



Widowhood Practices among Igbos of South Eastern Nigeria as a Betrayal of the Fundamental Human Rights of Women

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ABSTRACT

This study is a survey research which investigated the existing state of widowhood practices in five Igbo states of south eastern Nigeria namely: Enugu, Anambra, Abia, Ebonyi, and Imo states which violate the fundamental human rights of women through culturally prescribed seclusions. Two hundred and fifty (250) widows were randomly used for the study. The findings are that widowhood practice in the present age is existent in Igboland. The embrace of religion, education and modernisation did not put a stop to this social practice. Igbo women are not comfortable with this social seclusion practice and have not put up stiff opposition in terms of protests and court litigations. In addition, the state is incapable of abrogating widowhood practices since it is culturally established, furthermore, it cannot be abrogated in Igboland, however the penalties on women are reduced. Also, the significance of the study and the recommendations are addressed.

INTRODUCTION

Death in Igboland of Nigeria is perceived as inevitable end like in all cultural areas of Nigeria. Specifically the Igbos of Nigeria attributes death to man made causes, spirits, witches and witchcrafts machinations. As a result of this ingrained belief, most deaths in the traditional Igbo societies of Anambra, Enugu, Abia, Ebonyi and Imo states of Nigeria are investigated through oracle consultation and the subjection of culprits to take traditional oaths, some of which are drinking the water with which the dead persons body are cleansed, victims may be locked up in a room with the dead for hours or they are made to chew kolanut placed on the departed bodies.

The traditional culture of reverencing the death is worse on the side of women in Igboland. If an Igboman dies, the wife is subjected to some

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traditional rituals of shaving off the hair, eating food on a broken plate, exempted from taking bath for some weeks, confined in a room for about four weeks running, she is not expected to eat food and materials used for burial rites of the husband. In some Igbo cultural areas, the widow is subjected to oath to prove her innocence from eliminating the husband. In some extreme cases where the widow has no male child, she is relieved of her husband's properties, which are inherited by the kinsmen. According to Osita Njoku and Uwaoma(2001) widowhood practices in Igboland seem to have harsher penalties in the fifties and sixties than the present age of modernization. The truism is that the widowhood practices although in varying degree are still persistent in Igboland of Nigeria, despite the embrace of education, religious advancement and social emancipation. Against the forgoing discussion, Uchendu (1995) expresses that traditions, norms, and values relegated the Igbo women before male folk.

Furthermore, Okpete (1995) reports that the Igbo women are bound to loose her fundamental right and privileges by engagement in marriage. This underscores why widows are subjected to tortures, accusations and cultures seclusions which subjugate their rights. Worse still, the existent campaign by churches, social groups and concerned Nigerians to exterminate the widowhood age long cultural practices in Nigeria is yet to yield appropriate impact and the existent national laws do not seem to protect widows from traditional dehumanization or vitiation of their fundamental rights as bonafide citizens of Nigeria. In affirmation, Osuoha, Idokoja and Nwosu (2006) observed that the extent of protection of human rights by Nigerian government is low. It is imperative that the traditional customs of the Igbo people may conflict with observance of fundamental human rights, social justice and freedom from social discrimination, as upheld by the Nigeria's constitution of 1999. Again, one strong point is that the widowhood practices is selective practice amongst the Igbos marriage system, as other non Igbos are not compelled, except by marriage.

It is common knowledge that in developing nations of Africa that women status had been held down by cultural norms, prejudice and social discrimination. It is also common knowledge that Igbo women in this millennium are giving active and responsible fight to project their image and status from traditional marginalisation, inspite of potential traditional cultural bottlenecks. The social discrimination culturally inflicted in the Igbo women, can be deciphered from Onyenuchie (1995:172) who commented "In Africa, women suffer untold discrimination and marginalization despite their outstanding contributions to their outstanding contributions to their communities" Igbo women have played prominent role in the economic and social transformation of their communities by engagement in trade, farming, cultural festivals and development geared projects.

Widowhood practices in this paper entail the traditional agonising conditions widows are subjected to as their husbands die. It is restricted to social subjugation, Igbo women who lost their husbands undergo before burial. Osita, Njoku and Uwaoma(2001), Kolo(2002) and Lannap(2005)

expressed that widowhood is a period of grief and pain, marginalisation of women, accompanied by emotional deprivation, forceful seizure of property and cultural seclusion. Furthermore, Balogun(1989) and Okoye(1996) reported in Odo, Onyishi and Abah(2007) that widowhood practice places the widow in world of isolation, marginalization by relatives of her late husband, including seizure of property and possibly estranging the widow from means of livelihood.

One of the reasons for which Widowhood practices has persisted in Igboland is vivid in Nnachi(2007) observation, that human beings social behaviour are culturally and environmentally influenced. He further cited Bandura(1977) who opined that social behaviour in a community may be reinforced through imitation and modelling. Cultural behaviour attitudes, values and skills are generationally transferred in Igboland of Nigeria.

Ogbu(2001) comments that human rights violation frequently occur amongst the youths in Nigeria, specifically the males in anti social acts as intimidation, rape, armed robbery and we add cultism. In addition, some traditional cultural practices in Igboland as the widowhood practices violate grossly the fundamental human rights of women, yet it is not perceived substantial as a social problem, given that masses of the society at the base have not vociferously condemned this cultural age long act.

Omoruyi(1999) in a study hindering women participation in national development amongst women in four communities in Oredo local Government Area of Edo state of Nigeria, found that custom amongst others was an inhibitive factor. Regrettably, Salami and Udoh(1999) expressed that strenuous efforts in modern Nigerian society to narrow the social gap between women and male folk is yet to be appreciable manifest. The implication is that the emancipation of Igbo women from social bondage in terms of widowhood practices, will pose reasonable difficulty since cultural laden issues are not easily reversed by emergent social change factors and modernization. Given the hard conditions under which the Igbo women had been culturally enveloped and for cohesive social development in Nigeria, Ukwungwu(2007) calls for gender equity, in access to education, social roles and responsibilities. In essence societal gender bias in role performance should be abrogated and restructured.

Statement of the Problem

Widowhood practices in Igboland of Nigeria are antithetical to social justice and freedom. The subjugation of women to torture, seclusion and all kinds of dehumanising treatment, amount to violation of fundamental human rights of women. Since 1960 women have not joined force to resist this traditional imposition by seeking justice through the courts, this study tends to investigate the following: To what extent are widowhood practices existent in Igboland? Are there campaigns for the abrogation of widowhood practices? Are Igbo women comfortable with the widowhood practices? These questions amongst others constitute the problem of the study.

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Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to assess the extent widowhood practices violate the fundamental human rights of Igbo women of Nigeria, specifically, the study examined

1. The prevalence of widowhood practices in Igboland.
2. The extent to which women pressure against widowhood practices.
3. The place of the state in protecting the fundamental human right of women.
4. If there are possibilities for abrogating or moderating the abuse women undergo.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised and answered in this study.

1. To what extent are widowhood practices existent in Igboland of Nigeria?
2. To what extent has the embrace of religion, education and modernisation reduced the subjugation of Igbo women to widowhood practices?
3. Are women comfortable with widowhood practices in Igboland?
4. Are there substantial campaign by Igbo women against the elimination of widowhood practices?
5. To what extent does the state intervene against widowhood practices in Igboland?
6. Are there possibilities of alleviating the traditionally imposed tortures women undergo in Igboland?

METHODOLOGY

The descriptive survey research design was adopted for this study which is directed at assessing the prevalence of widowhood practices in Igboland of Nigeria and the extent it has violated the fundamental rights of women.

Area of Study

The study was conducted in five states of Nigeria, namely: Enugu, Anambra, Ebonyi, Abia and Imo.

Population of the Study

The population of the study consists widows in Enugu, Anambra, Ebonyi, Abia and Imo states of Nigeria. The widows were mainly Igbo women who live in rural communities, where traditional practices manifested without adulteration.

Sample and Sampling Technique

Since there are no authentic records of the population of widows in the five Igbo states of Nigeria used for the study, 250 widows in equal proportion were randomly selected from the five states of Igboland involved in the study. This was done to give fair chance to the widows who constitute a social unit.

Instrument for Data Collection

The researchers developed a structured interview research instrument titled "Igbo women and widowhood practices" (IWWP), which the investigators used to elicit information from widows. Structured interview was used because of the respondents and essentially to acquire immediate, quality and accurate information. The researchers were assisted by three research assistants, who personally interviewed the respondents. This method facilitated the generation of data and the exercise lasted for six weeks. A 16 item structured interview schedule was formulated to answer the six research questions posed to guide the study.

Validation of Instrument

The face and content validity of the instrument used for the study was determined by giving the draft to expert to experts in the field of social studies education and measurement and evaluation. Based on their comments and suggestions, some items were restructured before the instrument was satisfied adequate for the study.

Reliability of the Instrument

The reliability of the instrument was determined through the use of test retest method. The structured interview designed for the study was administered on 50 widows in Asaba, Useluku and Umunede towns of Delta state, who are western Igbos and share similar cultures with the Igbos in the South Eastern states of Nigeria geo-political zone used in the study. After the interval of two weeks the same structured interview was administered on the same set of respondent, Analysis of data obtained showed that the instrument had a reliability level of 0.70, which was reliable for the study.

Administration of Instrument

The researchers interviewed the widows with three field assistants, who generated information from Enugu, Ebonyi, and Anambra states, while the researchers investigation was in Abia and Imo states of Nigeria. The field assistants were trained and personal administration of instrument ensured a hundred percent generation of data.

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Method of Data Analysis

The data collected were interpreted through the use of frequencies and percentages. The data sequentially answered the research questions designed for the study. Strongly agree and agree responses were qualified as positive, while disagree and strongly disagree is negative. Decision was that any result below 40% was not accepted as significant.

RESULTS

Research question one: To what extent are widowhood practices existent in Igboland of Nigeria?

Table 1: Showing the prevalence of widowhood practices in Igboland (Number = 250)

Item description	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Widowhood practices is common to all Igbo societies	140 (56%)	100 (40%)	7 (2.8%)	(1.2%)	250
Widowhood is a condition for all Igbo women who lost their husband	121 (48.4%)	79 (12%)	30 (12%)	20 (8%)	250
Widowhood practices is ingrained in the traditional customs of the Igboman	200 (80%)	50 (20%)	- (0%)	- (0%)	250

96% of respondents affirmed that widowhood practices is common to all Igbo societies, while only insignificant 4% disagreed. In addition, 80% of the respondents confirmed that widowhood is a condition for all Igbo women who lost their husbands, 20% disagreed. 100% of the respondents accepted that widowhood practices are ingrained in the traditional customs of the Igbo people of Nigeria. Based on generated data, widowhood practices is a prevalent social act in Igboland of Nigeria, which is culturally rooted.

Research question Two: To what extent has the embrace of religion, education and modernisation reduced the subjection of Igbo women to widowhood practices?

Table 2: Showing the impact of religion, education and modernisation on the state of widowhood practices.

Item description	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
The embrace of education, religion and modernisation has reduced the torture of women.	32 (12.8%)	18 (10.8%)	27 (10.8%)	173 (69.2)	250
Widowhood practices does not apply in the modern Igbo society	13 (5.2%)	12 (4.8%)	75 (30%)	150 (60%)	250

80% of the respondents based on derived data disagreed that the embrace of education, religion and modernisation did not reduce the torture of women, 20% accepted. Insignificant 10% of the widows involved in the study accepted that widowhood practices do not apply in modern Igbo society, while 90% disagreed. Conclusion from studys, is that modernisation has not done much to alleviate the subjugation of the rights of women and that the widowhood practices is still potent in the modern Igbo society.

Research question Three: Are women comfortable with widowhood practices in Igboland?

Table 3: Showing the response of women to widowhood practices.

Item description	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Igbo women tend to be comfortable with widowhood torture and seclusion	—	—	30 (12%)	220 (88%)	250
Refusal to abide by the conditions of widowhood practices makes a woman a suspect of the husband's death	178 (71.2%)	42 (16.8%)	22 (8.8%)	8 (3.2%)	250
Widows accept their marginalised social conditions without protests	150 (66%)	60 (24%)	30 (12%)	10 (4%)	250

On whether Igbo women are comfortable with widowhood practices, there was zero negative response as 100% disagreed. 88% of the respondents agree that refusal to be subjected to widowhood practices, raises suspicion as if the woman has a hand in the husband's death. 84% agreed that women accept their marginalised social conditions without visible protests, while 20% disallowed this view. This is informed by the fact women opposition to the subjugation of their human rights is yet to attract support at the grassroots. Decision from findings of the study is that women are uncomfortable with widowhood practices, but are compelled and have not raised significant protest to this dehumanising social action.

Research question Four: Are there substantial campaign by Igbo women against the elimination of widowhood practices?

Table 4: Showing the status of campaign against widowhood practices.

Item description	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Igbo women have given a unique condemnation of widowhood practices	27 (10.8%)	23 (9.2%)	40 (16%)	160 (64%)	250
Some enlightened women are mounting pressure against widowhood practices in Igboland	90 (36%)	100 (40%)	36 (14.4)	24 (9.6%)	250
The campaign by women and social organisations against widowhood practices will lead to its abrogation in Igboland	13 (5.2%)	13 (5.2%)	60 (24%)	164 (65.6)	250

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Only 20% of widows agreed that Igbo women have given substantial condemnation to widowhood practices, while 80% of the respondents are in disagreement. Furthermore, 76% confirmed that enlightened Igbo women are mounting pressure against widowhood practices in Igboland, while 24% disagreed. The implication is that there is a current move by the enlightened women to voice against widowhood practices in the media and academic conferences, this protest is yet to get down to the grassroots and the traditional society for meaningful impact and reaction. 10.4% of the respondents agreed that campaign by women and social organisations will stamp out widowhood practices in Igboland, while 89.6% disagreed. This shows the potency of culture on traditional social life. It is therefore established from available data that Igbo women have substantially condemned widowhood practices, campaign against widowhood practices is yet to yield appreciable impact and that the Igboland is a mere impossibility.

Research question five: To what extent does the state intervene against widowhood practices in Igboland?

Table 5: Showing the level of state intervention in response to widowhood practices.

Item description	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
The government of Nigeria has taken a bold step in the abrogation of widowhood practices	—	—	100 (40%)	150 (60%)	250
Women have gone to courts to seek justice against widowhood practices	13 (5.2%)	17 (6.8%)	40 (16%)	180 (72%)	250
The Nigerian government is aware of widowhood practices and can do nothing to stop the operation since it is cultural	130 (52%)	70 (28%)	26 (10.4%)	24 (9.6%)	250

Generated information data indicate that government in Nigeria has not taken a bold step in the abrogation of widowhood practices. This is supported by 100% respondents approval, only 12% of the respondents accepted that women have gone to courts to seek redress against widowhood practices, while 88% of the majority are disagreed. 80% of the respondents supported government awareness of widowhood practices and cannot stop its operation. This is more so, when widows have not gone to courts or organise protests against the abuse of their fundamental human rights.

Research question six: Are there possibilities of alleviating the traditionally imposed tortures women undergo in Igboland?

Table 6: Showing if widowhood practices penalties alleviated.

Item description	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Widowhood practices will be abrogated in Igboland	23 (9.2%)	37 (14.8%)	63 (25.2%)	127 (50.8%)	250
The gravity of torture and seclusion of women tend to be reduced	70 (28%)	100 (40%)	50 (20%)	30 (12%)	250

24% of the sampled respondents agreed that widowhood practices will be abrogated in Igboland, while 76% disconfirmed this, 68% of the respondents expressed that the torture women undergo has been reduced over the years, 32% disagreed.

DISCUSSION

This study established that widowhood practices are a common social phenomenon which is culturally linked in Igboland of Nigeria. This is in consonance with the postulation of Okpete (1995) and Onyenuchie(1995) who asserted that culturally women are bound to loose their fundamental rights and suffer social discrimination as a result of marriage. Based on generated data, the wide embrace of religion, education and modernisation by the Igbo society did not put a stop to tortures women undergo through widowhood practices as this cultural act is still in existence in the Igbo society. This confirms the works of Njoku and Uwaoma(2001), Kolo(2007) and Lannap(2005) who reported that widowhood practices subjugates the fundamental rights of women and is associated with social and economic deprivation. This is further supported by Salami and Udoh(1999) who stated that the gap between the men and women is yet to be closed.

Research findings revealed that women are not comfortable with recorded stiff opposition as the women riot of 1929 which was used to oppose the imposition of taxation on women as a result of the indirect rule system of administration in Igboland. It was for this reason that Onoruiyi(1999) in a study found that cultural factors inhibit the potentials of women to protect their rights and dignity. The study showed that women have not mounted vigorous campaign against widowhood practices, even though some enlightened women have raised consciousness on the negative effects of this practice. It was upheld that the state can do nothing to abrogate widowhood practices since it is cultural and there has not been substantial litigation against this practice. This confirms why Osuoha, Idokoja and Nwosu(2006) established that Nigeria's government protection of fundamental rights of citizens is significantly low.

The study confirmed that widowhood practices cannot be abrogated in Igboland, however, the penalties meted on women is presently reduced. This is agreement with Osita,Njoku and Uwaoma(2001) who established that in the fifties and sixties widowhood practices was more severe in terms of

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social discrimination and punishment against widows than what is existing presently.

Significance of the study

This study will provide ample empirical evidence about the prevalence of widowhood practices in Igboland. It will go further to enrich literature about the potency of ingrained cultural practices in the social life of the Igbo man. Researchers in social sciences, social studies and education would find this study an invaluable material for further researches. The potency of the Nigerian Judiciary in protecting the fundamental human rights of women would be laid bare. This study might stimulate global consciousness and action against the moderation of widowhood practices in Igboland. The persistence of cultural norms in the event of sporadic social change, education and modernisation in Igboland would unearth. It may stimulate further research study into African cultures. The findings of this study may x-ray the extent the fundamental rights of Igbo women are culturally abused in the face of a democratic nation with viable constitution.

CONCLUSION

Widowhood practices are a violation of the fundamental rights of women in Igboland of Nigeria. In a democratic setting, human rights are protected by governments through the constitution of the land. Furthermore, the essence of protection of fundamental human rights is to ensure social freedom, equality, justice and to reduce discrimination against persons in a socio-political environment. However, in the case of widowhood practices in Igboland of Nigeria, it is culturally established and the lesson to be drawn from this study is that socio-cultural aspects of African cultures are not easily influenced by social change and public policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Widowhood practices in the modern age are a violation of the fundamental rights of Igbo women. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Widowhood practices alleviation in Igboland will need to be tabled for the attention of traditional Igbo people interactive forum at the grassroots.
2. Social studies education in schools, should be taught to focus the negative sides of our traditional customs which violate human right of women.
3. The Igbo women should utilise the annual August women conference to voice their disenchantment to the elders of their communities about the

modernisation of the indecent dehumanising practices ingrained in widowhood practices.

4. Igbo women should embrace education so as to form a formidable force in the campaign against widowhood practices.

5. The resistance against widowhood practices in Igboland, since is deeply rooted in the traditional norms of the people should not be approached with violent opposition, but with persuasion, in order to protect women from traditional sanctions of the society.

6. The campaign by enlightened women against widowhood practices should be extended to elders of the Igbo communities at grassroots.

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