

The Effectiveness of Widow Support Systems in the Rural Areas of Rivers State, Nigeria

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KEYWORDS Women. Rural Areas. Traditional. Conventional. Rights Obligations

ABSTRACT The study examined the effectiveness of widow support systems in the rural areas of Rivers State, Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives were to identify available support systems for rural widows in Rivers State and to determine how effective the support systems were to meet the needs of widows in the study area. The sample size for the study was 300 rural women selected using multiple sampling techniques. Data were obtained using structured questionnaire and recorded responses during Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions. Data gathered were analyzed using percentage mean and standard deviation. The findings include: availability of support systems ranging from traditional to conventional, the support systems were ineffective to meet the needs of rural widows. It was therefore, recommended that, governments (Federal, State and local) should do more to alleviate the sufferings of rural widows through the implementations of all rights obligations (International and locals) and the institution of social service programmes targeted towards widows. Also widows should form associations, an umbrella body through which they can make their voices heard by those in position to help them live meaningful lives.

INTRODUCTION

Widow is ascribed to a woman who survives her husband and has not remarried (Oniye 2007; Dodo 2010). When a man dies, the surviving wife is left in altered life circumstances unprepared and abandoned to brood over her husband's death (Nwadinobi 2001). Unfortunately, the death of her husband would automatically, expose the widow to lots of difficulties which include, financial, social, physical, sexual, emotional and societal (Abolarin 1997; Oniye 2000). An indication that a vacuum has been created, which by implications, needs to be filled by well defined support systems.

The impact of widowhood is multifaceted, it does not only affect the widow, but her family and to a large extent the society. It varies from bad to worst, though depending on the status of the family so affected. It is capable of causing socio – economic dislocations that could impact negatively on the well-being of the family. According to Saba (1997) widowhood could result to the decline of family income and lead to lower self-esteem, insecurity and feelings of inadequacy among the children of the widow. It could also result to social stigma, chaste system, austerity and assertive life pattern; making already

poor women poorer (Oloko 1997; Chen 2000).

In societies where social securities are non-existence or poorly coordinated such as Rivers State, widows seem to depend on other support and adjustment systems made available by nature or tradition. A widow (especially the poor one) needs support to maintain a life style, and such supports could be grouped into economic social service or emotional support. Rooks (1987) in a study believe that any support given to a widow is to restore her confidence and improve her sense of belonging to the society; and can often be accomplished through close and intimate relationship between the widow and significant others in her life.

To Oniye (2000) the development of useful support and adjustment strategies is dependent on certain factors which include, age, religious inclination, socio-economic status of the widow and her level of educational attainment. If proven, it therefore means many widows who found themselves at the lower rung of these criteria are automatically ruled out of any meaningful support and adjustment strategies. A widow not properly supported and adjusted is not only having problem, but could be a problem to herself, her family and the society as a whole.

Many widows, especially those at the lowest rung of socio-economic ladder (the poor and illiterates) rely on their children and relatives for

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support, while co-residence provides support for the middle-aged and younger widows. Young Christians and Muslims widows receive greater percentage of support than older widows and those of other religions (Abolarin 1997; Oniye 2000). According to Abolarin (1997) supports (economic, service, social and emotional) are given to most widows mainly by their friends, siblings and husbands friends.

The levirate system of support enjoyed by widows of old has been recently criticized as a ploy to sexually exploit widows, especially the younger and beautiful ones. Encyclopedia of Death and Dying (2008) in buttressing the argument reported that widows in many African societies impregnated by the male relatives in the levirate culture were often deserted and thrown out of the family homestead. Nwadinobi (2001) stated, that a recourse to religious organization, social service agencies, government and non-government agencies could not help in providing the assistance necessary for widows to work their way out of grief or social security. He revealed that no more than 40% of Nigerian population claim religious affiliation but only 3% of the newly widowed look upon their churches or clergy as a source of succor after funeral. Abolarin (1997) opines that the effectiveness of any support systems hinges on its adequacy and proportion to the perceived need, its promptness in timing and the genuine of intentions devoid of degrading or insulting conditions; that must be practicable in its structure.

Statement of the Problem

Widows all over the world face many challenges that affect them in almost all spheres of their lives. In many patriarchal societies of sub-Saharan Africa widows could be stripped of what could have provided them with support through disinheritance. This unwholesome cultural practice renders many widows unsecured economically, socially and otherwise; making support and adjustment systems inevitable if for survival. Researchers (Lopata 1979; Weibo 1987; Abolarin 1997) identified some support and adjustment systems for widows in Nigeria, which include levirate, government and non-governmental agencies, children, siblings and relatives. They assume these support systems to provide the succor needed, by widows for sur-

vival. Therefore, the study seeks to ascertain the effectiveness of support systems to the needs of widows.

METHODOLOGY

The study was a descriptive survey, and its focus was on the opinions and beliefs of rural women, about the effectiveness of widows support systems in Rivers State. The sample size was 300 rural women, comprising 155 widows and 145 non-widows selected using multiple sampling techniques. Firstly, the 23 Local Government Areas of the State were grouped into six: (Kalabari, Ikwerre, Ogoni, Igbani, Ogba and Etche) clusters, based on cultural affinity. Secondly, two Local Government Areas (LGA) were purposively selected from each cluster, on predominance of rural features. Thirdly, two communities were randomly selected from each LGA, given a total of twenty-four communities. In choosing the respondents, two techniques were adopted. The widows were systematically chosen considering the duration of bereavement, which was not less than three years, while non-widows were randomly selected. A total of 336, (7 widows, 7 non-widows from each community) respondents were sampled. However, 300 completed questionnaires were found analyzable. The data for the study were gathered using a structured questionnaire and interview schedule in Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions. The process, especially the FGD was made possible with the aid of experienced research assistance. The data gathered were analysed with percentage, mean and standard deviation.

Objectives of the Study

Specific objectives of the study were to:

1. identify the available support systems for widows in the rural areas of Rivers state and
2. ascertain the effectiveness of the available widow support systems in the study area.

Entries in Table 1, shows that 96.8% and 82.8% of widows and non-widow respectively, recognized levirate as a support system for widows, 32.2% and 48.3% of widows and non-widows recognized government agencies as a source of support respectively, 45.2% widows and 58.6% non-widows identified non-governmental organizations, 77.4% widows and 97.9%

non-widows identified religious organizations as a source of support to widows and relatives respectively, children and friends however recorded 100% entries by widows and non-widows respectively.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents based on their identification of sources of support to rural widows

Sources of support	Widows (N=155)		Non-widows (N=145)	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Levirate	150	96.8	120	82.8
Government agencies	50	32.2	70	48.3
Non-Governmental Organizations	70	45.2	85	58.6
Religious organizations	120	77.4	142	97.9
Individuals				
Relatives/children/friends	155	100	145	100

Figures in parenthesis = percentages
Source: Field Survey Data 2011

The findings corroborated those of Abolarin (1997), and Oniye (2006) who identified traditional (Levirate) system, government (through polices and their agencies), non-governmental organizations (through advocacy, donations, skill acquisition trainings, etc) religious organizations and individuals (mentoring), relatives and children as sources of widow support systems in most communities in Nigeria. Studies by Ahonsi (1997), Oniye (2008), Meera (2008) among others have shown that widowhood is associated with many factors that impinge on the livelihood chances and consequently the well being of widows, especially those in the rural areas that depend on natural resources, which accessibility is regulated by culture for livelihood. It is therefore imperative that that this vulnerable group must have other sources of support for survival.

Rooks (1987) listed four determinants of effectiveness of any support system for widows, which include adequacy and proportionate to perceived needs timelines geniuses without any degrading or insulting conditions attached and the practicability of the system in its structure. These were considered and the respondents opinions were analyzed and presented on Data on Table 2 reveal that Levirate, a traditional widow support, system was rated ineffective (1.46 and 1.54) by widows and non-widows respectively, Government through her policies and agencies was rated ineffective with mean val-

ues of 1.56 by widows and non-widows respectively. Non-governmental Organizations also did not fair better with mean of 1.75 and 2.06 by widows and non-widows, religious organizations had mean value of 1.89 and 1.79 while individuals (relatives, children, friend, mentors etc.) had mean of 2.21 and 2.05 by widows and non-widows respectively.

Table 2: Mean distribution of respondents' opinion of the effectiveness of identified widows support systems

Support systems	Widows (N=155)		Non-widows (N=145)	
	X_1	SD	X_2	SD
Levirate	1.46	0.82	1.54	0.79
Government	1.56	0.77	1.56	0.74
Non-governmental organizations	1.75	1.05	2.05	1.02
Religious organizations	1.89	1.04	1.79	0.96
Individuals (relatives/ children/friends etc)	2.21	0.83	2.05	0.77
Pooled mean	1.77		1.80	

X_1 = mean response of widows
 X_2 = mean response of non-widows
SD = standard deviation
Midpoint mean = 2.50
Any mean value < 2.50 suggests non-effective
Any mean value \geq 2.50 suggests effective
Source: Field Survey Data 2010

The pooled means were 1.77 and 1.80 for widows and non-widows respectively, which is indicative that none of the identified support system was considered very effective to provide the needed succor for widows in the rural areas. Secondly, the unanimous opinions of widows and non-widows in their assessment of the support systems and the close range in dispersion of the means deviation also showed that widows were not alone in their assessments of supports they receive. The findings were contrary to the widows expectations from these support systems.

During the FGD sessions, the women acknowledged that levirate could have been effective but for the advent of Christianity some decades ago and the recent awareness among men that levirate could be sinful and waste of time and resources as men were expected to breed and train up children that will never bear ones identity. Secondly, the women lamented that where it was practiced men were only interested in pretty and younger widows whom they quickly abandon after sexual and economic ex-

plotation. Their expressions corroborated the finding of Adedokun (1995) that levirate is a ploy to exploit the widow sexually, while Abolarin (1997) discovered that widows enjoy support on the basis of their age at bereavement.

On the part of governments and her agencies, the respondents argued that the refusal of government at different tiers to implement and enforce many of the legal instruments that could protect the rights and dignity of women was an indication that government efforts were not effective. However, Owasanoye (1997) recalled that it was the duties of governments to implement international obligations, introduce social security and enforce legislations against widows maltreatment in the society, which were lacking in the area of study.

Supports from the non-governmental organizations were adjudged ineffective by the respondents. It is expected that through advocacy, skills training programmes scholarships and grants from NGOs could enhance the well being of rural widows. It however, appears that their efforts were limited to urban centres. Many respondents could not recall when any organization had come to their aid. The religious organizations did not fare better either. The respondents complained that religious groups in the rural communities lack the capacity for any meaningful support for widows. According to them, the religious organizations themselves depend on the poor rural people for sustenance. Though it was acknowledged that they do well in offering emotional and spiritual support and assist widows recover quickly from psychological and emotional stress when widowed (Oniye 2006).

Individual support system includes help from children, relatives, friends and other well intentioned individuals. Individual support system was adjudged ineffective by the respondents. Although, Koriech (1996), and Oniye (2008) among others found that economic, emotional, social and service support are usually provided by children, siblings, friends and relatives but the adequacy, proportion, and the timing of such supports are usually questionable. He explained that supports were not quickly available when needed and the proportion and adequacy of the support to meet the widows' needs were not often guaranteed. It can be inferred that the individuals seem to effort as complimentary, prompting the widow to look somewhere else for help.

CONCLUSION

The following were the deductions based on the results of this study:

1. That there are support systems for widows in the rural areas of Rivers State.
2. That the widows were not ignorant of these sources of support as they can readily identify them.
3. That some of the sources of support such as levirate are no longer obtainable, while NGOs restrict their activities in the urban areas.
4. That widows in the study area receive supports which were neither adequate nor timely to meet their needs and therefore need more assistance from effective support systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is therefore, recommended based on the findings of the study that:

1. Governments (Federal, state and Local Government) at all levels should implement all the international obligations such as International Covenant on Economic and Social Right 1984, Covenant against Torture and punishment and the Declaration on elimination of violence against women. This could be a strategy of freeing women from the stranglehold of culture which reduces their chances of livelihood when widowed.
2. State and Local Governments should institute social service programmes, through which widows could be economically empowered through grants and monthly stipends to cushion the effects widowhood.
3. Widows should band together into associations as a platform to attract attention from governments and other welfare agencies. This is the only means they could be easily identified and their plights recognized and attended to by welfare agencies and other well intentioned individuals.

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