



HARMFUL AFRICAN TRADITIONAL PRACTICES IN WIDOWHOOD

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WIDOWHOOD

The state of having lost one's spouse to death is known as widowhood.

A woman whose husband has died is a widow, while a man whose wife has died is a widower.

However, these terms are not applied to divorced men and women following the death of their ex-spouse.

In every society, we have women of all categories of age whose husbands are late. These set of women constitute a significant number of every country's population.

Meanwhile, the way they are being treated, their welfare and conditions of living vary from one society to another. In this project we look at how the widows who are descendants of African are been treated after the death of their husbands. Most of these treatments that they get from both their oppressive in laws and the society are

attributed to the traditional rights that govern the particular community.

TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

Traditional practice reflects values and beliefs held by members of a community from the past generation known as the ancestors.

HARMFUL TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

The harmful traditional practice are the forms of oppressive, violence, detrimental, malicious, and barbaric traditional belief that has been initiated by the African ancestors as part of culture to the people. It is incredibly sad to know that the African Ancestors have succeeded in ingraining the Africans into some backward and barbaric traditions in the name of culture.

This cultural aspect of widowhood in African countries has created what could be described as an epidemic to widowhood. Whereby the rights and dignities of these vulnerable women are being violated in the name of culture that is meant to be dynamic.

Sometimes I feel it is like the African ancestors have written our stories in their own way, at the same time make us accept the way it has been written. They make us to believe that, we must submit ourselves to doing whatever they present to us as the traditional rites and cultures.

Also, they create the fear in our minds by establishing the fact that, something bad will happen to us if we do not adhere to the cultural beliefs. I was also subjected to

some of these cultural practices without being able to question them as a young woman who lost her husband at an early age of 29. Nothing prepared me for those emotions.

People are yet to understand the basis upon which the African Women must go through process of calamities following the loss of their husbands, which is a great emotional pain on its own.

GENDER DISCRIMINATION

African women are being disadvantaged in terms of rights and duties. This is nothing but what could be described as a sort of gender inequality.

The loss of a husband is devastating for many women, which could also be magnified by a long term of struggle for basic needs including their human rights and dignities. No one forces a man to any traditional practices after the death of their wives. They stand in charge of their own life and can chose to re marry as early as they want and are not subjected to any form of exclusion or stigmatisation.

Most women are being forced into an unwanted marriage as well as the traumatising and dehumanising widowhood rites culture, which has been detrimental to women's general well-being.

In most African countries, widows are being oppressed and are stigmatised, shunned and shamed for life. The so-called widowhood rites often increase the

widow's grief and sorrow, also have a negative impact on their esteem, which can adversely drop them to the level of impoverished.

Some of these harmful traditional practices varies among tribes and families. While some families are so diligent and mild in dealing with widows, some are very cruel. Some of these harmful ways of dealing with widows are as follows: -

1. Cultural suppression of grief

One of the principal aspects of widowhood is grief. Due to cultural practices, I have for several years hidden the pains of my personal grief because I have had no chance of expressing it at the early stage.

Grief is an important aspect of widowhood that should never be overruled, but the African culture suppresses the mode of our grief. They neglect the fact that our grief is unique to us and should be made personal. When you feel like crying, they tell you to stop, and often when you do not feel like crying, you are made to cry especially on the arrival of a guest or family member just to prove that you are innocent and have no hand in the death of your husband. They keep steering at the widow to observe her mood forgetting the fact, she might not be emotionally ready to cry at that time or when they feel she must have to cry.

Again, what people say around a grieving widow sometimes add more to her pain. Things like, thank God you are young, you will quickly get another man to marry, like as if one love instantly replaces another. Some can say, what if your husband goes mad, imagine how that can be consoling word at that grieving period. Some will say what if the man gets lost and cannot be found, or words like “do you know maybe he will marry another wife if he remains alive” Also, people say things like “you grieve too much” to a grieving widow. With all these, the African culture suppresses our grief which is not healthy for the widow’s recovery process.

2. Social stigma – In any marriage, if the wedding vow reads anything like mine, the moment the woman loses her husband, legally or contractually she is no longer the wife of her husband but instantly becomes his widow. This sudden change in the status and identity of women poses a sort of social stigma as she automatically becomes a single woman. She instantly loses the respect that women earn for being married. However, this is simply the wrong impression that people have about widows, which is also known as labelling.

4. Sexual cleansing practice – This is mostly practised in some African countries. A male relative is invited to have sexual intercourse with the widow to cleanse her, in preparation to re-enter the society. In the absence of a male relative, a stranger who is known to be a professional cleanser will be invited to perform that ritual of sexual cleansing with the woman. This was confirmed to me by women from Kenya during

our research. This aspect of the widowhood traditional practices often inflicts the widows with the HIV/AIDS by having unprotected sex with strangers.

5. Shaving widows head – Most African countries practise the ritual of shaving the woman's head following the death of her husband due to their cultural beliefs. This will automatically subject the women to what is known as societal stigma, because there is no way that she can escape the stigma of her widowhood.

6. Drinking bathing water from the corpse body – To prove the innocence of the widow in having a hand in the death of her husband, most culture in Africa will allow the woman to drink from the water that the corpse has being bathed in detailing that, if she refuses it means that killed the husband and within certain number of days she also will die.

7. Sleeping in same room with the corpse for certain number of days – This is a common practice in some part of Africa especially in the Eastern part of Nigeria. Where widows are being made to sleep with the corps of their husband for certain numbers of days just to proof their innocence or for other cultural believe.

8. Forceful endless cry, Some cultures in Africa make the widow go on endless cry even when she is not emotionally ready to do so. All these brings about an emotional torture and distress to the mental of women.

9. Poor feeding and eating from dirty plates – In order to punish some widows, the in laws will make her eat

from dirty and even broken plates in the name of cultural practices.

10. Forceful marriage to male relatives – This is known as widow's inheritance. Whereby a woman is forced to marry a male relative so that the properties of the husband can be controlled by the man's family. In a situation where the woman refuses the offer, she can be thrown out without anything and in some cases the children are also taking from her. They make her realise that she came into the marriage with nothing and with no children so she will have to go out of it with nothing.

11. Exclusion of widows for months – Widows are socially excluded for certain periods of time ranging between 5 months to 1 year or more according to the family tradition. During her seclusion, she will be confined into a room and will not be allowed to go out until after her seclusion period and widowhood cleansing done on her.

12. Accusations of witchcraft –Some African In laws mostly blame the widow for the death of her husband. The innocent women are often accused of witchcraft following the death of the husband and are badly dealt with for an offence that they have not committed. Some of the widows are being driven out of the village and treated as an outcast.

13. Prevent widows from bathing for days – Some African cultures will not allow the widow to wash herself with water for certain number of days. Also, this practice is because of traditional believe.

All these detrimental and barbaric ways of dealing with women and violating of their human rights and dignities create a sort of trauma in the lives of the vulnerable women. Many of the women never get over it.

Oppressed shunned and shame – I came across some India ladies while I was researching. They have explained to me how widowed women are being treated in their own culture. Everything that has been given to the woman as a symbol of her marriage will be taking from them, follow them in crowd to the local river and throw all those things that she valued in the river. They stand and watch her see those valuable symbols of her marriage flow away in the river. The women are then shunned and shamed.

One of the ladies I spoke with during my research expressed how her mother who is a widow was deprived of attending her own son's (her brother) wedding ceremony. She was denied access to the wedding because of this so called traditional believe that says her bad luck can be inflicted on the newly wedded couple if she can be present at the wedding.

MOST AFRICAN WIDOWS DO NOT ENJOY THE BEST OF HEALTH

All these humiliating and oppressive practices creates a stressful situation in the lives of women after the loss of their husbands. So, they suffer a lot of physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual

problems which hinders their general wellbeing and their ability to function well.

Majority of the women go into a deep depression, some live with high blood pressure, some live with HIV/AIDS while some women end up with mental health illnesses and even poverty following the death of their husbands.

EFFECTS OF WIDOWHOOD TRADITIONAL PRACTICES ON MENTAL HEALTH.

All these abuses, barbaric, and malicious ways of dealing with widows in the name of culture is posing a lot of problems to the mental health of the vulnerable women. Most of the women get confused and often lose concentration or focus including memory loss, because the stress levels are tremendously high which results in their inability to function well.

Research shows that one third of women meet the criteria for clinical depression within few months of their bereavement. Especially when they are subjected to denial and suppressing the loss grief.

WIDOWS THE FORGOTTEN SUFFERERS

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women. Most of the women get confused and often lose concentration or focus including memory loss, because the stress levels are tremendously high which results in their inability to function well.

As of 2019 before the global pandemic, the world statistics shows that there are about 259 million widows across the world, 116 million of them live in extreme poverty about 86 million widows have faced various forms of physical and emotional abuse, and an average of 2 million of their children are liable to die before the age of 5.

In Nigeria alone, statistics shows that there are over 4 million disadvantaged widows with over 21 million children. An average of 500 wives becoming widows daily in Nigeria.

The statistics of widows in the East Midlands from 2011 census says that there are 229,756 widowed women living in the East Midlands.

Now with the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, the numbers of widowed women have moved to the top as the death toll of men increases.

Despite the huge rise in the number of these set of women, just a little is known or heard about them and their wellbeing because, their voices are unheard, and their agonies go unnoticed. This relates that they are silent victims and forgotten sufferers.

EPIDEMIC OF WIDOWHOOD AS A RESULT OF THE HARMFUL AFRICAN TRADITIONAL PRACTICES IN WIDOWHOOD

The stress of losing a husband is enough to drive a woman crazy more reasons why the evolutionary biologist have analysed that the human body produces stress hormones as a result of separation.

This stress is now compounded with a lot of traditional beliefs and rituals in some part of the African Countries . The backward African tradition has brought a lot of calamities to the lives of millions of vulnerable women in the name of being a widow, an occurrence that is due to none of their fault.

Most women have being robbed of their inheritance, also, their dignities, pride and values have been taken away from them.

HIV/AIDS - Majority of these women have lost their lives to this virus following the death of their husbands due to the barbaric African traditional rituals known to them as the sexual widowhood cleansing whereby a stranger known as the professional cleansers will have sexual intercourse with the woman with the belief that it prepares the widows to re-enter the society after months or years in seclusion. This practice is common in some part of African countries.

Also, poverty leads some of widows to sleep around with men to get little help from them, through this they can easily contact the virus.

Some widows have lost their lives due to various forms

of infections which they have contacted through infected blades and razors and other non-sterilised objects that are being used to shave their head.

These various forms of ill treatment, abuse, oppression, discrimination and social stigma that most African widows get from the in laws and the society has violated their dignities and have driven most of them into an exclusion, which drag them into poverty because of the drastic drop in their self-esteem and social status.

It is time we join in the fight for the liberation of African Women from the hands of these disguised colonial masters known as the African traditionalist who are the initiator of the ritual practices known as the widowhood rites.

Let us rise to fight against the abuse and discrimination of widows.

African women need to be liberated from oppressive mechanism that has been laid down by the so called culture that violate their human rights and dignities.

Often, I see people who ask me if all these uncivilised and negative cultural practices are still in vogue. The answer I give is yes, is till rife in most Africa countries, even in some part of Nigeria where I come from.

Most sister in laws are known to be the perpetrator. They have turned themselves into champions in the abuse and the violation of the human rights and dignity of their fellow women in the name of practising

widowhood rites that are detrimental to the lives of the silent victims.

ISOLATION, LONELINESS AND DEPRESSION IN WIDOWHOOD

Isolation, loneliness, and depression are some of the significant types of public health. When a man dies in the African countries the widows are kept in isolation by preventing her to go out or see no one. Grieving in a secluded place can have a serious impact in the mental health and general wellbeing of the women.

APPEAL:

We soberly appeal to all, to join in the campaign against the abuse and discriminations of widows.

We seek your support as to be able to give the basic tools of empowerment to widows so to be able to live a fulfilled life and in turn give back to the society.

We want to teach women to fish, and give them the tools of fishing, rather than give them fish. We want to help widows discover new skills for them to have the opportunity to display their potentials.

We need to assist in building their infrastructure so that they can be fully empowered, liberated and find a purpose for their lives, because it is quite noticeable that most African countries are still slow in gender empowerment.

Widows need our support for their capacity building in the line of entrepreneur and in the acquisition of various vocational skills such as hair dressing, tailoring, soap making, hat making, catering, among others.

Please, take a chance in making a difference in the lives of others. Sow a seed in the lives of these women to make a positive change in their lives. Join in the crusade to make widows happy, see them without tears and intimidation, also watch their children grow.
