

## **When death strikes the female spouse in Igbo land: A peep at the other side of the coin**

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### ***Abstract***

*Widowhood is a state of being a widow or widower. However, in application as found to be in Igbo land, and of course, in many other areas world over, it is restricted to the state of being a widow. In fact, in the Igbo language, while there is an expression with the reference of 'widow' **nwaanyisimkpe**, there is none for 'widower'. Here, the account of the restriction is adequately provided. No wonder then, there exist advocacy/support groups, some government sponsored and other humanitarian sponsored agencies, which put in time and material resources to oppose harmful widowhood practices that affect widows. None of these or similar facilities is available for widowers. This discourse draws attention to the fact that what is good for the goose is good for the gander. A widow or a widower is in the pain of loss of ideally a beloved companion. Moreover, the way negative widowhood practices that affect widows exist in Igbo land is much the same way those that affect widowers exist. Unfortunately, such practices are under cover and not in any way emphasized. For this reason, intervention programmes for widows exist but none for widowers. Here, some of the negative widowhood practices that affect widowers have been pointed out and by reference to them, it is made clear that widowers deserve intervention programmes to succour them and save them from an*

*early grave or more pain arising from self-decision that at the long run exacerbates their pain instead of ameliorating it.*

**Keywords:** *widow, widower, deprivation, advocacy and spouse.*

## **Introduction**

In traditional Igbo society, spouses are meant to love each other dearly. Biblically, a woman is formed with a rib from a man, showing that they are one flesh and blood. Ekenze, (2008:vii) comments:

God saw everything He created as good except the fact that “the man should not be alone”. God thoughtfully provided a suitable help for Adam. To establish a permanent bond between Adam and eve, God used Adam’s rib to make the woman.

Here, we see that the aim is to make the union between a man and his wife harmonious and inseparable, not only in that first marriage but also in the ones that would follow. This fact is re-enacted and emphasized when a man and a woman are joined, especially in the Christian order, with the injunction, “what God has joined together, no man should put asunder”. God is therefore the author of marriage and there is the evidence that He designed it to create a family relationship filled with joy and satisfaction for the members.

A marital partner is usually an invaluable possession. This is what makes the marriage relationship the number one type of relationship which commands total commitment of the parties

involved (Ekenze, 2008:viii). When this is the case, there is no gainsaying the fact that the death of any of the parties becomes devastating and calamitous to the other. Of course, the first thing that happens is a change of designation, from a husband or a wife to a widow or widower. The new designation carries with it negative implications which are manifested in diverse forms ill treatments; denial of rights and deprivations, etc.

In most, if not all cultures, death is regarded as a great loss, not just to the family unit, but to the larger society. At such period, the bereaved mourn their loss and expect sympathy, encouragement, solidarity, love, care and support from other members of the society. Of all the losses, the death of a spouse is more sensitive and is given a special attention. In many cases widows attract more sympathy. They are solicited for and provided with material assistance especially when there is the evidence that were fully dependent on their departed husbands.

The case of widows have given rise to the establishment of advocacy support groups and humanitarian agencies who invest their time, human and material resources in order to provide succour as well as to restore the rights and privileges of the widows. This commendable move has gone a long way in achieving the desired objective. While this paper salutes the efforts of all the governmental and non-governmental humanitarian agencies, who champion the cause of the widows, it draws their attention to the other side of the same coin, the widower, who in one way or the other suffers both psychological trauma and other negative conditions as a result of the death of his wife.

This work make an attempt at bringing into view the plight of the widower particularly in the present day Igbo society. It is

divided into subheadings. The first part discusses the concept of widowhood and widower-hood. The second part looks at some notable interventions in favour of the widows while the third part determines the plight of widowers in the Igbo society. The fourth part summarizes and gives recommendations on how widowers could be carried along in the scheme of things in order for them to enjoy a sense of belonging in the society.

### **An overview of widowhood**

The BBC English Dictionary defines widowhood as “the state of being a widow or widower”. This dictionary definition is instructive in many ways. It emphasizes the point that widowhood covers a widow and a widower. While this is true, the question is whether everybody perceives it thus. What is clear to the writer is that widowhood is the state of being a widow and not a widower and this would be the case for many if a count is taken on the matter. The point here is that the concept of widowhood has been semantically narrowed to exclude the widower and emphasize the widow as much as I know in the Igbo society. This is not without a reason. The reason could be that widows suffer overwhelmingly more than the widowers are known to suffer in the Igbo society. The writer acknowledges the fact but thinks that attention has not been given to the widowers to determine their challenges. This is the main objective of this work. Hence, here I distinguish between widowhood and widower-hood even though widowhood is used as a cover term for both cases.

The suffering of a widow in the Igbo society ranges from the stigma of the negative reference *nwanyi-isi-mkpe* ‘a woman in mourning’ to evident feelings of deprivation and in some cases rejection and isolation. Iwuchukwu, (2006:23) captures this

implicitly and much more provides an answer to why widowhood is perceived to be restricted to the woman in the Igbo society,

Significantly, so common is widowhood to woman (nwanyi-isi-mkpe) and so uncommon to man that in Igbo society, no word exists in the vernacular language to describe a man whose wife died. It is very difficult to find a widower in this society. They remarry so fast or they have other wives and concubines.

The point Iwuchukwu has made here may not be peculiar to the Igbo language. It is possible to be a running index in many African languages and this reflects the African perception that has provided the women with more support when they become widows and placed men to take care of themselves when they become widowers. Of course, one of the ways readily available to them is to take marry again to fill the void and cushion the looming doom connected with widower-hood.

The *umuada* (married daughters of the kindred) are the major contributors to the agony of widows. They can make widowhood an unbearable period for a woman especially one who is not in good terms with them. They monitor and regulate all her actions. In the slightest provocation they make life difficult for her. They force the woman to shave her hair and wear mourning clothes, *uwemkpe* for a period (Okoye, 1995). Why this is the case many have found it difficult to understand because it women meting out on fellow women unwholesome measures.

Owen (1996), as cited in Iwuchukwu (2006:204), observes: “It is widows not widowers who must endure the most humiliating rituals in relation, for example, to dress, food, hygiene and sexual activities”. Widows are not entitled to rights, unless what they get through their male children; if she doesn’t have any male child, then she has to depend on the husband’s kinsmen, and this rarely augurs well for the widows.

The activities of *umuada* in their relationship with widows and conditions such as the ones pointed out by Owen, prove why more attention is given to the widow and not the widower. Would any right thinking person take it that the widower suffers nothing because there evident fair treatment meted to them? My argument here is that widowers are neglected by the Igbo society. They are left to prove they are men who do not cry and who can adjust quickly. The only way they have proved being men is to remarry. Remarrying becomes a factor of succour, consolation and readjustment. Unfortunately, it misconstrued to mean that the man as a widower suffers nothing. Hence, there is no intervention programme to support them.

### **Notable interventions in favour of the widows**

After years of happy married life and living together, the taste of love and companionship makes it appear as if one cannot continue to live on without one’s partner. In the case of death, how can one pick up the pieces of one’s life and begin again by one’s self? The above is a pertinent question which requires an answer. It is in a bid to provide an answer to this question that there are today many interventions in support of bereaved family.

There are some international humanitarian agencies, government and non-governmental agencies, clubs and

associations, as well as religious groups who have devoted both their time and money to champion the course of widows in the society. Among such groups are:

**1. The convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW):**This convention is adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly. It is often described as an international bill of rights for women, consisting of a preamble and thirty articles, it defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. (en.wikipedia.org/wikidowhood). The convention defines discrimination against woman as “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of man and woman, of human rights and fundamental freedom in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.

By accepting the convention, states commit themselves to undertake a series of measures to end discrimination against women in all forms including:

- to incorporate the principle of equality of men and women in their legal system, abolish all discriminatory laws and adopt appropriate ones prohibiting discrimination against women; to establish tribunals and other public institutions to ensure the effective protection of women against discrimination;

- to ensure elimination of all acts of discrimination against women by persons, organizations or enterprises.

The convention provides the basis for realizing equality between women and men through ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in political and public life. To take appropriate measures, so that women can enjoy all their human rights and fundamental freedom. The convention is the only human rights treaty which affirms the reproductive rights of women and targets culture and tradition as influential forces shaping gender roles and family relations ([www.ohchr.org/cn/hrbodies/cedaw/pages/cedawindex.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/cn/hrbodies/cedaw/pages/cedawindex.aspx)).

**2. Widows development organization (WIDO):** The committee on Non-Governmental Organization of the Department of Public Information granted WIDO association with Department of Public Information on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June, 2010.

Among the objectives of the organization are:

- To sensitize the general public on the plight of widows.
- To bring about change in the social status of widows
- To create awareness on the rights of widows and other women in the areas of basic education, legal awareness, income generating activities (trading, arts and crafts), health and population, agriculture and environment.

The organization is in partnership with the European Union, British Council, World Health Organization, Department of Public Information, Enugu State Government and Abia State Government ([www.un.org/dpi/ngosection/index.asp](http://www.un.org/dpi/ngosection/index.asp)).

**3. Empowering widows in development (EWD):** This organization is founded by Margaret Owen. It is a group dedicated to representing the interests of widows worldwide and to ensuring that the needs of widows are recognized and addressed by international organizations. EWD is registered as a non-profit group in the United Kingdom, and is an unincorporated organization with a Board of Trustees and an advisory group. EWD was set up to lobby and advocate for widows in developing countries at the local, national and international level. It has been monitoring the status of widows in ten countries, Nigeria, Ghana, Zambia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, India, Uganda, Tanzania and Malawi ([grieffeudrenewal.com/internat\\_empowering.htm](http://grieffeudrenewal.com/internat_empowering.htm)).

**4. Widows and orphans development organization:** This is another aid organization that champions the course of widows and orphans. It advocates for the oppressed widows, assists and empowers the poor widows and take care of the upbringing of the orphans. Added to the above mentioned organizations are the social welfare Department of all the ministries of Women Affairs and Social Development of all the states in Nigeria. It is part of their primary responsibility to look into matters affecting the welfare of widows in their various states and Local Government Areas.

Apart from organizations and groups, authors and film producers alike commit much effort in writing books and producing films that have thematic relevance with the course of widows in the society. Some books include:

- i. *A World of Widows* by Margaret Owen

- ii. *Widowhood: A Natural or Cultural Tragedy* by Pat Okoye
- iii. *Widows and Daughters* by Patience Ifejika
- iv. *Customary Marriage Laws and Rights of Widows* by Angela Otaluka
- v. *Empowering Widows in Development* by Laura Slap-Shelton
- vi. *Widowhood Among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria* by Chima J. Korieh
- vii. *Lonely Days* by BayoAdebowale

As it is common knowledge today, video films have become a mirror of the society as it reflects the societal way of living. Film makers utilize the medium in the projection as well as correction of societal ills. It is a glaring fact that the camera lenses of most film makers have lent their voices to the campaign against such discriminatory, dehumanizing, denigrating and obnoxious cultural practice against women.

Some of the video film titles that treat widowhood, cited in Chimeziem and Samuel (2009:185) include:

- i. ‘Yesterday (1993) andWidow (2007) by Kingsley Ogoko and Aquila Njama
- ii. “The Widow” (1999) by NdubuisiOkoli and produced by Obi Madubuogwu
- iii. “Widows Cot” (2007) by Dickson Iroegbu and produced by Nkeiruka John
- iv. Widows Men (2007) by TchidiChikere and produced by ObinnaOkeke

Added to these are stage productions, articles in magazines, journals and newspapers. The message concerning violence against widows is also carried in some churches, meetings and in other social gatherings. All these efforts are truly commendable and are really achieving their desired objectives. However, this paper is craving for some shift of direction and attention to the widower, who, as we have tried to point out, also suffers bereavement and the effect of pangs of loss of his wife.

### **Insight into the plight of widowers**

God said everything He created is good but observed that “the man should not be alone”. God thoughtfully provided a suitable helper for Adam (Gen. 2:18) to establish a permanent bond between Adam and Eve. God used Adam’s rib to make the woman. This was aimed at making the union a harmonious one, not only in that first marriage, but in subsequent marriages.

Ekenze and Ekenze, (2009:11) comments that the part of the verse that says, “It is not good that man should be alone” points to the fact God did not make room for loneliness for the man. Little wonder He made marriage between a man and a woman to last as long as they remained alive”.

It has been stated in this paper that men ought to love their wives as their own bodies, for no man ever hated his own flesh; but nourishes and cherishes it. In view of the above statement it is glaring that spouses are meant to ideally love and cherish each other and therefore the demise of either of the spouses becomes a catastrophe. Widows and widowers alike should shed tears in the same case and laughed in the same way with the tip of their tongues. All widows and widowers are silent for similar reasons

and looked very much alike in their garment of black colour (Adebowale 2006:22).

Widowers suffer loss of dignity and status like widows. In his abject solitude, the widower is closely scanned and monitored by people with every suspicion. Such monitors are bent on destroying his reputation.

There is a good reason to believe that widows receive more sympathy because traditionally men have the responsibility of providing for the family. However, it should be called to mind the fact that in contemporary times most women are the bread winners of their families. A loss of such a woman places the widower in a more critical condition than a traditional widower, who we argue here, is not free from pain of loss and deprivation, especially in a case where an ideal good wife is involved. Good wives are not just wives to their husbands, but also good friends, confidants and very close associates. The death of such wives will be devastating to the widowers who will be left alone in anguish of sorrow and loneliness.

The cry and mourning of a widower is unjustly regarded as crocodile tears, although one may question what benefit can be derived from sorrow which is programmed. Examples can be extended by reference to comments of some of the widowers in Owerri zone. A widower noted, “The widower in his black mourning cloth is prohibited from staying outside his house after 6pm in the evening. The situation puts him in a stampede in whatever journey or business he engages in to make sure he does not come back beyond 6pm” (Iwundu, 2015)

Though the period of mourning these days is increasingly shorter as recommended by some religious faith, but whenever a widower reduces his period of mourning from 12 months, he

faces gossips and castigations. He will be accused of not being perturbed by the death of his wife and that he wanted to come out from mourning so that he will gain the liberty to do whatever he likes, especially that of bringing in another woman, and many more accusations of similar sort.

NdubuezeOpara has also left an account of how severe and spiteful in-laws could be “I was invited by the in-laws to explain the cause of my wife’s death. After explanation, none of them believed me. Instead I received threats and charges ...” (NdubuezeOpara, 2015).

Whatever the situation however, the in-laws administer their fines and charges with vengeance, either out of spite for the widower, or to generate funds on which to feed and share from because they believe that since their sister is dead, they don’t have to lose at both ends. Most of the times the in-laws deny ever receiving the bride wealth or any marriage rite on the deceased, thereby subjecting the widower to another round of payment of huge sum of money; the money that could have been used for the funeral or used to take care of the family and children the female spouse left behind.

Another informant, a 47 year old widower and a father of 5 recounts:

My in-laws claimed that their daughter starved to death and her spirit had been appearing to them, requesting for food. I was then compelled to prepare food and keep in her room for four days, making sure that the door of the room remained open

those number of days (Nwabueze Ugochukwu).

In this case, if the food kept by the widower was not eaten by the dead wife (as it is certain that nobody would eat the food) the in-laws would hold it against the widower, with further allegations that his late wife was not at peace with him. This normally sparks off further use of foul language against the widower, with the resultant monetary extortions.

Widowers are more often than not accused of being responsible for the death of their wives. In the event of a widower who had a financial breakthrough and other material achievements, he would be accused of using the wife for money making rituals. In this type of case, there are usually summons places for the widower to take an oath to prove his innocence. It is pathetic to note that if a widower in the cause of proving his innocence, it is readily concluded that his hands are not clean in the matter of his wife's death.

Talking about death and accusations, Talbot (1926:59) states:

... a strange contradiction in the minds of the people, death should be and often is accepted with equanimity since nearly all recognized that the gods, jujus and our soul only permit its approach when the person has earned it, yet they are liable when it touches them personally, to believe that it would not have come except through the machinations of some enemy, and in any

case, whether deserved or not they attempt to revenge themselves on those who are deemed instrumental in causing it.

Talbot's explains that the first acts of a bereaved family, especially among the semi Bantus, is to procure the services of a diviner and ask him to find out the cause, with the result that it is often followed by many other deaths of those who are forced to undergo an ordeal on the accusation of witchcraft. In this situation, all restraints are thrown overboard and explanations sought in witchcraft, juju or bad medicine. Afigbo (1989:61) corroborates this, "Almost in all cases, the immediate or remote cause is sought in the wicked machinations of a human enemy or of a malevolent ancestor".

Leonard (1906), as cited in Korieh (1996:174) states that it is impossible to discuss this matter of death without taking into consideration the question of witchcraft, according to popular estimates, nearly every death is in the first instance, of all events, attributed to or associated with the accursed magic. Widowers usually bear the brunt of the after effects of these fetish acts in the guise of trying to find out the cause of their wives death.

Talking about widowers and remarriage, Okoye, (1995) as cited in Iwuchukwu (2006:203) claims, "It is very difficult to find a widower in this society. They remarry so fast so that they have other wives and concubines". Of course, the widower's predisposition to having "concubines" is one of the reasons why he should attract pity and assistance from concerned humanitarians for it is known that indulgence in concubines and illicit affairs could cost his life, thereby leading to the entire closure of the entire family.

On the second marriage issue, even when a widower attempts to gather himself for remarriage, the popular prescription and recommendation would be for them to avoid marrying younger girls who are still capable of bearing children (for the widower who had gotten the number of children he wants), rather he looks for the more advanced in age to simply look after the children and home. Here the widower's taste and choice is not given preference, and any marriage contract made in the absence of choice and taste never brings out its best.

One needs to put oneself in a widower's shoes to be able to appreciate how the widower feels when his children are being maltreated by the second wife. It is a case of perpetual agony, and this situation alone calls for attention.

## **Conclusion**

God, our perfect master observed that it is not good for a man to be alone; hence, He decided to make a helper suitable for him (Gen. 2:18). God designed the marriage and family relationship to provide joy and satisfaction for the members. The inherent love in an ideal family relationship makes the death of any of the spouses a devastating event. In other words, both the widow and widower suffer diverse degrees of pain. Unfortunately, as evident in the Igbo land and of course many other cultures, the widow attracts more sympathy than the widower. Hence, there exist different intervention measures to ameliorate the sufferings of widows and none for widowers. It has been seen here that this is supported by the reason that there are very negative practices that involve widows that do not involve widowers. The practices, as shown here, are anchored by *umuada* and not *umunna* kinsmen. However, this does not mean that there are no unwholesome

practices that involve widowers. Some examples have been given here and have been used to make a strong case for attention to be given to widowers in the same way if not in many more ways to ameliorate the pain they have and curb the early grave that greets them.

Widowers, more often than not are thought to have the capacity to endure their grief but this is not true. They suffer a lot of agony while trying to bear the family burden alone. Little wonder many widowers die a few years after the death of their wives. They need similar attention given to protect the interest widows, who as it is clinically proven, have natural ability and strength to absolve shock and survive crisis situations.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the matters raised and discussed here, the following recommendations are considered imperative:

- Efforts must be made in the Igbo society and other societies where widowhood practices are irregular to re-orient people matters connected with death and its causes. The society needs to be adequately informed about the meaning of death, as a natural phenomenon rather than seeing every death as being caused by the widow or widower. Ilogu (1974:4) observes, "I have not come across any death that any Igbo accept as a natural and biological end? This is a very bad order. People should learn to look at death from the Christian point of view for it is written, "What man can live and not see death or save himself from the power of the grave" (Psalm 89:48). That is, every one born of a woman is destined to die physically one day at a given time. Anyanwu (2009:167)

confirms, “Death is real, it is certain and every living soul knows that in this present life, death will come sooner or later”. A good understanding about death, as explained above would dissuade members of the society from looking at all deaths as being masterminded by either the widow or the widower, and this, will reduce the humiliation and suffering widows and widowers pass through.

- Men should endeavour to complete the marriage rites of their wives before living together. This would prevent the cases of coercing the widower in the moment of his grief to perform rites that should have been done while his wife was alive.
- Spouses should ensure peaceful co-existence both within their immediate family and with their in-laws. Evidence of harmonious living would terminate any suspicion and consequent accusation of the man killing his wife or the woman killing her husband.
- Stake holders in widowhood matters, support groups, advocates and humanitarians should carry widowers along in the scheme of things. Every widower needs counseling, and the very poor and helpless widowers need relief materials and protection. They should not be ignored or neglected because every living human being deserves a sense of belonging.

On the whole, this work calls for total peace in the human society, ranging from the nuclear family to the extended family relations.

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