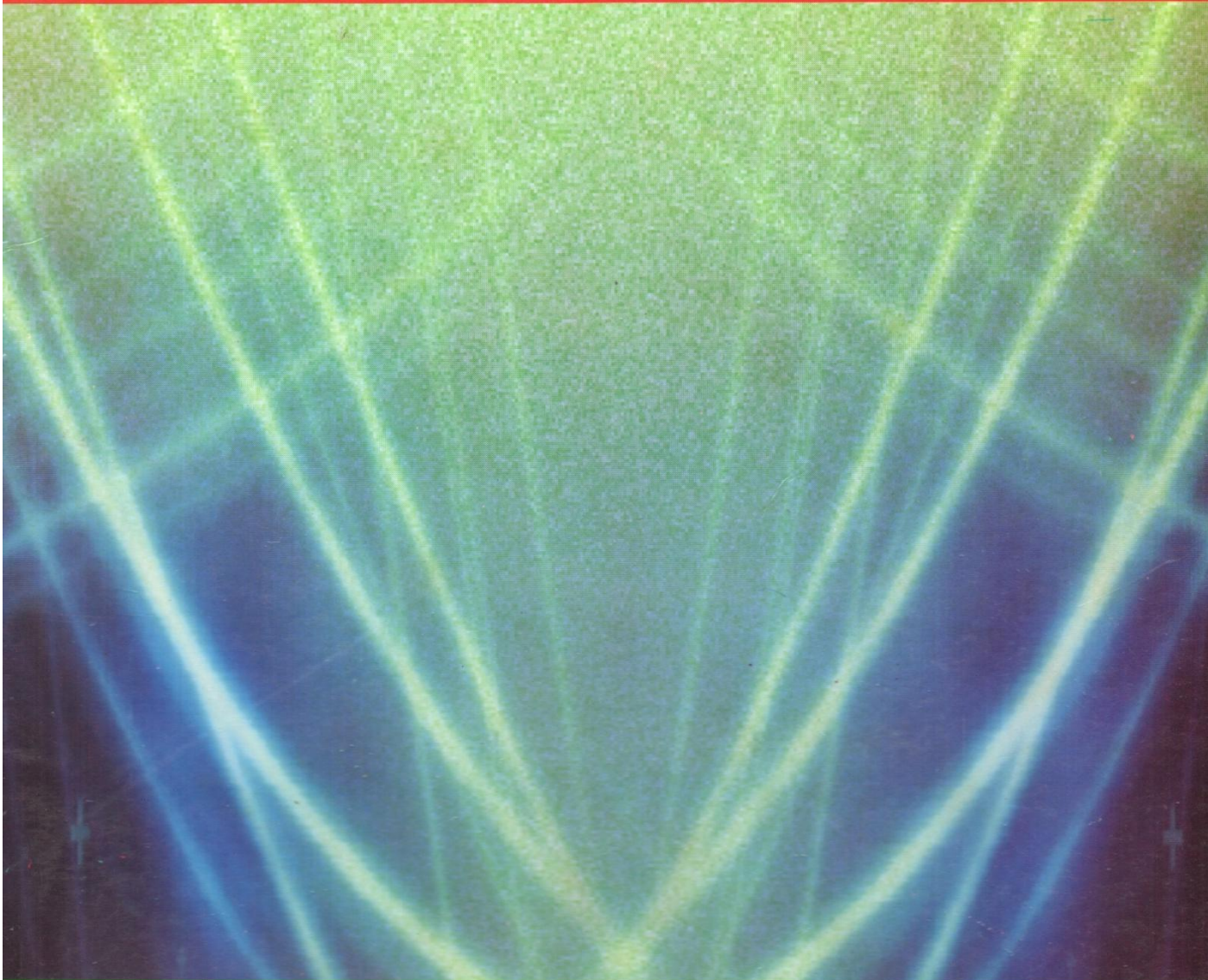


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**WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES AND PROPERTY RIGHTS: THEIR EFFECTS ON HIV/AIDS PREVALENCE
IN THE NIGER DELTA (A CASE STUDY OF AKWA IBOM STATE OF NIGERIA)**

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ABSTRACT

It has been observed that the increase in the deaths of men and women is on the high side especially in the riverine areas of the Niger Delta State; this high death rate is also linked to the high prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS. This work studies in-depth the problems faced by widows in the Nigeria Delta States. It makes use of the questionnaire and structured interview questions. Secondary data is also taken advantage of. The population of study includes Eket, Etinan, Ikot Ekpene and Uyo S Senatorial District. Cluster and stratified random sampling techniques were adopted through the process of randomization. Findings include the unpredictable circumstances of the destruction of local boats leading to the loss of husbands. Also, the socio-cultural practices, which allow contract of HIV/AIDS through wife inheritance pass through the use of unsterilised instruments such as knives used in letting out blood for purpose of oath taking lead to increase in prevalence rates of HIV/AIDS. Recommendations include increased awareness in those areas highlighting the dangers of exchange of partners and wife inheritance.

INTRODUCTION

Widowhood is state of living that is caused by the death of a wife or husband from society. For example, such factors as illness, accident societal attacks such as kidnapping, armed robbery, a conflict that arises from disagreement and fighting and eventually death through old age. According to Robert Havghurst, Berbice Neugarteb et.al (1968) many elderly people want to remain active because that leads to a sense identity and value. Autopsies indicate that 26 percent of individual past the age of eighty five die from 'natural causes' (Kohn, 1985). Unfortunately diseases such as HIV/AIDS have added to the number of death in both men and women.

The implication of the large number of widows cannot be ignored taking cognizance of the high rate of deaths in the Nigerian society owing to HIV/AIDS. There is a multiplication effect in the society when a husband/ wife was deceased through AIDS. Some societies in Nigeria still refuse to accept the existence of HIV/AIDS. In such societies every death is cause be a witch. A study conducted by a non governmental organization (consult) World Bank sponsored 2005 showed that some people in the riverine areas did not believe in existence of HIV/AIDS. Therefore in the case of loss of the husband, the wife becomes the primary suspect as the cause of the death and is thus treated accordingly.

A widow whose husband was diseased through AIDS definitely may contract HIV in the society, also a widow who was HIV negative. This multiplying effect in the society calls for immediate solution to curb the ills associated with widowhood. The problems of the children left under the care of the widows are manifest as some of these widows cannot pay school fees of these children. Some of the illiterate widows send out their children for sex trade thus compounding issues for the family. As observed by Strunsee (2004), the huge increases in the numbers of widows have resulted in millions of children being withdrawn from school, early marriages, life on the streets, prostitution, servile domestic services, child labour, and human trafficking. Widows in Nigeria face series of problems that attract interest of many writers. Men are not educated on the ills of wife inheritance as it increases contact of HIV/AIDS (Umoh, 2005). Widows are those women who have lost their husbands through death. Amongst such groups of women include those struggling to survive, perhaps utterly shattered by bitter experiences of life. Some of these experiences occur during the death of their husbands. In most countries in Nigeria, any husband that dies "is killed by the wife" so that she can inherit the man's property. Given where it is the woman who struggles for the acquisition of the property, the male relations of the husband or even the parent of the husband immediately take over the property of the husband.

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Millions of widows are young mothers, some still children, all subject to extreme discrimination practices and victims of neglect at times by families (Oching-Odhianbo, 2002). According to Wiebo (1987), McGloosen and 'O' Byrant (1998) widow's adjustment to bereavement is a function of her personality trait: socio-economic status and socio-cultural opportunity. Babangida (1988) is of the view that widows who are deprived of certain opportunities in life are lost in the ocean of life without a clear picture of what the future holds for them.

As observed by Ahonsi (1997) three conditions perpetuate the maltreatment of widows. The first is the prominence of the family, the second pro-creation is the main reason for marriage. The third condition is that marriage is viewed as a union between two families and not two individuals. As observed by Ncube (1989) all meaningful property under customary law is owned and to the problem of polygamy. As observed by Seymour (1986);

Nigerian women frequently face the threats of polygamy without priory consultation, are exposed to sexual harassment and the possibility of sexual mutilation... least access to birth control facilities and must obtain their husband's consent an as married women cannot their own property.

According to Struensee (2004) physical, emotional, and sexual violence is a common accomplishment to widowhood. Research shows that 70 percent of widows have been sexually abused (Umoh 2007). According to Ewelukwa (2002), a widow may be forced to have sex with her husband's brother, the first stranger she meets on the road, or some other designated male. As observed by Aderinto (2005),

The act of wife inheritance is a form of help. This is because when the traditional provisions for protecting the widow's welfare is not in place, it ca e catastrophic for both the widow and her children.

This view is not disputed because help sometimes comes through the deceased husband's family. Wife inheritance creates more problems than benefits. It brings conflicts into the family between the real wife and the inherited. Aderinto (2005) is also of the view that there is great need for wife-inheritance for the mere necessity of sexual satisfaction. It is of the view that keeping the widow in the deceased family will prevent the widow from moving about to other men for sexual satisfaction. Keeping the widow within the family can bring more trouble as the inheritor does not know the source of the brother's death.

Another member of the same forum, Ojie (2006) argues that wife inheritance is acceptable as the widow will now enjoy family relationships even after the children of the deceased are married out. The report presented by the Global Fund for women showed clearly a resentment of wife inheritance. As observed by Mhoja (2004), widows accept wife-inheritance owing to financial dependency and this contributes to the cycle of women's development and spread to the cycle of women's disempowerment and spread of HIV. Bowlby (1960), who isolated 5 fairly distinct stages as follows:

1. Concentration directed towards the deceased
2. Anger or hostility towards the deceased or others
3. Appeal to others for support and help
4. Despair, withdrawal and general disorganization
5. Reorganization and direction of the self toward a new love object.

Agreeing with Bowlby (1960), Kavanaugh (1974) suggests 7 stages which are involved in the grieving process. These stages are represented as: shock; disorganization; violent emotions: guilt: loss and loneliness: relief and re-establishment. Another member of the same forum (Clayton et al. 1971) also conducted a study of 109 widows. Symptoms reported include crying, depression, and difficulty in sleeping (the *Journal of World Anthropology: Occasional Papers: Volume III, Number 1* 58).

The core of the issue remains poverty and how poverty can be alleviated after the death of a partner. Whichever ways the widows choose to alleviate their poverty is often plagued with serious problems depending on the circumstances of widowhood.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This work adopts Marxist/socialist theory of Coontz and Henderson (1986). Also Engels inequality and private property (1972) will also be employed. Coontz and Henderson (196) believe that social inequality developed as a result of change in property ownership. Although they argued that it was the introduction of agriculture and domestication of animals that formed the genesis of inequality, there is no basis to accept

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that increase or surplus of goods for distribution could not go round equitably. It is their view that the emergence of “Kin Corporate property” which is a form of communal property, which allows a group of kin to acquire exclusive rights, is responsible for gender stratification. It is such a prescription that led to the belief that the parental and kinship relationship became very relevant while others who were regarded as intruders or strangers had not right to share of the property or resources. Marriage arrangement as seen by Coontz and Henderson (1986) where a man has the upper hand in marriage gives the man the authority for dominaton. The emphasis that what a woman produces belongs to her husband’s kin, corporate group ownership makes her lose control of what ever she produces. Widows are strangers who are married from outside the husband’s family. Since the practice of marriage is that the husbands pay dowries and other requirements to the bride’s family, then whatever is generated by both the husband and the wife now belong to the husband.

STUDY CONDUCTED IN AKWA IBOM STATE OF NIGERIA

Data Analysis

Age of Respondents

Age Brackets	Respondent	Percentage
20 – 21	3	3
22 – 32	7	7
33 – 43	10	10
44 – 54	60	60
55 and above	20	20
	100	100

Educational Qualification

Age Brackets	Respondent	Percentage
FSLC	50	50
WASC	20	20
OND/HND	10	10
DEGREE AND ABOVE	20	20
	100	100

Employment Status

Type of Work	Respondent	Percentage
Self employed	70	70
Civil servants/Public servants	30	30
	100	100

Years of Widowhood

Age Brackets	Respondent	Percentage
1 – 10	30	30
11 – 20	15	15
21 – 30	15	15
31 – 40	22	22
40 and above	18	18
	100	100

Question 5: Do you have a good relationship with your in-laws?

Responses to question 5

Variable	Respondent	Percentage
Yes, a great deal	20	20
A fairly good deal	30	30
None at all	50	50
	100	100

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Question 7: Would you willingly marry your husband's brother?

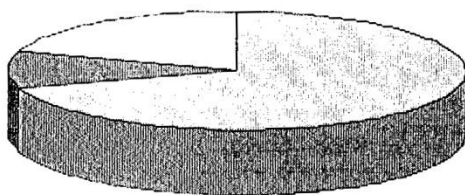
Variable	Respondent	Percentage
No, I won't	60	60
Yes, I will	20	20
He is not my husband	20	20
	100	100

Question 8: Would you be accepted by the legitimate wife of your husband's brother?

Responses to question 8

Variable	Respondent	Percentage
No, I won't	70	70
Yes, I will	10	10
Depends on Individual	20	20
	100	100

Would you accept being a second wife of your husband's brother's wife



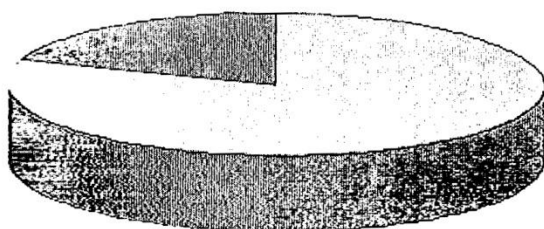
- No, I Won't
- Yes, I will
- Depends on Individual

Question 9: Would you want this wife inheritance to stop

Responses to question 9

Variable	Respondent	Percentage
Yes	80	80
No	20	20
	100	100

Would you want this wife inheritance to stop



- Yes
- No

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Information from eighty percent of the respondents revealed that at the end or the termination of the husband's life on earth, they have to remain with the husband's family. In this case, the wife is also regarded as a family property. She must belong to one of the husband's brothers or distant relation to continue the right of property ownership. It is often said that corporate property strengthens men's grip over their brother's property when death comes to do its normal duty. The widow has, however, a choice, that of remaining with the family and continue to enjoy the property of the husband. There are certain circumstances where the other males of the family bring all forms of intimidation to send the women away after the death of their husband, especially where the children are very young and cannot make decisions for themselves. Although male members of the family purport to take care of the orphaned children, it is never a reality. The orphaned children are added to the number of children already gotten by the other male members of the family, who perhaps, are unable to help themselves.

Grief over the loss of a loved one especially one who had played such a central role in one's life for so many years, may affect the widow's or widower's health making them have more physical illness and are frequently admitted in hospitals, thus leading to rise in the death rate. This research is in agreement with Bellin and Hardt studying 1803 people over 65 years of age in New York, found out that the rate of mental disorder was higher among the widowed than among the still married. These higher rates of mental illness was related not only to widowhood but also to advanced age, physical ill health and other variables. Blackwell (1981) also found that higher rate of mental illness was found among the widowed than their married counterparts (*Journal of World Anthropology: Occasional Papers: Volume III, Number 1 59*).

Interview with widows revealed that 12 percent of them were well better off financially than their husbands before death. Some of the wives of the fishermen were civil servants and even when their husbands were dead, they were still able to take care of themselves. Information gathered from field work revealed that 12 percent of these women who were married to the fishermen were also infected with HIV/AIDS. When asked how they contracted the disease, they admitted that the process of their husband's exchanging fish with sex with their "Eka Ufok", meaning mistress is common among the riverine areas of the Niger Delta especially in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States of Nigeria.

During the process of interview, it was also found out that they share knives which they use in preparing the fish for drying. Women who prepared the fish for drying always have pricks from the fish and there were evidence that they were always with one fresh wound or the other.

Poverty also contributed to the widows seeking help from the fishermen who were already infected and had to exchange fish for sex. It was a common feature that sex was carried out mostly without condoms, and where condoms were used, the focused group discussions showed that people who buy condoms were regarded as free women or harlots. When the patent medicine stores were visited, it was observed that these condoms had been on the shelves for quite a long time and the owners feel it will not be beneficial disposing of them without any financial benefits.

Interview with widows in Uyo urban showed that they resorted to taking treatment in the University Teaching Hospital because it is free but that there is still fear of stigmatization once they are identified by people they know them. Some of the widows who tested negative at the time of interview said they were happy to have their husbands dead because they were the architect of their problems. Some of them preferred to take care of their children without the husbands who, they thought brought mischief to them.

Problems Faced by Widows in the Niger Delta Area

- ❖ The first problem is the entrenched tradition of wife inheritance. Women who were not infected tended to be infected because they had to be forced to accept a male member of the family as a second husband.
- ❖ Poverty is a very important factor as an average Nigerian here is living on less than \$ 1 a day. As far as there is no source of help or the widow, some of them are forced to seek help form the rich fishermen who are already infected.
- ❖ Another crucial problem facing widows in the Niger Delta areas is the belief that witchcraft causes AIDS. They are indoctrinated to believe that what killed their husbands is witchcraft and that if they are taken to witchdoctors and some spiritual acts performed, they will be free from what killed their husbands.
- ❖ The problem of widowhood has been an age-long entrenched practice of demoralization in the society. Once somebody is widowed, the respect she had is gone and any person can now visit her to make advances to her. Most of the men who approach them are married men who are already infected or irresponsible ones who talk to every "Tom and Dick".

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ Widows should be empowered not always through micro-credit facilities, but by training them in various skills. It has been observed that widows who were given micro credit loans were unable to pay back. Organization which decided to help the widows face the problem of having to repay the loan with interest.
- ❖ Customary laws governing ownership and control of land should be reviewed in favour of widows. Property should be willed to widows and this should be entrenched in customary laws.
- ❖ Awareness campaigns should be intensified on HIV/AIDS issues and inheritance.
- ❖ Harmful traditional practices like taking of oath should be abolished. Blood is let out through unsterilised instruments.
- ❖ Human rights organizations should step in where widows need lawyers to protect their rights in court.
- ❖ Where inheritance is intensified, there should be intense teaching on the need to allow the widows who are young to remarry outside the deceased husband's family.
- ❖ Government policies formulated towards the amelioration of suffering of widows should be enforced.

CONCLUSION

From this study, it can be seen that widows get infected more where they (widows) are unemployed. Widows who are either self-employed or civil or public servants have a choice to reject the husband's male brothers as new husbands. Some of them are bold where a need arises. Some of them are bold enough to refuse wife-inheritance and move out of the deceased husband's family to a neutral apartment. The HIV/AIDS prevalence in such categories is low.

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