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PSYCHO-SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF DISCRIMINATORY WIDOWHOOD RITES AND PRACTICES IN SOUTH-WESTERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Women, who find themselves single after marriage, whether through death of a husband or through divorce, learn that being the head of a household brings with it a set of special problems, the greatest being emotional. Even in a bad marriage, the survivor feels the loss. The concept of widowhood and widow's rites are examined as it is practised in South Western Nigeria.

Apart from works already documented in the literature on psycho-social implications of widowhood practices, examples abound in our society which confirm the fact that there are indeed some discriminatory practices which have a lot of psychological and sociological implications on widows in South Western Nigeria.

There is no doubt that these unhealthy attitudes do have some psychological and sociological implications on the individual in general. This paper, therefore, explains the various psychological and sociological implications, and offer recommendations on how the discriminatory practices against widows could be minimized and how their psychological and sociological effects would be reduced.

INTRODUCTION

The Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English (1987) describes a widow as a woman whose husband has died and has not re-married. And the same dictionary describes widowhood to be "the state or period of being a widow" (pp 1204).

Many attempts have been made by several scholars to define widowhood. Some definitions of widowhood are quoted here as well as explanation on widowhood rites, rights and practices.

Saba (1997) explains that widowhood is the loss of husband, breadwinner and supporter, usually followed by a period of grief and bereavement after which the woman begins to adjust to the loss and plan for the future of herself and the children.

Oloko (1997) in her own submission asserts that Sharia has made adequate provision for widows in the sense that Koranic injunctions entitle a widow to a percentage of her late husband's estate. She explains further that relatives benefit from the deceased's property when there are surplus after due distribution to the children and the widows.

The Christian religion also advocates for care of the widow and fatherless in many instances in the Bible. Even the traditional religion has adequate provision for the care of the widows.

It is therefore quite amazing that in spite of the provisions made by all the religions, majority of the women who suddenly find themselves in this state have a lot of agonies, sufferings and tales of woe to tell obviously from relatives and other people who are enjoined to care for them. The widows are therefore, exposed to a lot of problems ranging from emotional, financial/economic, social, cultural to religious, just to mention a few. All these problems to the widows culminate in extreme psychological dysfunction.

EXPLANATION OF CONCEPTS

It is important to clarify some concepts in accordance with the two major settings (traditional and modern) by which one could view widowhood practices in South Western Nigeria.

WIDOW INHERITANCE

This is popularly referred to as the custom of widow inheritance that is still widely practiced in the Yoruba traditional setting. Usually, the younger brother or close relative of the deceased remarries/inherits the widow and obviously the children. Hence, the widow and her children remain in the house. She also bears other children for her new husband if she is still in the reproductive age and so life continues for her and her children. A critic of this custom is not within the domain of this paper.

DISCRIMINATORY WIDOWHOOD

On the other side of widow inheritance is what the authors call discriminatory widowhood which is widely practiced among the elites and founded on western culture and individual freedom. It is practiced in the modern society and is fashioned after western culture. The ordeals widows in this setting go through are limited as there are both legal and legislative provisions to protect them. But in spite of these provisions, the reality of discriminatory widowhood has come to stay. In essence, discriminatory widowhood involves dehumanizing the woman and depriving her of her husband's assets/property.

WIDOWHOOD RIGHTS

The fundamental human rights are also widow's rights. The Nigerian constitution of 1999 states categorically that everybody in Nigeria, whether male or female, regardless of marital status is entitled to the fundamental human rights, e.g. right to live, right to human dignity, to personal liberty, to fair hearings, etc.

WIDOWHOOD RITES

A rite is defined as a ceremonial act with a fixed pattern usually for religious purpose. Nigerians try to ritualize the different phases of awareness and experiences of natural reality and historical events, widowhood is therefore seen as a transition period in which different rites are highly observed. Umeagudosi (1987)

The widow is therefore subjected to certain rites, practices and obligations after her deceased husband in any setting whether traditional or modern.

The modern trend shows that there is the likelihood for a woman who becomes widowed while still in the reproductive age, to re-marry in order to maintain her marital status and comply with cultural values.

In situations where the family is no longer rooted in the Yoruba traditional setting, it is difficult, if not almost impossible for the widow to be inherited by a male relative of her late husband. An outsider automatically becomes the eligible suitor. A dilemma therefore sets in – will the outsider inherit the late husband's property and children? Or if the widow moves to the new husband's home, what becomes of the children and property left behind? Or will the widow, now a wife in somebody else's home supervises two homes? These are issues that still need to be thoroughly

examined before labelling some widow's present predicament as discriminatory. There is no doubt that Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" and everybody is "No longer at Ease" captures this situation succinctly.

WIDOWHOOD RITES AND PRACTICES IN SOUTH WESTERN NIGERIA

Irrespective of the type of marriage which widows contracted and the personal love of their deceased husbands, they are subjected to a variety of arduous and degrading rites whose intensity varies from one area to the other. Some of these practices are:

1. Grieving/Mourning Period

As soon as the man dies, the woman should be the very first person to cry to tell people or show people that something bad has happened. Grieving is an intense process and many women are overwhelmed by the complexity of the emotions which they feel (Hayes, 1994). Some widows would cry persistently and not eat. Some wail, some just look sober as they cast their minds back to good and bad old times. The complexity of the emotion in itself is often extremely disturbing for women as the turmoil takes its physical toll. Parkers (1964) found that widows consulted their doctors more often in the first six months after bereavement than they had done before. It should be noted here that the form of grieving is not under any compulsion as it is in other parts of Nigeria like the Eastern Nigeria or the Middle Belt Region. The widow is allowed to mourn or grieve in accordance with her personality make up. This can be excessive wailing, weeping aloud or rolling on the floor, abstaining from food or inability to eat. There are individual or personal reactions which are not socially imposed.

2. Confinement

The widow in South Western Nigeria also owes the deceased husband the obligation of being confined to the house for a certain period. This period includes the time before burial and the period after burial which usually ranges between 21 days to 1 year, depending on the type of job the widow is engaged in. Some are enjoined to wear dark clothing during this period of confinement. Some may neither change their clothing nor have a bath for a certain period, while some stay alone with the corpse for

about seven days. Since the traditional rites that Nigerian widows undergo usually differ from one ethnic group to another, it is not uncommon to find that in Nigeria, shaving is rampant among Ibos whereas the wearing of black clothing is noted among Yoruba widows. In South Western Nigeria, a good percentage of the widows feel that the rites are acceptable except for the few cases of suspicion and extreme rites like stripping naked.

However, modernization and Christian religious practices have helped in modifying some of these strange practices. Hence, nowadays, widows do not experience some of the harsh and violent rites as in the past. For instance, the period from when the man dies to the time he is buried does not usually pose much problem to the widow. The situation changes, when the man is buried as family meetings begin and decisions taken on how to distribute the man's property and children if they are still young.

3. Widow Inheritance

In the Yoruba society, there is the custom of widow inheritance. If a woman's husband dies, it is the duty of his younger brother to take his widow as wife and care for her children. Any new child born by this woman subsequently belongs to her brother-in-law who is now her husband. In this way, the female has no problem of being without a male support in her old age (Gohen, 1967 and Faniran-Odekunle, 1978).

In most cases, widows continue to work after having ended the mourning period. Mourning period may range between 21 days to 1 year as already mentioned earlier. The job the widow does determines the length of time she stays at home. If she works outside the home e.g. white-collar job, she may resume work as soon as her deceased husband is buried. However, there is no way the widow's financial or economic condition will not be jeopardized as her breadwinner and supporter is no more. In this respect, Saba (1997) observes that there are many instances where widows have been deprived of the husband resources and therefore, have to start life all over again. Such widows are left to struggle and cater for themselves and their children. In short, such poor women who are incapable of meeting their basic needs of food, clothing and shelter are often faced with the problem of maladjustment and life generally becomes unbearable for them.

Owasanoye (1997) summarizes the maltreatment and abuse widows go through and labels such practices as being violent. These include the followings:

- (i) Making a widow drink the water, with which her husband's corpse was washed,
- (ii) Shaving her hair, including pubic hair,
- (iii) Depriving her of her late husband's property,
- (iv) Inheriting a widow as a chattel by her late husband's brothers,
- (v) Confining her to one place for a specified period,
- (vi) Restricting her to one dress or one colour for a specified period, and
- (vii) Making her swear an oath that she had no hand in her husband's death.

The level of the widows education, her personality, her economic strength and the relationship she has with her own family determine to a great extent, the form of adjustment mechanism she develops. To take the situation on the whole, the experience is an unhealthy one and the society rather than allay whatever fear or confusion she may have, compounds the problem for her.

PROPERTY INHERITANCE

Potash (1986) explains that typical African women have no right of inheritance in their husband's estate. In patrilineal descent systems, property goes to man's sons or brothers while in matrilineal groups the property goes to sister's son or some other close kin.

In most cases now, colonial and post-colonial changes in inheritance systems have given widows a share of their husband's estate. Also most women gain access to productive resources only through some kinship relationship. Moreover, preparing of "will" for the wife (widow) by husband before his death makes it possible for her to have access to property irrespective of their husband's relatives' antagonism. In addition to that at this modern times women now have access to own landed property either by purchasing it or the husband purchased for them while he was alive.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The basic challenge for most widows is the very central one of giving shape and direction to their lives. Put very simply it is like being faced with the pieces of a complicated jig-saw puzzle and asked to fit them together in a meaningful and satisfying manner. In fact, Holmes and Rahe

(1967) show that, the social readjustment and stressful like event scale ranks death of marriage partner the highest values (i.e.100 percent). When one considers the physical and emotional trauma widows go through due to the discriminatory, inhuman and degrading practices, one could imagine and appreciate the extent of the psychological implications. The most pressing and dramatic manifestation of maladjustment is mental illness or psychopathology and this is usually perceived as a major health problem of our time.

In the process of adjustment, there is doubt that strong emotions are brought to bear on them and these include stress emotions such as anger, fear, anxiety, guilt and shame. The environmental demands of economic crises usually precipitates conflicts, threats and frustrating circumstances to the widows (Oshinowo and Udegbe, 1997). The demands of economic reforms are both physical and psychological in nature. The physical dimension includes inability to provide basic needs, while the psychological includes loss of confidence, lowered self-esteem, shame, guilt for those who cannot adjust favourably to the changes. For instance, these two dimensions may be illustrated thus- with respect to the physical demands, a woman may be forced to take up a job in another country in order to improve the economic status of members of the family or become a daily labourer who goes out in search of casual labour because her husband has been retrenched.

The psychological dimensions may take the form of a woman leaving home for the first time to another country and having to gamble with the future of her marriage and putting up with the guilt of the disruption of her family with the attendant consequence that inadequate care of the children might cause. The consequences of economic reforms in Nigeria have certain psychological implications. For example, human needs are arranged hierarchically according to Maslow's theory (1970) Oshinowo and Udegbe (1997) stress the point that, the problems enumerated above depict a sad situation for the Nigerian people, especially the poor women who are almost incapable of meeting basic physiological needs such as food, shelter and security. Once these basic needs cannot be met, it will be difficult if not impossible for the individuals to get along to other higher needs, thus, further compounding the problems of such women.

One severe implication is that according to Rees and Lutkins (1967) widows are ten times likely to die themselves in the year immediately following bereavement. Parkes, Benjamin and Ritzgarald (1969) explain

that death could come about in three ways through self-neglect, through suicide of one form or another or as a result of cardiac illness brought about by severe stress. The fact that some widows die suggests that they must have gone through some uncontrollable feeling of guilt such as depression. Research has shown that many widows especially older ones, have lower life satisfaction and morals than non-widowed persons (Arbuckle and Brianderies, 1995 and Saba, 1997). This finding suggests that even those who do not die do not really enjoy life any longer; they see the worthlessness of life, which is to be compounded by the traditional rites. They experience the vanity of life as the preacher asserts in the book of Ecclesiastes that "vanity upon vanity, all is vanity" for those who could not operate at the same economic level as when the husband was alive.

They become tensed up and stressful as they try to make ends meet with the meager resources accruing to them. This drop in economic well-being is usually very stressful for women because traditionally the men are supposed to be the breadwinner and provider. When the woman suddenly finds herself occupying this role, she is likely to become tense. This has effect on her and her relationship with her children. The situation is worse when the woman has been deprived access to the late husband's savings and resources.

No one would pretend that any of these crisis in a widow's life is easy to get through like loneliness, child control or children's discipline; financial problems, and decision taking just to mention a few. Each is in its own way harrowing and brings its own emotional turmoil. Some widows find themselves flying off the handle or weeping inconsolably over little things that never used to matter. Some may find their moods swinging wildly between skittish gaiety and deepest gloom. Yet others may retain their outward calm, and suffer various signs of physical distress like insomnia and headaches. Some eat excessively or would not eat at all. There will be grief and bitterness, fear and regret, but above all, there is usually an overwhelming sense of loneliness as the widow is caught up in her own turmoil of emotions. The widow is faced with the difficult task of explaining to her underage, anxious children why their daddy is not going to be with them anymore. She is faced with the task of combining gentleness with honesty, simplicity with truth and at the same time, trying to shield them from harsh realities.

In many traditional African societies, including Nigeria, widowhood rites depend on the kinship ties and differ from one culture to another. In the contemporary Nigerian societies, including South Western Nigeria the modernization and social change have directly or indirectly affected the treatment given to the widows and their children. Among the Yoruba for example, the male head of the deceased man's family can be given custody of the children while the mother caters for them on daily basis. The situation, according to Saba (1997) removes economic burden from the women and does not give the women the freedom to leave the family and chose who to remarry. However, due to modernization, the nuclear family system, education and the economic conditions of Nigeria have made this situation non-feasible. The widows may therefore, be merely subjected to traditional rites and thereafter left to cater for their children.

In the Nigerian societies, including South-Western Nigeria, virtually every culture has widowhood customs and traditions, which are discriminatory in nature. Custom and tradition that derive from culture are often used as justification for harmful and oppressive widowhood practices. Custom refers to any habit that is socially learned, performed and transmitted such that the associated practices become gradually accepted as appropriate modes of behaviour. Whilst tradition is that behaviour patterns associated with old beliefs of pre-colonial origin. They are sustained by their long established usage, although they are not static, rather they respond to socio-economic changes (Amadiume, 1995 and Ahonsi, 1997).

Practices therefore, in the context of this paper are those habits and behaviour patterns that are directed towards women that have lost their husbands. It is an ideology used to rationalize practice that may not match with prevailing socio-economic realities.

A lot of the customary practices that are meted towards widows are harmful, not because they are relics from the past, but because they no longer serve the socio-economic purposes that they did when the country was largely, rural, agricultural, non-monetised and extended family-based society. For instance, widow inheritance and polygamy may have been inevitable to increase agricultural output. These conditions no longer exist in many parts of the country where levirate is still being practiced. Widowhood rites subjected women to dimension of inequalities, namely, discrimination, exploitation, that is, the actual subjecting of women of

discriminating practices to obtain disproportionate gain and oppression, the use of coercion and tyranny to forcibly constraint women.

In South Western Nigeria, the execution of widowhood rites is largely shaped by education. The economic well-being of the widow in question, religion particularly the unrestricted influence of Christian religion (i.e. Pentecostals) are less severe than when compared to the experience of women in other parts of the country. On this ground, Adedokun (1998) observes in her study that the incidence of widowhood is less prevalent among women with, at least, a reasonable level of education than those with little or no education. Her study further showed that, a suitable partner for remarriage may be easier for women with little or no education than for the educated ones who may again, be less willing to settle for polygamy. This implies that the educational influence has discouraged remarriage among the educated women after the death of their husbands. This is so probably because of their high socio-economic status in terms of the achieved status or role in the society.

Adedokun (1998) further stressed that some age-long cultural values related to marriage such as levirate, stability and exercise of paternal authority have declined in importance as a result of continued urbanization and influence of formal education. In their own contribution Horn and Meer (1987) and in line with the finding of Adedokun (1998) who studied the Yoruba of Southern Western Nigeria, asserted that social status affects remarriage rates in opposite ways for men and women. The more education a woman has and the higher her income, the less likely she is to remarry, while the reverse is true for men. In some ways, it is more difficult for men to adjust to, for they lose not only their wife but often a system of domestic support as well, one that they have always taken for granted.

There is no doubt that the widows are faced with many predicaments when compared to men of the same categories. A good percentage of women are poorly educated. They concentrate on low-earning occupations and their views are not represented at decision-making levels. As a result, they do not possess access to or control resources like finance and education that would make them less vulnerable to maltreatment and impoverishment should their husbands die. This socio-economic condition makes widowhood an unpleasant experience for most women as is accomplished by depressed economic well-being of the women (Dodge, 1995 and Kuo, 1996).

Widowhood affects the children of the widow in quite a number of ways. The decline in family income implies that they have less of what they used to have. As a consequence, the young children of the widow so affected are forced to drop out of school, to work or become destitute. In instances where the dead man's relations allocate some of his resources to the upkeep of the children, the tendency has been to discriminate against his female children, especially as regards schooling (Osimiri, 1996).

There is lack of masculine influence, which can have adverse effect on children's discipline and morality. The males may develop weaker morality and superego because of the absence of male role model, while the girls may be shy and uncertain about the activities around men. The child's social environment is less enriched; this could lead to lower self-esteem, economic insecurity and feelings of inadequacy.

The spatial confinement of widows and restriction of their social interaction is a denial of their right to free movement, and for a confined widow the care of the children and their social and economic network invariably suffer reverses.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper shows the psycho-social characteristics influencing the discriminatory widowhood rites and practices in South-Western Nigeria. It therefore, explains the widowhood rites and practices looking at them from psychological and sociological perspectives. The paper further, examines the concept of widowhood and widow's rites as well as discriminatory practices against widowhood rights. Hence, the following recommendations are being made in order to alleviate the psychological and sociological effects of widowhood on widows and their children:

- (i) There should be public enlighten programmes for eradication of all harmful widowhood practices. To achieve this, the agents of change should be involved such as policy makers, market women and traditional rulers. In this regard public awareness campaigns should reach the people through markets, town unions, schools, women organizations and the mass media. Several seminars and workshops are to be organized as means of disseminating information.
- (ii) Emphasis should be on education of women in order to ensure socio-economic empowerment. In this respect;, women will be less

dependent on their husbands and consequently less vulnerable to impoverishment in the event of their husbands' demise.

- (iii) Philanthropists, non-governmental organizations and policy makers should be encouraged to give assistance or supports to the welfare of the widows and their children after the deaths of their husbands. For instance government should endeavour to award scholarships to the children of widows. Also, priorities should be given to widows in the provision of job opportunities by government.
- (iv) Various organizations should be encouraged to pay financial benefits of the deceased to the widows for the support of their children.
- (v) There should not be any form of gender inequality and discrimination, one of which is widow maltreatment thus, the creation of gender awareness and change in societal attitude to gender disparity should be encouraged.

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