

**WIDOWHOOD IN AFRICA:  
A MAJOR CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY**

**Francis Felix Edet**

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Calabar,  
Calabar, Nigeria

Email: francisedet002@g.mail.com.

**Abstract**

It is an incontrovertible fact that we have widows among us and the number is constantly increasing because of incessant deaths. The horror of death is universal among mankind. Death, as a mystery, is always accompanied with pain whenever and wherever it occurs. Nobody is righteous enough to escape death and nobody is wicked enough to escape death. Nobody is too rich or too poor for death. Death is a universal calamity that will come to everyone. Every generation, regardless of age, status and tribe is normally visited by death. It is this death that exposes women to this plight or condition. It marks the beginning of suffering and change of identity. The death of a woman's husband may invariably reduce and humble her. It affects her rating in the society, church and several other places. The reason widows suffer after the demise of their husbands is always because of the expectation of the society. Also, the church appears to sometimes share the tradition or worldview that women are inferior to men and as such must not usurp authority over a man. This seems to be one of the factors preventing the church from taking a stand to defend the cause of widows and orphans. This article shall examine these issues.

**Keywords: Widowhood, Church and Society.**

**Introduction**

It is a veritable fact that the condition of widows and divorced women remains deplorable in the society. Widows and divorced women suffer from varying degrees of psychological stress.

Almost worldwide, widows comprise a significant proportion of all women. Ranging from 7% to 16% of all adult women. In some countries and regions, their proportion is far higher. In developed countries, widowhood is experienced primarily by elderly women, while in developing countries, it also affects younger women, who are still rearing children (Rands 127).

Loss of spouse is a very negative life event; just as the loss of a child. Widowhood presents a myriad of economic, social and psychological problems, particularly in the first year, after the death of one's spouse. A major problem is always economic hardship. When the husband was previously the principal breadwinner; but at his demise, his wife is now deprived of the income that was coming from him.

The greatest problem in widowhood is always emotional. Even if it had been a bad marriage, the survivor feels the loss. The role of the spouse is lost, social life changes from couple-oriented to association with other single people; and the widowed will no longer enjoy the daily companion of the other spouse (Raschke 597).

### **The Condition of Widows**

One basic reason for the miserable plight of widows is the patriarchal nature of our society. Men are mostly in control of things, both at the domestic level and at the societal level. Women are predominantly to be seen and not heard. Men therefore form an integral part of the culture.

As a patriarchal society, women are excluded from the distribution of inheritance. This explains the reason why whenever a woman loses her husband, the male relations quickly come around to take possession of the property of their brother or son. In fact, more often than not, the widow is also regarded as part of the property to be inherited. Someone within the clan would inherit the woman. The famous Hausa phrase that explains this uncanny practice is "**Auren Gado**," which means "inheritance marriage." Several widows have been exposed to inextricable difficulties because of their inability to accept "inheritance marriage."

War also provides a good opportunity for female abuse. War crimes against women include rape, genocide, sexual slavery and forced pregnancy. Women or widows have to succumb to soldiers in order to save their lives. A great deal of soldiers would take their turn to satisfy their lustful desires to the detriment of one woman or widow. A widow once made the following confession to her pastor:

Do you know why this my three-seater seat is broken? I used to fight with at least a man every night on it wanting to rape me. This is why am not always in good health. How long will I contend with this? I had prayed to God and no godly husband came, so I had to marry this man as a second wife to

save myself from these brutal men (Cited in Andria 12).

As a patriarchal society, men make the laws and regulations that enhance the effectiveness and togetherness of the society. Most of these laws are made basically to keep women in perpetual dependency and subservience to their male counterpart. This applies to both religious and family life. For instance, in African Traditional Religion, women prepare the drinks for religious festivals, but are prevented from participating in the festivity in the shrine. The male priest imposes a heavy fine on any woman who is known to have peeped at the masquerade (Grass 5).

Since the widow is deprived of what she could have inherited at the demise of her husband, she therefore has nothing to depend upon when the husband is no more. Destitution sets in once a woman becomes a widow. More often than not, relatives make every effort to clear the house of every valuable property as soon as her husband dies. The widow is left with insignificant things like children's clothes and a few pots and pans. Bank books are taken away without any consultation with the widow. All these things are done because tradition permits it and everything must be done in conjunction with the olden day's tradition.

Invariably, the hardship and miserable plight of widows is as a result of the way society views women. Women in the society are not free to exercise their fundamental human rights. If women are free, their problem would be less if they become widows. The pain associated with widowhood is excruciating. Lamenting on this sorry situation of widows Onwukwe noted that:

Being a woman in a patriarchal society like ours is a tall order let alone being a widow. Knowledge monopolists owe us an explanation as to why this is. Whenever the cold hands of death snatch away the family bread winner, immeasurable consequences, untold hardship, misery and frustration set in to buffet the bereaved family. The onerous task of fending for the family, being a single parent of the kids is something a young and unprepared widow was not ready to handle. Being a widow marks the harbinger of poverty and suffering and when it happens, even hitherto decent wives join the pigs to roll the dirt. As they say, however clean and perfect

it was, a finger that runs through the butt never smells the same afterwards (8).

In Nigeria, widows are seen as automatic murder suspects whenever they lose their husbands. They attract open hatred and rejection from the immediate family. In worst cases, the kids of these widows hawk items and beg for food. The widow and her children lose and suffer huge mental and emotional trauma.

### **The Christian Widow and the Responsibility she is saddled with.**

It is vital to begin this section with the lamentation of a widow by the name Love. It runs thus:

Sometimes being a Christian widow and not having a help mate can be overwhelming. Here I am, making decisions that I never dreamed possible. I have no idea what tomorrow might bring, and yet Jesus said we should not worry about the morrow. I am at a point where I will like to have a male companion, but my options are narrowed as the potential individual would have to be a Christian. Meanwhile, I am noticing women around my age and older, who may or may not be saved and happen to be single for one reason or another, getting married or going to live with a man they have met (Personal Interview, March 7, 2012).

Also, the Holy Writ has made it abundantly clear in Ecclesiastes 4:9-11 that: "two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work. If one falls down, his friend can help him up, but pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone?." The absence of a father-figure at home has invariably compelled widows to assume responsibilities which could have been the exclusive preserve of a man. We shall examine a few of such responsibilities in this section.

The first responsibility noteworthy is children's education. Many argue that it is not only men that should pay the children's school fees. That in some families, it is paid by both spouses, while in others, it is the woman or man that pays. But it is a veritable fact that the widow who has had the children's fees paid by the husband would toil more to pay the fees alone, than the widow who had been the one paying it herself. In a situation where a widow's wages is so

meager, it becomes a herculean task for her to pay school fees out of such wages. When widows are unable to pay the fees of their children, this will lead to illiteracy and ignorance on the part of the children.

Also, it is vital to talk about the health bills at this juncture. In some families, when the husband was alive, the medical bill of the family was taken care of by his employer. Now that he is no more, the responsibility falls on the widow, who may not be working. Medical expenses are on the increase these days. Many illnesses found within some families result from lack of good nutrition. The food given to children in such homes is often deficient of good and essential nutrients. They consume whatever is available just to keep their stomach busy; just for survival. Many people who could have lived longer have died in these families because of lack of exposure to good medical treatment.

It is significant to note that growing children tend to eat more food than those who have reached maturity. This implies that a widow who has such children will need enough food to be able to provide for the children. When she is unable to cope, then the repercussion is always that the children don't stay indoors. They start loitering around and become a social nuisance to the public or community. They may go out stealing, pilfering, picking pocket and indulging in several criminal acts that will make them incur the wrath of the law; and in this way, break the heart of the widow.

The desire to provide enough food for the family has put many widows under pressure of different kinds. Some have gone to the extent of selling their bodies in sexual immorality, in order to provide or cater for the needs of their children. This is true of those widows who don't have anything to do in order to eke out a living.

The widow also encounters the problem of clothing herself and her children. It is particularly so because we live in a society where people's worth and significance is sometimes measured by the quality of clothes they put on. This has tremendous and far-reaching consequences for the widow, who before the demise of her husband had enough clothes for herself and children. Gotar stressing this fact noted that: "With the death of the husband, she is faced with the problem of clothing herself and the children as well. And in the face of competing demands such as feeding, providing medical care and paying school fees, she may find herself in dire straits" (37). It is pertinent to note that there is nothing wrong with dressing well, if the means of doing so is there. It only becomes a problem when the widow resorts to ungodly behaviours in order to satisfy her curiosity.

Another aspect that a widow faces inextricable difficulties is when it appertains to disciplining their children. Generally, a great deal of widows complain that children do not regard their discipline. They complain that their children do not respect their admonitions. One of them made this confession: “When our father (husband) was alive, the children were always doing what they were asked to do. But now that he is no more, they do not listen to me” (Cited in Adepoju 8). The issue of child discipline is an unresolved problem in many Christian families. A family that is deficient in this area is in a pitiable state as the children will go astray or become unruly.

A widow may need the counseling of a pastor or mature Christian where there is indiscipline among her children. She should not feel reluctant reporting her children to the church leadership, because help could come from this direction. She also needs to pray fervently for the children. This is because God is able to change the children and restore decorum to the home.

It is a veritable fact that several women assert that what a man can do, a woman can do even better. But it must be noted here that there are some domestic tasks that need more energy. It may be true that women can do them, but this could be very exerting on the woman and will get her tired quickly. Apart from normal domestic chores of cleaning the house, cooking the meals and washing the dishes, the widow finds herself also doing all the other jobs that the man was doing. She digs the garden alone, fetches the wood, hangs the curtain, climbs the ladder, rakes the fields, tills the land and does several other things alone. This makes the widow to over-stress herself, when she could have been assisted by her husband.

### **Caring for Widows**

Widows, more often than not are always living in abject poverty and the church is not expected to relent in taking care of them. In the Old Testament, widows were part of God’s family. They found joy in fellowshiping with other people of God. They were part of the worship that went on in the tabernacle and at feast times. (Deut. 16:9-12). This feast was also known as “feast of harvest” or “Pentecost.” Widows were part and parcel of this celebration (Ryle 12).

It must be noted too that widows are very dear to God’s heart. In Psalm 65:5, the Holy Writ views God as: “a father of the fatherless and a judge of the widows...” Also, in Psalm 146:9, the Bible says: “The Lord preserveth the strangers, he relieveth the father less and widows, but the way of the wicked he turneth upside down.” God is therefore the defender of the widows. He

cherishes and sustains them. He will definitely punish those who oppress them. This is clearly stated in Malachi 3:5.

Widows must be cared for, by their children, family members and the church. If children provide for their parents who are widows, God will be more happy with them. Family members should equally take similar care of widows in order to secure God's favour. The church which is a congregation of God's people should see widows as an integral part of that family.

The society too must also take very good care of widows. Wherever widows are found, the society should cherish them and be generous towards them. Both the church and society must work towards meeting the needs of widows. All widows, whether in the church or outside the church deserve church assistance in different ways and at different levels. This should be encouraged because caring for widows is part of preaching the Gospel. Through this medium, some widows who did not even know God can now come to the knowledge of God.

#### **Widows and Remarriage.**

The Bible makes it explicitly clear that widows have the right to remarry. Scriptures abound in favour of this, both in the Old and New Testament. In the Old Testament, it was called Levirate marriage. The word Levirate is derived from the Latin word "Levir," which means "husband's brother." This means that a man is permitted to marry the widow of his dead brother, in order to raise children for him, if he died leaving no child. In the absence of a brother, a close relative or kinsman takes this responsibility. This was practiced so that the name and property of the deceased would be preserved-Genesis 38 (Milam 23).

Paul also talks about the remarriage of widows in 1 Corinthians 7:8-9, 39-40 and 1 Timothy 5:13-15. These scriptures can be a very good guide for the remarriage of widows. Paul encourages widows to remarry and give birth to children instead of living promiscuously. It is more beneficial to be married and give birth to children than to engage in indiscriminate sexual relationships.

## **Conclusion**

It is an incontrovertible fact that widows keep increasing daily as a result of the death of their husbands. Whenever death strikes, especially in the direction of their husbands, married women are always at the suffering end, since this makes them become widows.

Widows have a significant role to play in helping their situation. The demise of their husbands should not be the end of life for them. When death occurs, they should prepare to make necessary adjustments in all areas of their lives, because their new condition demands that. They need a positive adjustment, so that their lives can go on.

Also, the decision to re-marry or not to re-marry is a very vital decision a widow must take. If she knows she cannot stay alone, then it is better to re-marry than to live indecently. But if she can stay alone, then let her remain single. What matters here is the fact that the life of a widow, after the death of her husband must be a meaningful and decent one.

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