

WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES: EDUCATION AS A BASIC TOOL

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the menace of widowhood practices on the life of a widow and her offspring's when all that belongs to her have been taken or seized in accordance with the traditions and customs of the people. This occurs more often at the death of her spouse. Education is the only weapon that can spotlight her rights and subsequent assertion of same. Therefore, the need for every woman to be educated cannot be over emphasized.

Introduction

Nigeria is a country with cultural and traditional diversities in relation to child upbringing, marriage and death. The prominent and most affecting among all is the widowhood practices in our society. In most tribes in Nigeria, the death of a man must be linked to the wife. Therefore, it is expected that the wife must perform certain traditional rites to prove her innocence.

In some parts of Nigeria, Edo and Delta states in particular the widow is subjected to taking an oath to deny involvement in the husband's death. The oath would be administered with some drinks and she would be subsequently forced to bath with water used in washing the husband's corpse. In other parts of south-east and south-south geopolitical zones of Nigeria, a widow must shave all her hair (both head and pubic) at the death of her husband, traditionally would be required to wear the same dress or the same type of cloth for a year, sleep on bare floor, eat with broken plates and not wash her hands after food for a number of days or months (Akande 1999).

Among other traditional requirement, a woman whose husband is dead is expected to show great concern through her continuous crying and lamentations to prove her innocence. As soon as her husband is buried, the widow would be inherited by the relation of the late husband and where the woman refused the marriage; she would be denied her right in the family and might even be ejected out of the family with her children in some cases. For the Muslim communities, the widows go through a traditional forty-day mourning period called "talaba" and another thirty – day "idda" period within which they are prohibited from public view (Whyte 2002; Nria 2006).

These inhumane and humiliating practices expose the widows to economic hardship as they are denied access to their husbands' properties, land or building which in most cases, they actually contributed to acquire. In most cultures, women do not have right to inheritance and therefore have no share or access to anything in their parents' family before or during marriage and the woman who lost her husband with every property of her husband taken away from her by her in-laws, would be rendered completely helpless and vulnerable. The UN Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) 2000 noted that widows suffer a lot of status degradation, thus making them vulnerable to social isolation and depression along with discrimination and even physical violence.

The non-inheritance of properties by women had heightened their lack of access to both material and financial resources which further incapacitated them from enhancing the general well-being of their children and families. On the other hand, there are no degrading traditional rites for a widower rather his welfare is the paramount concern of both family and friends. In fact, in some parts of this country, customs and traditions demand that widower should not sleep alone until his wife is interred so that the spirit of the dead wife will not come and disturb his sleep. Another woman would then be imported to sleep and comfort the widower for that period.

Liberating Widows Using Education

Education is the process of developing the individual's abilities and behavior so that he is useful to the society. Education helps an individual to acquire knowledge, skills, attitude and norms of the society which are valuable to the beneficiary as well as the society. (Abdullahi 2005). Fafunwa (2004) defined education as the aggregate of all the processes in which a child or young adult develops abilities, attitude and other forms of behaviors which have positive value to the society in which he lives.

Afe (2002) stated that education is the most powerful instrument for social progress. In this respect, it is expected that the victims of widowhood who have basic education, could develop some skills and become economically empowered to cater for themselves and their children. [Uwah 1999] in her view stated that if more women were educated, they would be more aware of their rights, the basic law of the land, understand different forms of marriage in the country. This will equip them to determine in time what their rights are, when the rights and benefits are denied. It is known that education equips the widow not only to cope with widowhood but with a whole gamut of societal problem and also present a major role in the way a widow reconstructs her identity and her world after her bereavement.

The offspring of such disadvantaged widow are said to be disadvantaged themselves. UNICEF (2008) acknowledged that children of educated women are most likely to go to school and the more schooling the women have received, the more probable it is that their children will also benefit to an extent from advanced and higher education.

Education saves and improves the lives of girls and women. It provides the platform for women to have greater control over their lives and provides them with skills to contribute to the society. It enables them make decisions for themselves and influence their families. It is also the power that produces all other development and social benefit.

Nevertheless, the illiterates and economically dependent widows, in order to survive engage themselves in poor income jobs thereby exposing themselves to health risks, poor working conditions, risk of trafficking, economic and sexual exploitation by men and other forms of abuses (Ukachukwu, Urang, and Giadom, 2007) The result is that the children of the widows are usually exposed to the following;

Early and Forceful Marriages

The girl child of the disadvantaged widow becomes an article of trade as they are given out in marriage too early and the money is shared among family members and sometimes, used in training others especially the boys or used for business to sustain the home.

Prostitution

Some widows most times, encourage their children to go into such trades as they themselves are partakers for survival.

Child Labour

Education protects one from abuse, violence and child labour. However, for the frustrated widow, the children are given out as “housemaids” and these children suffer hardship and in some cases, are used for rituals or may die in accidents.

Street Trading/Hawking

Most children involved in street trading and hawking are victims of rapes, indecent assault and are sometimes killed while crossing the busy roads and streets. Indeed, poverty has actually forced many widows to take their children out of school and use them as street vendors and shop minders. The children are thus, denied their right to a decent education.

High Rate of Illiteracy

UNICEF (2008) identified that the majority of the children that dropped out of school are children of the less privilege and majority of them are girls thereby increasing the level of ignorance and illiteracy among women.

Conclusion

Widowhood practices in general are dehumanizing, humiliating and frustrating act which pose serious health problems, some of these practices include, sleeping on bare floor, drinking of deceased bath water, eating from broken plates, staying indoors for one year, among others. It is indeed a violation of the fundamental human rights of women. The effects of widowhood practices cut across

Widowhood Practices: Education as a Basic Tool

the widowed, their children and the society. These obnoxious practices are man-made and are merely being perpetuated to satisfy an age old belief held by a people.

It is on record that these obnoxious practices called widowhood practices affect the illiterate widows more than the educated ones. The illiterate widows are more often than not, exposed to emotional trauma, psychological instability, and physical debilitation in the event of the death of their spouses. This is because they solely depend on their husbands for survival. The downtrodden effect of widowhood practices adversely affect the children of the illiterate widows because they find it extremely difficult to give the children the best education they deserve and thus expose them to social vices.

The educated widows on the other hand, know their rights and are endowed with skills and needed knowledge to fend for themselves and their children when faced with destructive widowhood practices. Education therefore enhances the cognitive, affective and psychomotor of an individual for the best. Thus, the educated widow is well equipped to surmount the intricacies of widowhood practices.

Recommendations

- 1) The legislative arms of the three tiers of Government should enact relevant Acts, Laws and Bye-Laws with appropriate stringent punitive measures to eliminate obnoxious widowhood practices in our society. There should also be laws against child labour and trafficking with equivocal punishment for offenders.
- 2) Women should be encouraged to embrace education in various forms; Adult, part-time, sandwich, distant learning, full-time and open university to reduce illiteracy and enhance their ability to fight for their fundamental rights.
- 3) Women organizations should carry out extensive and mass enlightenment campaigns against widowhood practices. They can also galvanize government support in this direction.
- 4) Victims of widowhood practices should be rehabilitated through free education, skill acquisition, financial support and scholarship award.
- 5) The time has come for women to seek redress in court in matters of denial of property rights at the death of their spouses.

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Dr. Josephine Azuka Onyido

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