

A REVIEW OF THE PSYCHOSOCIAL EFFECTS OF WIDOWHOOD AMONG OLDER WOMEN IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Widowhood is a momentous life event that could affect the psychological, social, and financial well-being of widows. This study investigated widowhood and its effects on older women in Nigeria. It explored widowhood from a global perspective and was narrowed down to the perspective of widowhood in Nigeria and reviewed statistics which revealed that a staggering number of elderly women are widows, yet, so little has been done in terms of social relief, financial, or psychological aid all over the world. For this reason, this research was done to better understand widowhood and its all-round effects. With the aid of existing literature, this study examined how widowhood affects psychological well-being, financial stability, and even the social status of widows. It also pointed out common cultural practices done to widows that are detrimental to their well-being. Guided mainly by Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, which highlights the developmental stages an individual must attain psychosocially, this study pointed out how widowhood could 'drown the work done in previous stages of development and make it difficult for widows to go through the rest of their lives with fulfilment. The study also reviewed the conformity theory as a factor influencing widows' blind adherence to the detrimental cultural practices meted out to them. This paper contributes to the understanding of the complexities and effects of widowhood and suggests interventions to reduce its impact.

Keywords: Widowhood, Psychological Well-Being, Social Status, Economic Instability, Cultural Practices.

Introduction

Widowhood is a global experience for women, with millions of women around the world finding themselves widowed, and facing the ensuing social, economic and psychological difficulties. Widowhood looks very different around the world due to differences in age, gender roles, and legal systems. Such contextual understanding of widowhood is important because it can inform interventions that support widows while providing them with a safe space to express their suffering and discuss strategies for coping and empowerment.

Widowhood is not just a deeply personal loss; it is also a challenge that ripples through families and communities. When someone loses their spouse, the effects often extend far beyond the individual, touching loved ones and even the broader society. Many widows struggle with finances, feelings of loneliness and emotional pain highlighting the need for greater support and understanding on both personal and societal levels.

The study tries to give a multidimensional view of widowhood in its global, regional and local aspects. It also examined the cultural, legal and economic parameters that shape the experiences of widows especially older ones in Africa and Nigeria where traditional practices and legal barriers usually exacerbate their plights.

Background of the study

The issue of widowhood is a global one as it affects women worldwide regardless of age, race, or profession. According to the United Nations, there are an estimated 258 million widows globally. (UN, 2024). As at 2024, India holds the position for the country with the highest number of widows, with an estimate of 46 million widows and the global inevitability of widowhood makes it hard to ignore its implications. Widows around the world face emotional instability, financial insecurity, isolation, stereotypes, and even some harmful cultural and traditional practices. While battling with their grief due to the loss of their significant other and other consequential psychological issues, many widows face detrimental practices or traditions, which they often find themselves unable to speak again.

Fortunately, developed countries have overcome dehumanizing traditions and put certain structures in place to aid the women in their transition to widowhood.

- The United States, offers social security survival benefits paid monthly to the widows based on the work history of their deceased spouses.
- The United Kingdom, under the provision of bereavement support payments, gives widows access to bereavement allowance to help ease the financial burden.

- Australia offers support groups for widows, with free or subsidized therapy sessions.
- Japan promotes social integration of widows through part-time jobs by the Silver Human Resource Centers, where these jobs are specifically for older people to improve their health conditions.
- And in Canada, certain groups such as the Soaring Spirit provide resources and tools for widows to rebuild their lives.



Figure 1: American widow receiving Social Security support.

These initiatives do not entirely take out the sting of grief, loneliness, and other emotions that come with widowhood, but rather they help to cushion the blow.

In developing nations, however, widows are still subjected to unfair traditions, biased inheritance laws, and stereotypes. In India, some conservative Hindus throw widowed women out of their houses with the belief that they should not have a reason to live so as they could not retain the souls of their husbands. Due to their advanced ages, most of these women cannot find well-paying jobs, so they live together in **vidwa ashrams**; clusters of widows mostly located in a pilgrimage city, Vrindavan. They are dressed in white garments without accessories or makeup, and they stay together knowing they cannot return to their families. These widows are subjected to a life of isolation and mourning, with faith being their only comfort.



Figure 2: Indian widows in vidwa ashram.

In Malawi, many widows struggle with land-grabbing and unfair inheritance laws, where the relatives of their late husbands disinherit them from their property and sell or destroy their properties.

In Croatia, widows are traditionally expected to tie a black scarf under their chin for the rest of their lives to symbolize perpetual mourning.

Some initiatives like Global Funds for Widows have been founded to help widows in these situations. Older widows have little or no knowledge about such initiatives that could help them. And even if they do, the mindset that their relatives have the final say has been so ingrained into them that they are too afraid to seek help. These issues leave aged widows in a state of poverty, at risk for health complications and mental or emotional breakdown. The practices of isolation and restriction lead to not only mental health issues, but also physical issues like cardiovascular diseases, cognitive decline, and many other issues. The alarming number of widows subjected to these harsh experiences all over the world poses a threat to even the economy, as widowhood in areas where there are cultural practices that put the widow in financial jeopardy could exacerbate poverty in nations, place strains on government health care facilities, promote violation of human rights, and increase the dependency of the citizens on the government of such nations. All of these factors promote economic and social crises for countries all over the world.

Widowhood in Africa

This gives the phenomenon of widowhood its complexity and multifaceted features driven by an array of cultural, social and economic forces. Experiences associated with widowhood vary from one region to the other because there exist differences in cultures, legal systems and socioeconomic conditions.

Widowhood prevalence and demographics: One in ten African women aged 15 and older is widowed. In some African countries, as many as 3 of 10 women in the reproductive age of 15-49 years are widows including those who remarry. More than 5 widowed women are under age 49 years. The prevalence of widowhood rises with advancing age thus by age 80 years, many women will live in widowhood.

Cultural and social issues: The status of widows in Africa is often defined by deep-seated prejudices embedded in cultural traditions, societal norms and legal systems. Widows are usually denied their rights, access to resources and opportunities which increases their vulnerability and makes it very hard for them to take care of themselves and their families.

In Africa, widows face severe economic disadvantages and have poorer nutritional status compared to women in other marital statuses. For example, a study done in Mali showed that widows are more likely to head the poorest households and this disadvantage does not seem to disappear even after remarriage which has negative implications for the health and educational status of their children.

Regional variations: The experience and prevalence of widowhood vary throughout the African continent. For instance, there are comparatively low rates of early widowhood in Ghana which can be explained in part by the possible practice of forced widow remarriage in some regions. On the other hand, South Africa has high rates of early life widowhood which is possibly driven by factors like HIV/AIDS and violence.

Effects on economic stability and well-being: In Africa, widowhood hits hard on their economic stability and health outcomes as most of the time, these women have limited access to major productive resources such as land and are subject to discriminatory inheritance practices which further deteriorate their economic situation. The many challenges that the widows face in the African region call for a holistic approach where policy changes ensure that rights are protected and access to resources is increased. Such changes include challenging various harmful traditional practices and establishment of legal systems that will promote inheritance rights and economic empowerment for the widows. Changing cultural attitudes towards the widows can also be done through public campaigns that encourage respect and empathy towards them. The impact of patriarchy of the sociocultural systems in Africa often push women into subordinate positions thus stripping them of their self-determination and ability to make decisions. Widows in particular face a structural system that does not seem to fully recognize them as independent individuals.

This lack of recognition is further deteriorated by the lack of data on widows which poses challenges to the formulation of relevant interventions.

Widowhood in Nigeria

In Nigeria, marriage is a very significant part of the customs and tradition. It is one thing that most Nigerian girls are taught to aspire to. And any delay in marriage beyond the early twenties, the societal and family pressure begins. When a woman eventually gets married, there is a huge celebration for the family of the couple. And the marriage is often seen as the union of not just two individuals, but two families and even communities at large. And traditionally, marriage lasts till death parts the couple.

When a marriage ends in the death of the man, the grief and anger is even more intense and palpable than the joyful experience during the celebration of the marriage. And in most cases, all of these negative emotions are burdened on the widow. Nigeria, which is also a still-developing country, has traditions that do not benefit the widow. In fact, many Nigerian cultural practices towards widows are detrimental to their psychological and physical well-being. And according to the International Woman's Society, 15 million Nigerian women are widows living in abject poverty.

Just like in every other part of the world, widowhood comes with complex psychological, social and even physical challenges. But due to Nigeria's cultural diversity and uniqueness, widowhood in Nigeria comes with its own unique experiences, which may not necessarily be positive.

In Igbo land, South Eastern Nigeria, it is believed that the dignity of a woman is her husband, and once her husband dies, the dignity of the woman is shattered. When the woman becomes widowed, her hair is shaved by her fellow widows to signify that her husband, who was her glory and dignity, has departed from her. Then for a period of minimum of three months to a year, the widow is required to wear only the colour white, to commemorate her mourning period. This sets her apart from the rest of the community, and she is easily identified as a woman in mourning.



Figure 3: Igbo women cutting a widow's hair.

Sadly, the widow may face disinheritance of her husband's property, because it is believed that since she is not related to her husband by blood, she is not to inherit his property. The widow's only saving grace will be if she birthed male children that can inherit their father's property, as daughters also are not allowed to inherit their father's property. But still, in some adamant families, even when the widow has male children, they may have their own traditions that prevent the children from inheriting their father's property. These practices leave the widow at risk for psychological, physical, and financial problems.

Consequently, there are issues of severe loneliness, as their spouse, who was their major source of companionship, has died and their children have most likely moved out. Similarly, in regards to finances, the widow who has been stripped of her husband's properties will be left to start with nothing. And due to her age, it will not be easy to get suitable employment, leaving her financially dependent on her children or relatives.

The Igbo land is not alone when it comes to traditions towards widows. In the Isoko tribe of Delta State, South-South region of Nigeria, widows are also not allowed to inherit their husband's property, but they are in fact inherited by the designated family member as their own wife. If the widow does not want to be inherited by any of her husband's relatives, she returns the bride price and goes back to her father's house. If she doesn't choose any of the above options, she can decide to choose one of her sons to stand as her husband, and if she has no son, she picks an underage boy in the family. This is because in the Isoko land, when a woman gets married, she doesn't marry just a man but his family. Usually, because she cannot inherit her husband's property, she is often at the mercy of her children and other relatives, and these relatives ordinarily do not make it easy for the widow.

In many cultures across Nigeria, widows are made to go through extreme lengths such as drinking the water used to wash her husband's body, just to prove their innocence in the death of their husbands and some are forced to lavish their husband's property on a stupendous burial, leaving them alone and poor afterwards. They may face rejection or social isolation, as some cultures deem widows to be 'unclean people' for a period of time. These unkind cultural practices toward widows add to their burden of grief and gives them extra stress. In aged widows, such traditions put them at higher risk of financial ruin, physical problems, stigmatization, and disrespect from others.

It is obvious that in Nigeria, treatment of widows is deeply intertwined with cultural traditions, and legal practices are yet to catch up on the violation of fundamental human rights, and the deprivation of widows' respect and dignity continues fearlessly. If lawmakers can invest in proper legal protections and social welfare for widows, then a society can be created where widows are allowed to thrive.

Implications of widowhood

Widowhood significantly impacts the psychological, social, and financial well-being of older women, particularly in culturally diverse contexts like Nigeria, where traditional practices exacerbate their challenges. Siyanbade et al (2023) in a study recommends that the government at all levels be more active in terms of ensuring safety, eradicating poverty among youths and vulnerable members of the society which includes the women and youth through the provision of agricultural infrastructure like modern storage systems and tractors, as well as improving social amenities such as roads, electricity, health, and education so that job creation can be a reality for the young people.

This particular topic is being reviewed to understand the multifaceted effects of widowhood on older women and for developing targeted interventions that address their unique challenges and improve their quality of life. This exploration is particularly pertinent given the increasing number of widows globally and the specific cultural practices that affect their status and well-being.

Akinwale et al (2024) study on the burden of energy crisis among women and in rural communities of Lagos State, as predicted, the study revealed that all the challenges that comes with lack of access to basic and clean energy has severe implications for children and women, the study noted that clean and modern energy is not a luxury for city dwellers or the rich alone, but a necessity for every individual irrespective of age, status and educational background. Widows are considered to be a vulnerable

group; the death of their spouse will add to the burden of daily living thus making life and living condition difficult.

Similarly, a study conducted by Akinwale et al (2024) among women and children in Osun State revealed that many young women are already widowed in their early years due to the activities surrounding risk taking in mining sites. A significant number expressed hoe poverty has been their major nightmares because of the demise of their spouse.

Lack of masculine influence can affect the children's discipline and morality, thus making them nuisance in the community. The child's social environment is less enriched and Saba (1997) pointed out that this could lead to lower self-esteem, economic insecurity and feeling of inadequacy in the children which are indicators of underdevelopment. Oreh (2005) advised that even though the absence of a male figure in the home can affect the boys' identification with the male role, the widow must remember that she can only be the best mother and never mother and father.

Stillion (1998) pointed out that with the death of a husband, the social status of the widow is largely reduced and this will result to loss of self-esteem. No one who has lost her self-esteem can contribute meaningfully to community development.

Theoretical Review

As it is already established, widowhood has deep implications for the widow and her general well-being. Therefore, it is important to explore some theories that could provide insight into the implications of widowhood especially in the psychological aspects. This review focuses on three theories of psychology:

Erik Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development

According to Erik Erikson, there are eight stages of psycho-social development that span from the beginning to the end of life. In each of these stages, an individual resolves internal conflicts in order to achieve the best possible outcome before moving on to the next stage of development. The stages are demarcated by age.

In this paper, we will be exploring stage 6 which lasts from the ages of 19 to 40 and aims to resolve the conflict of intimacy versus isolation. According to Erikson, this stage is for building quality relationships, both romantic and platonic. It is at this stage that many individuals form meaningful connections and long-term partnerships. A successful completion of this stage of psycho-social development leads to healthy and secure relationships while an unsuccessful outcome results in loneliness and isolation.

It is worth noting that one of the great successes of the intimacy versus isolation stage is a healthy marriage. When this marriage ends due to the death of the man, it can affect the woman's resolution of further psycho-social conflicts necessary for development.

Women over 60 are in one of two stages, either generativity versus stagnation stage or the stage of integrity versus despair. In the generativity versus stagnation stage, an individual tries to use his or her resources and knowledge to help younger generations. The confidence to do this usually stems from a successful completion of the previous psycho-social stages.

In the case of a widow, her husband's death could drown the work done in the intimacy versus isolation stage, taking her from someone who was previously in a secure relationship to someone who is alone and possibly even socially isolated. Such widows may experience isolation, and sometimes a loss of identity and self-esteem. All these factors can make it difficult to mentor younger generations, and the widow might end up leaving this stage feeling unproductive and having no impact on younger generations.

This perceived lack of impact could affect the final stage of psycho-social development, which is the integrity versus despair stage, where most people begin to look back on their life and determine if it was successful. The death of a woman's husband, which resulted in isolation and lack of generativity in the later stage, would leave a sense of regret in her as she may not have achieved all that she hoped to achieve. This may result in despair instead of integrity in the final stage of psycho-social development.

Erikson's theory can be compared to a ladder. If one rung is removed, it becomes difficult to ascend to higher steps. In widowhood, the rung of intimacy has been removed, making it difficult for a woman to successfully resolve the remaining two conflicts in her psycho-social development.

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

Abraham Maslow's theory involves the hierarchy of needs, where he believed that human needs can be arranged into a hierarchical format and are solved sequentially. According to Maslow, satisfaction of human needs begins from physiological needs, then safety needs, to love or belonging needs, esteem needs, and ends with self-actualization needs.

When a woman is in a healthy marriage, she is protected and provided for, fulfilling her physiological and safety needs. She is loved and loves others, achieving her love and belonging needs, and she is often respected and recognized properly in society,

achieving her esteem needs. When her husband dies, however, the woman becomes vulnerable and may lack in one or all of the highlighted needs. She loses the love of her life, causing her to lack in regards to love. She may be in financial trouble, causing her to lack in physiological and safety needs. And the terrible cultural practices towards widows are humiliating and may result in a loss of self-esteem.

In widows over the age of 60, these effects are even worse because at such a stage in life, it may be difficult to rebuild one's self and recover all that they have lost. This proves that after the death of a spouse, a woman is never really the same again.

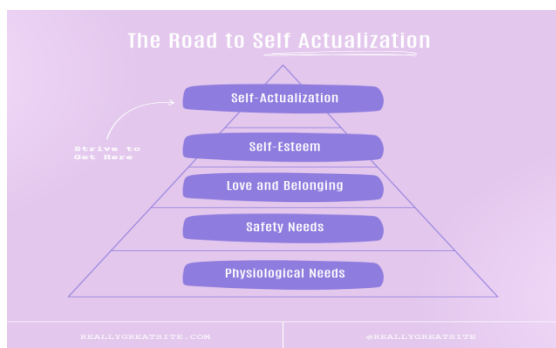


Figure 4: Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Conformity Theory by Solomon Asch

Conformity theory posited by Solomon Asch means that individuals are motivated to adopt the norms, attitude, beliefs, and behaviour of a group they want to be part of. When a woman gets married, she enters into her husband's family and conforms to their practices. She accepts their culture and tradition because she is not part of them.

Unfortunately, it is this culture and tradition that make provision for the maltreatment of a woman. After the death of her husband, based on the excuse of culture, many families and tribes have practices that isolate and scar a widow for the rest of her own life. And the widow is unable to refuse most, if not all of these traditions because upon her marriage, she has agreed to conform.

For instance, if an Isoko woman marries an Igbo man, she must shave her head upon his death, despite the fact that she is not an Igbo woman.

Social Exclusion Theory

Walker, (1997) and Duffy (1995), stress on the multidimensional nature of social exclusion. According to them, social exclusion relates not simply to a lack of material resources but also matters like inadequate social participation, lack of cultural and educational capital, inadequate access to services and lack of power.

Social exclusion theory refers to persistent and systematic multiple deprivation of individual or group resulting to disempowerment and alienation and the way the resultant dynamics affect the individuals or groups in the society (Hills, 1998).

Thus, in widowhood practices, widows are excluded by their late husband's relatives from inheriting their husband's property thereby plunging the widows into a sudden state of powerlessness leading to lack of material resources and inadequate social participation thereby making contribution to community development difficult.

Limitations and future directions

This research highlights the complexities of widowhood and the need for comprehensive interventions to support widows however there are several limitations and areas for future research that should be considered;

Data limitations: There is a need for more comprehensive data on widowhood especially in developing countries. Current data often under report the prevalence of widowhood and its impacts particularly among marginalized communities. This lack of data complicates efforts to develop targeted interventions and evaluate their effectiveness. Future studies should prioritize collecting detailed and reliable data on widowhood including its socioeconomic and psychological impacts. Additionally, data collection should be sensitive to the cultural and legal contexts of different regions.

Future research should consider the cultural nuances of widowhood experiences across different regions. This involves understanding local customs and legal systems that influence the lives of widows. Cultural sensitivity is crucial for developing interventions that are relevant and effective in diverse contexts. Researchers should engage with local communities to ensure that their perspectives are integrated into the design and implementation of interventions. Moreover, cultural sensitivity requires acknowledging the diversity within cultures and avoiding assumptions based on generalizations. This involves recognizing that cultural norms can vary significantly within a single society and interventions should be tailored to address these variations.

Intervention studies: More studies are needed on the effectiveness of interventions aimed at supporting widows. This includes evaluating the impact of empowerment programs and policy reforms on improving the socioeconomic status of widows. Intervention studies should employ rigorous methodologies such as randomized controlled trials to

assess the outcomes of different interventions. Furthermore, future research should explore the long-term effects of interventions examining whether they lead to sustained improvements in the lives of widows. This involves conducting follow-up studies to assess the durability of intervention impacts and identifying factors that contribute to successful outcomes.

Interdisciplinary approaches: Future research should adopt interdisciplinary approaches combining insights from psychology, sociology, economics and law to provide a comprehensive understanding of widowhood. This involves collaborating with experts from different fields to develop interventions that address the multifaceted challenges faced by widows. Interdisciplinary research can help identify the most effective strategies for empowering widows considering both the immediate needs of economic support and the long-term goals of social and legal change by integrating perspectives from various disciplines. Researchers can develop more holistic interventions that address the root causes of marginalization.

Global collaboration: Collaboration between researchers, policymakers and practitioners across different countries is essential for addressing the global challenges faced by widows. This includes sharing best practices in empowerment programs, advocating for policy changes at the international level and mobilizing resources to support interventions in developing countries. Global collaboration can facilitate the exchange of knowledge and expertise ensuring that interventions are informed by successful models from around the world.

Conclusion

From the different parts of this paper, we have explored widowhood, its effects on the widow, its psychological impacts, and also the tolerable and intolerable practices towards widows, especially those older women

We have looked at statistics and global trends concerning widows and how different societal structures and culture could affect a woman's transition into widowhood and her quality of life afterwards. We have also explored how the rates of widowhood could even affect the economic state of nations.

The paper underscored certain negative cultural practices towards widows and pointed out the results which include: isolation, vulnerability, financial, emotional and psychological burdens that widows are made to bear. It has highlighted the need for favourable practices towards widows, and clamoured

for an end to the harmful cultural practices done to them.

The paper also analysed the effects of widowhood from a psychological point of view by reviewing three psychological theories; Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory and The Conformity theory. The reviews of these theories revealed that widowhood could disrupt an individual's personal development and affect the satisfaction of basic needs.

There is a need for understanding, kindness and empathy towards widows and creation of favourable policies that firmly discourage maltreatment of widows with legal consequences for defaulters. The society and state should be able to protect its weak and vulnerable members which widows make up a large percentage.

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