | Accept  |
| 7   | Widows are the most neglected set of people                               | 123 | 3.07 | 2.37     | Accept  |
| 8   | Widows are not allowed to wear nice clothes during mourning period        | 123 | 3.14 | 2.47     | Accept  |
| 9   | Widows are not allowed to make hair style during mourning period          | 123 | 3.63 | 2.83     | Accept  |
| 10  | Young widows are likely to become prostitutes                             | 123 | 3.38 | 2.66     | Accept  |
| 11  | Older widows are likely to become beggars                                 | 123 | 3.31 | 2.60     | Accept  |
| 12  | Widows are not allowed to attend social activities during mourning period | 123 | 2.95 | 2.27     | Accept  |
| 13  | Widows are not allowed to leave their houses during mourning period       | 123 | 3.37 | 2.63     | Accept  |
| 14  | A widow is ejected from her husband's home                                | 123 | 3.37 | 2.67     | Accept  |
| 15  | A widow is forced to marry her husband's brother                          | 123 | 3.15 | 2.45     | Accept  |
| 16  | A widows is forced to sleep with her husband's dead body                  | 123 | 2.60 | 1.95     | Accept  |
| 17  | A widow is not allowed to inherit her husband's property                  | 123 | 2.33 | 1.77     | Reject  |
| 18  | A widow is deprived of her husband's income                               | 123 | 3.37 | 2.67     | Accept  |
| 19  | A widow is forced to sleep on a bare floor during mourning period         | 123 | 3.19 | 2.43     | Accept  |
| 20  | A widow is abused anyhow by people  | 123 | 3.22 | 2.51     | Accept  |

Results in Table 1 indicate that all the 20 items, except item 17 have mean scores above 2.50 cut off point. This means that both the widows with only male children and widows with only female children agreed that all the items, except item 17 are the hardships widows undergo in Kwande LGA. This also means that there is no gender bias among widows.

### Research Question Two

What is the perception of widows with only female children about widowhood hardships in patriarchal society?

**Table 2:** The perception of widows with only female children in patriarchal society

| S/N | Widowhood hardships   | N   | Mean | St. Dev. | Remarks |
|-----|---|-----|------|----------|---------|
| 1   | Widows are rejected by their people                                       | 87  | 2.38 | 1.84     | Reject  |
| 2   | A widow is seen as a witch  | 87  | 3.03 | 2.34     | Accept  |
| 3   | A widow is accused of killing her husband                                 | 87  | 3.20 | 2.50     | Accept  |
| 4   | A widow is not provided with economic support                             | 87  | 3.23 | 2.52     | Accept  |
| 5   | A widow is exposed to hunger  | 87  | 3.25 | 2.55     | Accept  |
| 6   | A widow is exposed to poverty   | 87  | 3.23 | 2.52     | Accept  |
| 7   | Widows are the most neglected set of people                               | 87  | 3.05 | 2.00     | Accept  |
| 8   | Widows are not allowed to wear nice clothes during mourning period        | 87  | 3.32 | 2.23     | Accept  |
| 9   | Widows are not allowed to make hair style during mourning period          | 87  | 3.32 | 2.63     | Accept  |
| 10  | Young widows are likely to become prostitutes                             | 87  | 3.29 | 2.59     | Accept  |
| 11  | Older widows are likely to become beggars                                 | 87  | 3.20 | 2.50     | Accept  |
| 12  | Widows are not allowed to attend social activities during mourning period | 87  | 2.72 | 2.07     | Accept  |
| 13  | Widows are not allowed to leave their houses during mourning period       | 87  | 3.03 | 2.34     | Accept  |
| 14  | A widow is ejected from her husband's home                                | 87  | 3.24 | 2.53     | Accept  |
| 15  | A widow is forced to marry her husband's brother                          | 87  | 3.05 | 2.37     | Accept  |
| 16  | A widows is forced to sleep with her husband's dead body                  | 87  | 2.71 | 2.09     | Accept  |
| 17  | A widow is not allowed to inherit her husband's property                  | 87  | 2.99 | 1.96     | Accept  |
| 18  | A widow is deprived of her husband's income                               | 87  | 3.28 | 2.57     | Accept  |
| 19  | A widow is forced to sleep on a bare floor during mourning period         | 87  | 3.03 | 2.33     | Accept  |
| 20  | A widow is abused anyhow by people  | 123 | 3.15 | 2.45     | Accept  |

Results in Table 2 indicate that all the 20 items, except item 1 have mean scores above 2.50 cut off point. This means that both widows with only male children and widows with only female children agreed that all the 20 items, except item 1, are the hardships widows undergo in Kwande LGA. It also means that there is no gender bias among widows.

**Hypothesis:** The perception of widows with only male children and widows with only female children in patriarchal society do not differ.

**Table 3:** Paired sample t-test of widows with only male children and widows with only female children

| Widows N |     | Paired Differences |      |      |  |       | t df sig. (2tailed) |    |      |
|----------|-----|--------------------|------|------|--|-------|---------------------|----|------|
|          |     |                    |      |      | 95% confidence interval of the differences |       |                     |    |      |
|          |     |                    |      |      | Lower                                      | Upper |                     |    |      |
| WMC*     | 123 | 3.411              | .556 | .155 | .133                                       | .484  | 1                   | 87 | .262 |
| WFC*     | 87  | 3.236              | .792 | .143 | .109                                       | .460  | 2                   | 85 | .224 |
|          |     |                    |      |      |  |       | 1                   |    |      |
|          |     |                    |      |      |  |       | 2                   |    |      |
|          |     |                    |      |      |  |       | 2                   |    |      |
|          |     |                    |      |      |  |       | 4                   |    |      |

\*WMC: Widows with only male children

\*WFC: Widows with only female children



Given the very low significance level (.262) and (.224) at 87 and 85 df, the null hypothesis is accepted. That is the perception of widows with only male children and widow with only female children about widowhood hardships in patriarchal society do not differ. Consequently, the differences between the widows are not significant. This also means that there is no gender bias among widows in perception of widowhood hardships.

## VII. DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this study was to investigate widows' perception of widowhood hardships in patriarchal society. Two research questions and one null hypothesis guided the study. The findings of the study showed that widows (123) who responded to the questionnaires agree that items 2 to 20 are hardships widows in Kwande LGA of Benue State undergo. These hardships include: widows are not allowed to leave their houses during mourning period; the widow is ejected from her husband's home; she is forced to marry her husband's brother; she is deprived of her husband's income; she is exposed to poverty and hunger.

The findings of the study support the findings of studies by Anji and Velumani (2013) that widows in India are restricted to their homes and are not allowed to attend social, religious and cultural ceremonies. Besides, the findings of the study also corroborate the study reported by Trivedi and Humanashu (2009) that widows are painfully omitted in the statistics of the developing countries, and that they were rarely mentioned in the multitude of reports on women's poverty, health or human rights published in the last 25 years.

In addition, the findings are in line with the study by the Division for the Advancement of Women (2000) which reported that thousands of widows live in abject poverty and degradation in India. Another finding of the study is similar to the finding of Bill (2006) who reported that widows in India are disowned by their relatives and thrown out of their homes in context of land and inheritance disputes. Besides, some findings of the study echoed the findings by Bruce (2005) and Damon (2007) who in their separate studies reported that widows without education are exploited, and turn to begging or prostitution. The findings of the study also showed that a widow is accused of killing her husband. These particular findings of the study are similar to Ezeiorfor (2011) who reported that widows are accused of witchcraft, and killing of their husbands that they have no right to inherit property such as land, houses matrimonial homes, and cash.

However, widows who responded to the questionnaire disagree with item 1 which says that widows are rejected by their people. This finding reflects the true culture of Kwande people. In this culture, widows are not rejected by their people. Infact, widows usually go back to their fathers' homes when the hardships in their matrimonial homes become unbearable. Their fathers' or relatives homes provide accommodation for them.

In general, the perception of widows with male children and widows with female children about widowhood hardships do not differ. Hence, the null hypothesis that there is no difference in perception of widows with only male children and widows with only female children do not differ is accepted. This is contrary to the assumption that widows with male children may differ in their perception about widowhood hardships as compare to widows with only female children. This is surprising because in a patriarchal society like Kwande, where the male child is more valued than the female child, it is expected that widows with male children should suffer less. However, the findings of the study prove to the contrary. In summary, there is need for further study in this area.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

This study investigated widows' perception of widowhood hardships in patriarchal society. The major findings of the study indicate that:

1. Widows in Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria are accused of participating in witchcraft practices and for being responsible for the killing of their husbands;
2. Widows are exposed to different forms of poverty and hunger;
3. Widows are the most neglected set of people;
4. Young widows are likely to become prostitutes;
5. Widows are ejected from their matrimonial homes;
6. Widows are forced to marry their husbands' brothers;
7. Widows are not allowed to make hair style during mourning period;
8. Widows are deprived of their husbands' income;
9. Widows are not provided with economic support;
10. Widows are abused anyhow by many people.

### Recommendations

Based on the major findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Government should enact laws that prevent the male counterparts from falsely accusing widows of witchcraft practices and for being responsible for the killing of their husbands.
2. Governments, nongovernmental organizations and wealthy individuals should assist widows by providing them with cash loans so that they can establish small scale business to sustain them. This can prevent young widows and older ones from taking to prostitution and begging respectively.

3. Government should also enact laws that prevent widows from being ejected out of their matrimonial homes, which usually causes widows' hardships.
4. Husbands should write wills specifying how much money and what property widow should inherit in their families. This measure will save widows from untold hardships during sharing of family inheritance.
5. Widows should be included in Government's social programmes meant for improving the conditions of women such as health, development and the rights of women. Widows are often neglected in these programmes.
6. Government should enact laws to protect widows from being abused anyhow by people. This will likely guarantee the integrity and respect for widows.

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