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CHAPTER FIVE

PROBLEMS OF WIDOWHOOD PRACTICE IN IGBO LAND

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Introduction

Widowhood has become a topical and sensitive global issue because of the ugly practice associated with it. Widowhood is a social status. It befalls a male or a female but it is generally used in reference to females who have lost their husbands, since most men who lose their wives soon abandon this status by re-marrying. Remarrying is not easy for women whose husbands have died, which is the beginning of the problem of widowhood.

Thompson (1996: 112) defines a widow as a woman whose husband is dead, and has not married again, a wife bereaved of her husband. He further emphasizes that widowhood is the state or condition of a widow or widower. According to Nwoga (1983: 8) "a woman becomes a widow when her husband dies and it is from that point of the death of the husband that widowhood practices start. These practices he defines as sets of expectations to action and behaviour by the widow and rituals performed by or on behalf of the widow from the time of the death of her husband.

According to Okoye (1995: 10) widowhood has been seen by different scholars as both a natural and cultural tragedy. In various communities in Igbo land, several unacceptable or obnoxious widowhood practices still exist in spite of the efforts by the government, religious and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to educate the people on the harmful effects of such widowhood practices.

Customarily, a woman and her children are the property of a man, the head of the family whose responsibility it is to provide for them. Traditionally, she is not expected to be involved in any paid employment. Her work is to give full and undivided

attention to her family husband, children and extended relations. Then, perhaps suddenly, the husband who was seemingly indispensable dies. This marks the beginning of her dilemma and the discrimination she is bound to encounter. She is not only faced with the pains and anguish of losing a dearest one but also a host of other debilitating factors in keeping with tradition and culture which leave her with no time to come to terms with her tragedy.

Widowhood is indeed a tragedy. It is now widely accepted that widowhood rites in various communities in Igbo land are not only discriminatory but also dehumanizing. The widow sometimes is absolutely confined to one room from the time her husband dies till the time he is buried in Igbo land. For the widow, those periods are a trying one. After undergoing the tribulations of confinement, the widow advances to the next stage of the mourning period till she reaches the final stage which marks the end of the one year mourning period. Harmful, obnoxious and marginalizing widowhood practices remain a painful reality in communities in Igbo land till this third millennium. Consequently, it has become absolutely necessary to call for greater advocacy and foresighted intervention programmes which actively promote the eradication of harmful rites. For example, in Olo in Ezeagu Local government Area of Enugu State, widowhood and its consequences are most felt. Members of the extended family seem to care-less for the widow. Ezeagu Local Government Area has no organized welfare scheme for the widows and the same is true for other parts of Nigeria and indeed Africa (Okoye: 1995). As a result, the widows from these areas have no help or aid from anywhere. Their condition becomes more critical when such widows have no means of livelihood, that is, when they are not employed or have no strong trade which they are engaged in.

Thus, the importance of this work on widowhood in Igbo land cannot be over emphasized. It is against this background that effort has been made in this work to cover the following:

(1) Problems of the widows in Igbo land (2) Implications of widowhood practices for widows in Igbo land: (a) Health

implications (b) Social implications (c) Economic implications (d) Cultural implications (3) Solutions to the problems of widowhood in Igboland (4) Concluding remarks.

Problems of Widows in Igboland

The problems of widows or widowhood in Igbo land cannot be over emphasized. In Igbo land, the widows go through a lot of difficulties both at the death of their husbands and after they have been buried.

Bliuokhoff (1998: 15) writes that it is now a common practice for the relatives of the deceased man to accuse his wife of killing or masterminding the death of her husband. As a result of this accusation, every injustice done to the widow serves her right. He states further that, in so many places, people have cultivated the culture of depriving the widows of their rights of inheritance. Sources, according to him, have proved that grabbing of the dead man's property by his relatives, is as a result of greed induced by poverty on the side of the dead man's relatives, though they make false accusation against the widow to justify their evil deeds.

According to Ezeliora (1997: 21) "the widow is made a visitor in both her father's and husband's families and she loses all rights to ownership as soon as her husband dies, worst still, if she has no male issue for the man. In most cases, she is also among the dead man's property to be shared by his relations. The practice of sharing the widow along with her husband's wealth is very pronounced in the practice of levirate marriage and widowhood inheritance in which the matrimonial ownership of the widow is transferred to a close relation of her dead husband soon after his mourning period as is done in Nsukka.

Okoye (1995: 30) states that the widows have no say in the affairs of their husband's burial because they are crippled by the norms. They are seen as impure and contaminated beings. Until some humiliating cleansing rituals are performed, the widow cannot associate or even discuss freely with her neighbours. Okoye (1997: 45) goes further to say that the impact of widowhood in the socio-cultural and economic lives of our societies cannot be overemphasized. The woman's world

collapses completely at the death of her husband, yet death is a devastating natural tragedy and therefore, ought to elicit public sympathy and support for the widow and her children. Unfortunately, in Igbo land, the widow is subjected to obnoxious and harmful traditional practices, which not only constitute barriers to development but also threaten the continuous existence of such a woman. No consideration is given to the impact of such traumatic experience on the lives of the widow's children.

Nwadinobi (1995) discovers that most obnoxious harmful traditional practices against the widows in Igbo land are perpetrated by a women cultural group, *umuada*. The researcher mentioned some predicaments meted out to widows by their fellow women. In order to destroy her beauty and reduce her to a repugnant rag, the *umuada* group shave off the widow's hair, even the pubic and armpit hairs of the widows are shaven. This is what Nwadinobi calls defacement. During the defacement, the widow is stripped naked and she is given some repugnant rags to cover her nakedness. No bathing is allowed for twenty eight (28) days as is the case in Arochukwu in Abia State and the widow is not allowed to wash her hands at meal time. She is subjected to routinized crying.

The widow is symbolically dethroned at the death of her husband by the same *umuada*. She is made to sit on the bare floor in full view of all who troop to pay condolence visits. Nwadinobi (1995) however states that the more elderly ones are given mats or wrappers to spread on the floor and sit on. The significance of the sitting on the floor is that the widow, hitherto enthroned to a position of respect by virtue of being married, now suffers social dethronement.

Furthermore, Ezeliora (1997) remarks that in some places, the widow is compelled to sleep alongside with her husband's dead body the nights before his burial. Ezeliora emphasizes that, there are some women who will force their fellow women to drink the water used to wash the dead body of her husband on the pretence that she failed to take care of the man when he was alive. No man has ever inflicted any of the above mentioned assault to a

fellow man on the death of his wife even when it is clearly known that the man is responsible for the death of the wife. This is the height of injustice; it is absolutely against equity and justice, a total breach of fundamental human rights. It is the evil women do against womanhood. Okoye (1995) calls it woman's individual inhumanity to women.

Nwaoga (1983: 34) views the widow's activities as restricted and confined. In some areas if a woman loses her husband, all the property will be taken away and she will be out of everybody's sight. He goes further to say that during the "Nso period", she does not speak to any man nor does she cook during the period of confinement and isolation. Relatives give necessary help to the widow throughout that period of mourning as some women may not even allow the widow to come close to their husbands for fear of the widows gaining their husbands' attention and admiration.

Even when the widow has been remarried to her husband's brother, she still goes through some problems, as the late husband's brother might not agree to train her children in school. The widow also receives torment from the other wives, as they would do anything possible to eliminate her from the family. This and many more add to the problems of most widows in the Igbo society.

Nwoga (1983) holds the view that women suffer a lot both socially and culturally on the death of their husbands. They suffer socially in the sense that the society sees them as irresponsible and would hardly entrust anything into their hands. He observes that most widows find it hard to secure a job after the death of their husbands thereby they go through a lot of social stigma. He goes further to state that the widows also suffer culturally because they believe they are entangled in a culture, which nobody can change except the gods.

Thio (1990) observes that due to the culture of the Igbo society, which does not allow the widow to associate with other people, she is beset with loneliness and those who even visit her

shy away from discussing her problems as it is believed that they might inherit her condition.

Nwoga (1983) states that the problem of loneliness is more on young widows as the old ones have their children to comfort them unlike the young widows whose children are still young and tender to console and comfort them.

Implications of Widowhood Practices for Widows in Igboland

Widowhood practice has a lot of implications for the widows themselves, which include health implications, social implications, economic implications, and cultural implications.

Health Implications

Okonkwo (1989) observes that during the period of twenty-eight days' confinement, the widow is exposed to the risk of contacting all sorts of diseases, due to the environment which she finds herself. Nwadinobi (1995) observes that the widow sits on the bare floor, wears rags, lives in an un-swept room and also does not take her bath for twenty-eight days. This exposes her to so many dangerous skin diseases. He goes further to say that the widow is compelled to chew bitter kola and cry aloud at intervals as prescribed by *umuada*. She is not even allowed to wash her hands during meals.

Kanu (1990) observes that in some places, the utensils used by the widow is not washed throughout the twenty-eight days period, which makes her prone to food poisoning. He also states that stress and stress-related illness such as ulcer and hypertension easily attack the widows during or shortly after the twenty-eight days confinement period. If she eventually dies during this period as a result of poor feeding and care, it is believed that she is responsible for the death of her late husband and has faced the wrath of the gods.

Social Implications

Helherington (1989: 105) states that widows experience task overload. They have to carry out both their own role and male

role. According to him, it is the economic hardship that forces the widow to work outside the home instead of staying at home and taking care of her kids. The widows, according to him, face a problem of authority in disciplining their children. He states that children believe that fathers are much more threatening than mothers.

Queenhalter, Young, and Smith (1997) observe that very commonly, families and communities do reject both mother and child, putting them to the rank of detached homeless and perhaps delinquent. Procter (1980) in his research asserts that for most widows, life is difficult as they experience an expansion of role responsibility soon after they assume their new role as single parents.

Umezurike (1992) states thus "fatherless children are always uncultured, untrained and a lot of them constitute the street beggars who would later grow up and join the street hooligans, armed robbers, dupes, drug addicts and prostitutes. He states that over 50% of the children found in the motherless babies home are fatherless children. He goes further to say that in these cases, prostitution is always the last resort of many young widows who lost their rights of inheritance to the relatives of their late husbands. This prostitution could expose them to all kinds of diseases. According to him, widows who contract dangerous diseases become destitutes and swell the number of street beggars. Some who become emotionally or mentally deranged add to the number of mad women on the streets due to stress and hardship.

Economic Implications

In virtually all cultures in Igbo land, a woman is disallowed from inheriting her husband's estates. The relative economic powerlessness of many widows constrains them to being inherited along side their late husband's property by male members of the deceased families as it promises a better fortune. According to Odimegwu (2002), widowhood rites in Igbo land smack of denial of basic human rights of the widows. The

widow is denied property and financial resources and this is with little or no community reaction.

The plight of widows in Igbo land, according to Okonkwo (1989), includes confinement and long duration of mourning period, hair scrapping, etc. Their untouchable status or being considered *persona non-grata* worsens their condition, but most importantly, the practice of disinheriting and dispossessing them has serious economic implications which go a long way towards affecting the widow and her children negatively. According to Afigbo (1989), widows were denied the right to their husband's property and there is no instance where the widow was the chief heir. Many communities explain this away by referring to the right of a widow to remarry after the expiration of mourning period and the fact that such re-marriage could be into a different community.

It is possible to give an immediate verdict on the matter of widowhood practices. Nwoga (1983: 27) argues that human greed exists in most families and the death of male member of the family offers an opportunity to the other males of the family to increase their holdings of the scarce and inelastic commodity, land. The commodity now in question can expand to houses, cars, furniture, etc. It is acquisitiveness, which basically controls the treatment of widows. Dehumanized and humiliated by the religions, rituals and other practices, the widow becomes prone to keep silent over other forms of oppression which end up, ultimately, as economic despoliation. Ejeabukwa (2002: 45) argues that widows are exploited and suppressed simultaneously by unrefined men. Grievances such as these coupled with poor economic status often occasioned by the squandering of her late husband's property in giving him befitting burial, compounds the widow's problem by making her economically dependent.

Nwankwo (2002) argues that a woman is not allowed to inherit her husband's estate, instead another male in the family inherits her along with the estate of her husband. This practice still exists in most communities in Igbo land like in Olo in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State though on a bare minimum. She argues that this was a customary practice designed

to protect the woman and her interests by providing her with someone upon whom she retains the 'honourable status' of being married.

In recognition of traditional inheritance laws, which debar women from inheriting land and other properties of their husbands, Ike (2002) argues that widows are left with little or nothing to sustain them and the children, that is, if she is not chased out of her husband's house. Akpala (1998) argues that the burial of the husband's corpse brings the widow's plight to a crescendo. Sometimes, the burial is suspended until documents pertaining to the husband's property including the land, investments and bank accounts are retrieved from the widow.

Cultural Implications

In a typical Igbo community, argues Afigbo (1989: 55), the source of harsh oppression of the widow at the death of her husband are the umuada (daughters of the extended family married or unmarried). They take charge of the catalogue of customary rituals, harassments, demands, and accusations. Even these modern times and after about hundred years of Christianity, the situation has undergone very minor modifications. There are cases where widows have been locked in the room where the corpse of the late husband lay, left to sleep alone with the corpse as punishment for allegations of past ill-treatment of husband during his life time. It is in this regard that Afigbo (1989) concludes that women are sometimes their own enemies.

Effah, Mbachu, and Onyegbula (1995) argue that widowhood is a time for settling scores especially in the case of a widow who was never favoured by her late husband's family. They often make the already painful and dehumanizing widowhood rites more painful. According to Akpala (1998: 67), the torture and humiliation meted out to the widow are better imagined than experienced. In parts of Enugu State (like in Nsukka) and other Igbo speaking states, a group of daughters of the kindred otherwise known as the "Umuada" subject the widow to all kinds of torture, usually the widow is directly accused of having killed her husband in order to inherit his estate.

Nwoga (1983) argues that in Igbo tradition, generally, *umuada* retain intense influence over what happens in the family in which they are born. In some cases, this means near tyrannical power over the women married by their brothers. They insist on establishing that the wife has not come from another family to kill some members of their own family in order to carry the wealth from their own family over to her own. Odimegwu (2002) argues that the Igbo believe that if the dead is not mourned according to tradition, he may not get "his share in the region of the dead" and would disturb the family by bringing ill-luck and mishaps. Consequently, a widow that fails to carry out these rites is penalized, victimized or denied her rights.

Solutions to the Problems of Widows in Igbo land

Okoye (1995) notes that not only widowhood but also the obnoxious harmful traditional practices associated with it have done havoc to the entire societal life of our rural communities. It is therefore worthwhile to unanimously fight against the harmful tradition that brings about societal discomfort. A lot of people who practise this custom know that it is harmful but they don't want to modify it because it has been the practice from the time of their ancestors. Aguené (1998) observes that it is these harmful practices in our culture that bring about problems and setbacks for the rural dwellers.

Megerate (1977) states that theories of modernization are currently forms of evolutionism streaming from the ideas of progress and social engineering, which assume that change means improvement of social conditions. We can make some changes in our old customs to suit our present needs by making new customs that can replace the already existing ones, if we can make a headway in progressive societal life.

Concluding Remarks

Widowhood is a social ill that has eaten deep into the fabrics of our Igbo land. Widows are ill-treated in the society. Most of the practices being undergone by widows sometimes expose them to fetish acts and other social problems. In most cases, widows

are left with nothing after their husbands' death thereby exposing them to further dangers. For instance, if a widow is denied the right to inherit the property of her husband and is subjected to abject poverty, she might fall back to prostitution in order to survive. It is now common knowledge that to increase the number of prostitutes in the society means to increase the chances of spreading HIV and STDs in the society. Again, if the children of the widows are left to roam the streets without good training, there is every likelihood that they will engage themselves in some social mischief like rape, stealing, drug addiction, armed robbery, etc., which would pose serious dangers to the welfare of every other member of the society. The harmful traditional practices against the widows are societal problems, which affect all the members of the society directly or indirectly. Misfortunes of the widows affect every other member of the society.

Nevertheless, all the harmful traditional practices could be eradicated in Igbo land and this could only be achieved through revolution and not by evolution. It needs the reaction of well-organised revolutionary groups. It equally needs a multidisciplinary action. Dialogue may not help situation in stopping harmful widowhood practices in Igbo land. The traditional rulers, *umuada* and other cultural groups will certainly fight vigorously to subdue every effort made by any revolutionary group. Therefore, it is expected that conflicts may arise in the process of this cultural change. But the conflict will die off immediately after the people begin to see the benefits of the innovations. The government and non-governmental organizations should come in and help the widows.

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