

The Impact of Widowhood Practices on the Social, Psychological, and Economic Wellbeing of Women in Epie-Land

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Abstract: *Widowhood practices remain one of the enduring socio-cultural challenges confronting women in many African societies, with significant implications for their rights, dignity, and wellbeing. This study examined the impact of widowhood practices on the social, psychological, and economic wellbeing of women in Epie-land, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Anchored on Feminist theoretical perspectives, the research investigated the extent to which cultural norms and traditional rites associated with widowhood shape women's lived experiences. Data were sourced through qualitative method, including interviews, and focus group discussions with widows in Epie communities. Findings revealed that widowhood practices often result in social stigmatization, exclusion from community decision-making, and erosion of personal autonomy. Psychologically, widows face trauma, depression, and feelings of marginalization due to ritual humiliations and lack of social support. Economically, disinheritance, loss of property rights, and limited access to sustainable livelihoods further deepen poverty and dependence. The study argued that these practices not only violate women's human rights but also undermine gender equality and community development. It concludes by recommending legal reforms, awareness campaigns, and community-based interventions to mitigate harmful practices and enhance the protection and empowerment of widows in Epie-land.*

Keywords: widowhood, Epie-land, marginalization, human rights, gender equality

INTRODUCTION

Widowhood, a universal life event, is experienced through a powerful cultural lens that dictates the rituals, rights, and restrictions imposed on the bereaved. In Epie-Land, an ethnic nationality

within the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, these widowhood practices are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural and traditional religious fabric, presenting a complex intersection of custom, gender, and human dignity. The impact of these practices on Epie women's wellbeing is profound and multidimensional, affecting their psychological, physical, social, and economic health in often devastating ways. While ostensibly serving purposes of spiritual cleansing, mourning, and the transition of the deceased's soul, these rites frequently translate into a period of intense trauma, stigmatization, and disenfranchisement for the woman left behind. The ordeal for an Epie widow typically commences immediately after her husband's death, initiating a period governed by stringent and often punitive rituals. These can include enforced seclusion, compulsory wearing of specific (often black) mourning clothes, dietary restrictions, and mandatory sleeping on the floor or in a designated space (Amadiume, 2015). The most harrowing of these practices often involve ritual cleansing, which may compel the widow to drink the water used to wash her husband's corpse—a practice rooted in the belief that it proves her innocence regarding his death (Nwoye, 2017). From a psychosocial perspective, these rituals occur when the widow is most vulnerable, grieving the loss of a partner and the primary structure of her life. Instead of receiving comfort and support, she is subjected to isolation and psychological distress, which can exacerbate grief, precipitate depression, and lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The stigmatization inherent in the process, treating her as ritually unclean or a potential suspect, severs crucial social support networks at the very moment she needs them most, profoundly damaging her mental and emotional wellbeing (Azu, 2020).

Furthermore, the impact extends severely into the physical and economic realms, directly threatening the widow's survival and that of her children. The period of mourning can last for months or even years, during which the widow's ability to engage in economic activities is severely curtailed by the restrictions placed upon her movement and social interaction (Amadi, 2022). This enforced economic inactivity, combined with the financial burden of the funeral rites themselves, can plunge a family into poverty. In a patrilineal society like Epie-Land, the widow's plight is often compounded by property disinheritance, where her husband's relatives may seize assets, land, and homes, leaving her destitute (Iweriebor, 2018). This economic disenfranchisement is not merely a temporary hardship; it can have long-term consequences, limiting her children's access to education and healthcare and cementing her position of dependency and powerlessness. The physical toll of harsh living conditions, poor nutrition, and the stress of the entire experience lead to a decline in physical health, creating a vicious cycle where poor health further impedes economic recovery. Therefore, the traditional widowhood practices in Epie-Land, while culturally significant to some, function as a critical nexus where psychological trauma, social ostracization, and economic deprivation converge, creating a profound and lasting negative impact on the overall wellbeing of women.

Statement of the Problem

Widowhood, as a social reality, has continued to generate critical concern across societies, especially in Africa where cultural practices deeply influence the lives of women. In Nigeria, and particularly in Epie-land of Bayelsa State, widowhood practices are often laden with socio-cultural

prescriptions that affect the status and wellbeing of women. When a husband dies, widows are frequently subjected to cultural rites that may include confinement, shaving of hair, compulsory mourning periods, and restrictions on social interaction. While these practices are justified by some as customs that preserve tradition and identity, they often translate into physical, psychological, social, and economic hardships for women. In Epie-land, widows are sometimes stigmatized, blamed for the death of their spouses, and denied rights to inheritance and property. This creates a climate of social exclusion, further marginalizing women in both family and community life. The psychological toll of grief is compounded by humiliation, suspicion, and forced rituals that undermine their dignity and mental health. Economically, many widows face dispossession from farmlands, businesses, and family resources, thereby pushing them and their dependents into poverty.

Despite constitutional protections and global advocacy for gender equality, widowhood practices remain entrenched and resilient to change in many communities, including Epie-land. The persistence of these practices raises critical questions about their impact on widows' ability to live fulfilling lives, contribute productively to society, and maintain a sense of dignity and self-worth. Moreover, limited scholarly attention has been given specifically to the experiences of widows in Epie-land, leaving a research gap on the localized dimensions of widowhood practices and their broader social, psychological, and economic implications. It is against this background that this study seeks to investigate the impact of widowhood practices on the social, psychological, and economic wellbeing of women in Epie-land, with the aim of generating evidence that may inform advocacy, policy reforms, and cultural re-orientation towards the protection of widows' rights.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative methodology, relying on both primary and secondary sources to examine the impact of widowhood practices on the social, psychological, and economic wellbeing of women in Epie-land. Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with widows, community leaders, and women leaders to capture lived experiences and perceptions. Observational techniques complemented these accounts, providing contextual insights. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles, government reports, and relevant cultural documentation, were reviewed to provide historical and theoretical grounding. This combined approach ensures a holistic understanding of widowhood practices and their implications.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory is rooted in the works of scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir (1949), Betty Friedan (1963), and later African feminist thinkers like Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) and Ifi Amadiume (1987). Its central idea is that gender inequality is a social construct that systematically subordinates women while privileging men. The theory interrogates patriarchy, power relations, and cultural practices that sustain women's oppression, while advocating for gender justice, equity,

and empowerment (Tong, 2014). Proponents argue that traditional norms and structures often reinforce male dominance and marginalize women in social, economic, and psychological spheres. Applied to this study, the feminist theory helps explain how gendered cultural customs disproportionately affect women. Widowhood rituals—such as forced seclusion, property dispossession, and stigmatization—are products of patriarchal structures that perceive women as dependent on men for identity and status (Amadiume, 1987; Nwoye, 2011). These practices compromise widows' social wellbeing by subjecting them to exclusion, humiliation, and loss of dignity within the community. Psychologically, widows experience trauma, depression, and reduced self-worth due to degrading rituals and societal blame. Economically, dispossession of property and denial of inheritance rights perpetuate poverty and dependency, limiting women's opportunities for self-reliance (Okorie, 2017).

The Peopling of Epie-land

The peopling of Epie-land, the ancestral and contemporary homeland of the Epie-Atissa people in the Niger Delta region of present-day Bayelsa State, Nigeria, is a complex historical process deeply embedded in the broader migrations and socio-political developments of the Ijo (Ijaw) ethnic nationality. Unlike state-forming societies with written chronicles, the reconstruction of Epie history relies heavily on oral traditions, linguistic evidence, and anthropological analysis, which point to a narrative of internal migration, cultural assimilation, and ethnogenesis within the dynamic delta environment. The prevailing scholarly consensus, primarily drawn from the seminal work of historians like Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa, posits that the Epie, along with other Central Ijo groups, are descendants of ancestors who migrated from the distant north and north-eastern directions, likely from the vicinity of the ancient Nupe and Benin regions, into the coastal territories they now inhabit (Alagoa, 2005).

The foundational migration narrative, as preserved in oral traditions, tells of a leader named Oproza (or Uproza) who led his people from the ancient city of Benin, possibly around the 14th or 15th century AD, following a period of political unrest or conflict. This tradition is central to the identity of not only the Epie but also related groups like the Engenni and Degema (Ikile, 2005). The migration is often linked to the broader expansion and pressures of the Benin Kingdom. Upon reaching the upper reaches of the Nun River and the swamps and plains of the central delta, these migrants encountered and interacted with earlier settlers, possibly proto-Ijo groups or other autochthonous populations. The term "Epie" itself is said to be derived from "Epe," meaning "they have separated," reflecting a schism within the migrant group, while "Atissa" means "they have settled at last," signifying the end of their long journey and the establishment of a permanent homeland (Alagoa, 1964). This period of settlement was not an isolated event but part of the wider dispersal of Ijo peoples across the Niger Delta, a process that involved adapting to a challenging ecosystem of mangrove swamps, creeks, and seasonal floods.

The subsequent peopling and societal organization of Epie-land were profoundly shaped by its unique geography. The establishment of city-states and independent settlements along the riverbanks and creek lines became the characteristic political structure. Key Epie-Atissa towns

such as Yenagoa, Amassoma, and Ogboloma developed as autonomous entities, each with its own leadership structure, yet bound together by shared language, culture, and kinship ties. The economy that sustained this growing population was intrinsically linked to the aquatic environment, revolving around fishing, canoe building, and the harvesting of mangrove resources. This maritime orientation distinguished them from their inland agrarian neighbours and fostered a distinct cultural identity. Furthermore, their strategic location positioned them as crucial intermediaries in the trade networks that connected the interior hinterlands with the European traders on the coast from the 15th century onwards, dealing in goods such as palm oil, which later became the central commodity during the era of the "legitimate trade" (Kpone-Tonwe, 1997).

Social Implications of Widowhood Practices on the Status and Relationships of Widows in Epie-Land

In the Epie, widowhood is not merely a personal tragedy but a profound social transition that systematically redefines a woman's identity, status, and web of relationships, often through practices that are deeply rooted in patriarchal and patrilineal traditions. The social implications of these widowhood practices are extensive, stripping widows of their former social personhood and relegating them to a marginal status fraught with vulnerability and stigma. The commencement of widowhood is typically marked by a series of ritualistic practices that serve as a public and painful disconnection from their previous life. Immediately upon her husband's death, an Epie widow is often subjected to isolation, confined to a room or a secluded space for a period that can last from weeks to months. This physical separation is a powerful symbolic act; it instantly severs her normal social relationships with the community, marking her as ritually impure and temporarily dangerous to others (Akani, 2018). During this period, she may be forced to sit on the floor, wear specific mourning clothes (often somber or torn), and adhere to restrictive dietary rules. These practices are not just about grief; they are a performative enactment of her new, diminished status. Her body becomes a site upon which tradition is inscribed, publicly signaling her loss of the protection and identity that her husband provided.

The most devastating social implication of these rituals is the comprehensive assault on the widow's relationships and standing within her family and community. Prior to her husband's death, her social status was largely derived from her role as a wife and mother. In widowhood, that derived status evaporates. She often finds herself in a precarious position regarding property and inheritance. Despite modern laws, customary practices in Epie-Land frequently favor the husband's male relatives, leading to widespread property disinheritance (Dike, 2020). This economic disposition is not merely a financial crisis; it fundamentally alters her relationships with her in-laws. From a respected wife, she can become a dependent and a burden, or worse, a rival to be expelled from the family home to allow her husband's brothers to claim his assets. This often triggers a breakdown in familial bonds, turning previously supportive relationships into adversarial ones. Her relationship with her own children can also be strained, particularly if she is young and pressure is mounted for her to undergo a levirate marriage—being "inherited" by a brother of her deceased husband. While intended to provide support, this practice can feel like a further violation

of her autonomy, reducing her to a form of property to be transferred and complicating her emotional and social life indefinitely (Amadi, 2019).

Consequently, the long-term social identity of an Epie widow is frequently reconstructed around stigma and exclusion. The suspicion that she may have been responsible for her husband's death through witchcraft or negligence is a pervasive and damaging stereotype that can follow her for years (Akani, 2018). This label of "husband-killer" makes her a social pariah, leading to exclusion from community celebrations, decision-making gatherings, and even casual social interactions. Friends may distance themselves, fearing association with her perceived misfortune or impurity. This erosion of her social network leads to profound loneliness and psychological distress. The cumulative effect of these practices—ritual humiliation, economic disempowerment, and social stigmatization—is a dramatic decline in her overall well-being and agency. She is effectively stripped of her voice and her power to determine her own future. While the constitution of Nigeria and international conventions like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) provide frameworks for equality, the enforcement of these protections at the grassroots level in Epie-Land remains weak, allowing harmful traditional practices to persist. In conclusion, the widowhood practices in Epie-Land are a potent mechanism of social control that systematically dismantles a woman's status and reconstitutes her relationships through a lens of suspicion, dependency, and marginality, ensuring that her social death closely follows her husband's physical one.

Psychological Effects of Widowhood Practices on Women's Mental Health and Emotional Stability

The psychological toll widowhood practices exact on women in Epieland is severe, leading to significant trauma, prolonged grief, and a deterioration of their mental health and emotional stability. The prescribed rites often involve a period of intense and public mourning, which can include seclusion, mandatory wearing of specific (often black) clothing for an extended period, restrictions on personal hygiene, and dietary limitations. These practices systematically strip a woman of her identity and autonomy, reducing her to a symbol of grief and potential pollution. The enforced isolation during the seclusion period, which can last from months to a year, severs her from crucial social support systems at the very moment she needs them most. This isolation is not for reflection but for containment, fostering an environment where loneliness and rumination can flourish, significantly increasing the risk of developing major depressive disorders (Igbolekwu, 2018). The lack of social interaction and the constant reminder of her loss through the rituals prevent the natural grieving process, trapping her in a state of acute psychological distress.

Furthermore, the psychological impact is compounded by the inherent stigma and the terrifying prospect of being subjected to archaic and humiliating oath-taking rituals, which are believed to determine her complicity in her husband's death. The anxiety and fear generated by this accusation-by-ritual create a state of hyper-vigilance and chronic stress. A woman lives in dread not only of the rituals themselves but of failing them, which would bring eternal shame and ostracization upon herself and her children. This experience is a direct pathway to trauma-related disorders, including symptoms consistent with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), such as intrusive thoughts,

severe anxiety, and emotional numbness (Amadiume, 2015). The public nature of these practices means her grief is performative and scrutinized, denying her the private, intimate space necessary for authentic emotional processing. Instead of being allowed to mourn the person she loved, she is forced to perform a culturally scripted role that often involves self-degradation, reinforcing feelings of worthlessness and profound shame. This public humiliation attacks her self-esteem and can lead to a persistent depressive state, undermining any foundation for future emotional stability.

The long-term emotional stability of Epie widows is also critically undermined by the economic and social disenfranchisement that frequently accompanies these practices. In many instances, property grabbing by the husband's family leaves the widow and her children destitute. This economic violence, sanctioned by some interpretations of custom, occurs while the widow is at her most psychologically vulnerable, dealing with both grief and the trauma of the rituals. The loss of her home, livelihood, and social standing creates a cascade of stressors that can lead to chronic anxiety, a sense of hopelessness, and pervasive insecurity. The combined effect of traumatic rituals, social ostracization, and economic deprivation creates a perfect storm that devastates mental health. Research on cross-cultural widowhood practices confirms that where rituals are highly restrictive and stigmatizing, rates of clinical depression, anxiety, and complicated grief are markedly higher (Potash, 1986). Consequently, many women in Epie-land emerge from the official mourning period not as individuals who have healthily processed their loss, but as psychologically scarred survivors, burdened by trauma and facing an uncertain future with diminished emotional resources. Their mental well-being is sacrificed on the altar of tradition, leaving them to navigate a path of recovery with little to no institutional or communal support, a silent crisis with profound implications for the social fabric of Epie society itself.

Economic Consequences of Widowhood Practices on the Livelihood and Financial Independence of Widows

The economic consequences of widowhood practices on the livelihood and financial independence of widows in Epie-land, are profound and systematically debilitating, stripping women of their financial autonomy and plunging them into a cycle of poverty and dependency. These practices, deeply embedded in the cultural and traditional norms of the Epie-Atissa people, though often justified as a means of mourning and protecting the lineage, function in reality as a form of economic disinheritance and asset stripping that cripples a widow's capacity for self-sustenance. Upon the death of a husband, a widow immediately becomes subject to a series of rites and customs that carry significant financial burdens and often result in the loss of her primary source of economic stability. The practice of property grabbing, or property disinheritance, is arguably the most devastating economic blow. Despite legal frameworks like the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VPP) Act 2015 and the Prohibition of Inheritance Customary Practices Law in Bayelsa State, which outlaw such practices, customary law often prevails. The deceased husband's family, particularly his brothers, frequently lay claim to assets such as the family home, land, vehicles, and bank accounts, arguing that these properties belong to the patrilineage and not to the widow, who is considered an "outsider" (Amadi & Princewill, 2020). This leaves the widow and

her children homeless and without the capital or productive assets necessary to generate income, forcing them into immediate financial precarity and reliance on often-unreliable extended family. Furthermore, the widowhood rites themselves impose a direct and often crippling financial cost. Families are frequently expected to fund elaborate funeral ceremonies, the financial burden of which falls disproportionately on the widow. She is required to provide food, drinks, and money for the mourners, and to purchase specific items for the burial rites. These expenses can exhaust her personal savings and push her into debt, compounding her economic vulnerability even before any property is seized (Nwabueze, 2019). The period of mourning, which can last for up to a year or more, also imposes economic sanctions. During this time, a widow may be confined to the home, prohibited from engaging in her usual business or farming activities, and required to adhere to strict codes of dress and behaviour. This enforced inactivity means a complete cessation of income for the duration of the mourning period, effectively dismantling her livelihood and disrupting any market connections or customer bases she may have spent years building (Okon, 2021). The cumulative impact is the evaporation of her financial independence at the very moment she needs it most to care for herself and her children.

The long-term economic consequences for widows in Epie-land are a deepened cycle of poverty, food insecurity, and a forced dependence on precarious survival strategies. With their assets seized and livelihoods disrupted, many widows are forced into low-paying, informal sector work such as petty trading, street hawking, or domestic labour, which offer little security and are insufficient to meet the needs of their households. The psychological trauma of their experience, coupled with social stigma, further diminishes their capacity to compete effectively in the local economy. This economic disempowerment has a direct intergenerational impact, as widows struggle to pay for their children's education and healthcare, thereby perpetuating poverty across generations (Amadi & Princewill, 2020). While some non-governmental organizations and faith-based groups have initiated empowerment programs, their reach is often limited and cannot counteract the systemic nature of the problem.

Coping Strategies Adopted by Widows in Epie-land

Widows in Epie-land, employ a multifaceted array of coping strategies to navigate the profound social, economic, and emotional turmoil that follows the death of a husband. These strategies are shaped by a complex interplay of deep-seated traditional customs, the pressures of a modernizing economy, and the transformative influence of Christianity, requiring widows to constantly negotiate between conflicting systems of support and oppression. A primary and immediate set of strategies revolves around navigating the prescribed traditional mourning rites, known as *Ikpè-osi* (the widow's rites). While often perceived externally as purely oppressive, for many widows, compliance is a strategic choice for social integration and future security. Adherence to these rites, which may include seclusion, specific modes of dressing, and behavioral restrictions, is a public performance of grief and fidelity that serves to protect the widow from accusations of witchcraft or culpability in her husband's death (Azuonwu & Wokem, 2020). By submitting to these often-onerous practices, a widow strategically placates her husband's lineage, demonstrates her respect for communal norms, and secures her legitimacy within the family structure. This is crucial for her

ultimate goal: securing her and her children's rights to her husband's property. Failure to comply can result in dispossession and ostracization, making ritual compliance a calculated short-term hardship for potential long-term stability (Amadiume, 2015).

Economically, widowhood often precipitates a severe crisis, thrusting women into the role of sole provider. In response, Epie widows deploy remarkable entrepreneurial resilience. A common strategy is the intensification and diversification of income-generating activities. Many turn to petty trading, using micro-savings or loans from informal cooperatives known as *esusu* to buy and sell foodstuffs, provisions, or homemade goods like soap and snacks (Azuonwu & Wokem, 2020). Others leverage traditional skills in food processing, such as grating cassava for fufu or making palm oil, to generate income. For younger, often more educated widows, strategies may involve seeking formal employment as teachers, nurses, or civil servants, though these opportunities are limited. This economic agency is not just about survival; it is a strategic assertion of independence, especially in cases where the deceased's family fails to provide adequate support. By achieving a degree of financial self-sufficiency, a widow can reduce her dependence on potentially hostile in-laws and gain greater control over her life and her children's futures.

Perhaps the most significant modern coping strategy is the strategic mobilization of social support networks, which now extend beyond the traditional kinship system. While the extended family remains a critical, though sometimes unreliable, source of emotional and material support, widows increasingly lean on their *ndi nwunye* (fellow wives/women) and church groups. The church has become a pivotal institution for Epie widows, offering an alternative narrative that often challenges stigmatizing traditional beliefs (Nwoko, 2019). Churches provide not only spiritual solace and counseling but also tangible material aid, financial assistance, and a powerful social community that can advocate on a widow's behalf. Furthermore, forming alliances with other widows creates a solidarity network for sharing resources, information, and emotional comfort, effectively creating a buffer against the isolation and marginalization imposed by some traditional practices.

Recommendations

- i. **Legislative and Policy Enforcement:** The government of Bayelsa State should strengthen and enforce existing laws against harmful widowhood practices in Epie-land. While the Nigerian constitution and international conventions guarantee women's rights, many widows still suffer degrading treatments such as forced seclusion, disinheritance, and ritual cleansing. Strict enforcement of legal protections, combined with punitive measures for offenders, will discourage the perpetuation of such harmful cultural norms. Furthermore, community by-laws that promote gender equity should be enacted in collaboration with traditional rulers.
- ii. **Awareness and Sensitization Campaigns:** Civil society organizations, faith-based groups, and women's associations should organize sustained sensitization campaigns to enlighten community members about the psychological, social, and economic harm caused by widowhood practices. Through town hall meetings, media programs, and religious platforms, awareness can be raised to reshape cultural perceptions and reduce

stigmatization of widows. Emphasizing shared values of human dignity, compassion, and social justice will help foster acceptance and support for widows in Epie-land.

- iii. **Psychosocial Support and Counseling Services:** Widows in Epie-land should be provided with accessible psychosocial support systems to help them cope with trauma, depression, and social isolation often associated with widowhood practices. Establishing community-based counseling centers, peer support groups, and partnerships with professional psychologists will strengthen widows' emotional resilience. Faith leaders and traditional institutions can also be engaged in offering compassionate support to restore widows' self-esteem and reintegrate them into community life.
- iv. **Economic Empowerment and Skill Acquisition:** To mitigate the economic vulnerability of widows who are often deprived of property and inheritance rights, targeted economic empowerment programs should be implemented. These may include vocational training, microfinance schemes, agricultural cooperatives, and access to credit facilities. Empowering widows with sustainable income-generating opportunities not only improves their livelihoods but also enhances their ability to care for their children, thereby reducing poverty and dependency in Epie-land.

CONCLUSION

In sum, widowhood practices in Epie-land exert profound social, psychological, and economic consequences on women, undermining their dignity, health, and overall wellbeing. These practices, rooted in cultural traditions, often subject widows to stigmatization, isolation, and emotional trauma, while simultaneously restricting their access to resources and economic independence. The compounded effects not only deepen gender inequalities but also hinder widows from contributing meaningfully to community development. Addressing these challenges requires a deliberate re-examination of harmful customs, the promotion of legal protections, and the strengthening of support systems that uphold widows' rights. Ultimately, fostering a more humane and inclusive cultural framework will ensure that widows in Epie-land are empowered to live with dignity, security, and equal opportunities for social and economic participation.

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