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Cultural Barriers To Widows' Wellbeing And Social Work Interventions In Central Senatorial District Of Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract
Widowhood is often accompanied by profound emotional distress arising from the loss of a spouse. Beyond bereavement, many widows experience multifaceted psychosocial challenges, including poverty, fear, depression, anxiety, social exclusion, neglect, and abandonment. In many rural communities, these challenges are further compounded by patriarchal social structures and harmful widowhood practices that perpetuate gender inequality and reinforce women's vulnerability. This study examines the lived experiences of widows within patriarchal cultural settings where widowhood rites remain prevalent. It explores how these cultural practices undermine widows' dignity, restrict their agency, and diminish their contributions to community development by subjecting them to discriminatory and dehumanising treatment. The findings reveal that widows residing in rural areas and those with lower levels of education and socioeconomic status are significantly more vulnerable to oppressive cultural norms and traditional practices than their counterparts in urban settings. The study further demonstrates that social work interventions play a critical role in mitigating these challenges, regardless of the widows' backgrounds. Intervention strategies, including advocacy, public awareness campaigns, psychosocial counselling, community sensitisation, referral services, rehabilitation, and brokerage, were effectively implemented across the study area. These interventions contributed to improved psychosocial well-being, enhanced social functioning, and greater resilience among widows in confronting harmful traditional practices. The study highlights the complex realities of widowhood in the Central Senatorial District of Cross River State, Nigeria, and underscores the indispensable role of professional social work practice in challenging harmful cultural practices, promoting social justice, and advancing the dignity, rights, and well-being of widows...
Keywords cultural barriers, patriarchy, social work, strategies, widowhood, widows' wellbeing, widowhood practices

INTRODUCTION

It is indisputable that the underlying causes of today's challenges confronting widows in rural communities are often associated with harmful traditional and cultural practices. Globally, the effect of tradition and culture has been one of the several contemporary challenges found to militate against the well-being of widows. Indeed, the stronghold on customs and traditions governs the attitudes, behaviour, and moral framework of rural folks towards widows in rural communities (Adetunsi & Karim, 2021). Thompson et al (2015) posited that cultural practices tend to have governed the pattern of care towards women and by extension widows, such that it affected them in negative ways. It does not only affect the decision-making processes made by and for widows but also exhibits a

very great influence on their wellbeing. Some cultures deliberately limit widows' access to care for various cultural practices (McIlwaine, 2013). According to Triana and Li (2021), widowhood practices and the culture of patriarchy are very effective in our contemporary societies because the government has been paying lip service to it by not formulating and implementing policies and programs that can effectively deal with them.

However, even though over time, government, donor agencies, and non-governmental agencies have initiated plans and programs to create awareness of the need for rural dwellers to treat widows with dignity and honour and to care for them, the level of compliance remained very low, with only 1.3 percent of rural widows living and doing well, socio-economically (Cislaghi et al, 2019). In other words, despite all the efforts of the government, the socio-economic well-being of widows is still low as most of them are poverty-stricken.

Also, Tse and Wilton (2018) assert that several efforts were made by the federal government to disentangle widows from the snare of harmful traditional practices using traditional rules councils, and institutions. The government has also relied on the law and legal instruments to eradicate these harmful practices. Religious organizations have done their part in preaching against these harmful traditional practices. Moreover, feminist movements had emerged with diverse campaigns and propaganda on: "women sensitivity" "gender equity" "women equality" and "women empowerment" among others all in a bid to deal with the low-status women were subjected to (Tudose, 2018; Wentling & Rivas, 2018). Workshops and seminars were periodically organized by civil society organizations and spirited individuals and organizations to deal with the plight of widows in society (Wiele et al, 2022). Also, the government has provided empowerment programs to cater for the needs of widows in the society. Despite all these efforts, it was observed that the trend where widows are still subjected to harmful traditional practices is persistent and tends to have no solution in view.

Essentially, social work practice is at the proper place to eradicate these harmful traditional practices and to manage, enhance and promote a relatively better standard of wellbeing for widows. Social work practice has become one of the fundamental resources for causing persons with diverse challenges bordering on health, psycho-social, physical, cultural, and social to come out of it and become socially functioning. It is however unfortunate that the social work profession has not been given adequate attention by most developing and third world countries. Nigeria for example, is lagging far behind in utilizing the services of social workers towards solving and resolving personal and societal problems. Many Nigerians today are unaware of the services rendered by social workers that would have made life meaningful to them. This is partly due to the government's inability to help social workers play their unique roles in the country without many hindrances (Alamu, 2022). Among the persons that need social work services the most are widows. This is because studies have shown that when once a woman loses her spouse, she can no longer afford to sustain her livelihood status. This is especially the case with rural widows.

Laima and Jurate (2020) stated that though essential social work services are available, it becomes somehow worrisome that widows cannot access them. For example, Smith (1990) reported that the number of widows in need of psychosocial care and support is becoming high daily and generating concerns. Indeed, the challenges often faced by widows are many and multifaceted, ranging from poverty to traumatic experiences. It is against this background that this paper examines cultural barriers to widows' well-being and the extent to which social work intervention can curb these obnoxious practices in Central Senatorial District of Cross River State, Nigeria. Thus, this paper highlights the methodology, literature review, theoretical perspective and a detailed discussion encapsulating cultural barriers to widows' wellbeing and social work intervention strategies on the plights of widows in Central Senatorial District. The conclusion and recommendations to the study were also made.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of widowhood practice

Widowhood experiences may be painful depending on those involved or at stake in the bereaved state or context. In most third-world countries as in Africa and Asia, widowhood rites are multipurpose serving defined functions (Sulumba-kapuma, 2018). The widowhood practices in Africa are rooted in the belief of reincarnation and on the assumption that the dead functions in the spiritual realm overseeing the activities of the living.. thus, widowhood practices reinforce the belief that spouses have a spiritual link with each other even though they are separated by the death of one (Keister & Destro, 2018). In Africa, widowhood practice is more of a burden on the widow than on the widower. A woman who has lost her husband usually experiences pain due to more cultural demands than

even the death of her husband (Banda & Priscilla, 2016). Widowhood practice often is a process that may last long with different stages of rites being performed (Iloka, 2022).

The purpose of widowhood rites and practices varies according to the different belief systems of a people. Among the Azande, an ethnic group found in Central African Republic, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the rituals performed are to appease the spirit of the dead in case he may have cause to punish his living partner. That is, to protect widows from their powerful deceased husbands (Olaniyi, 2010). The Tonga tribe in Zambia and Zimbabwe found justifications for subjecting widows to inhumane and humiliating customary practices on mere suspicion that the widow might have a hand in the death of her husband (Palpart, 2000). In some cultures, the successful completion of widowhood rituals would have sent the ghost to a peaceful rest while in some it was meant to prove the innocence of the widow (Loomba Foundation, 2015).

Widowhood practice entails women who lost their husbands to death observe specific rituals such as traditional cleansing before or after the burial of the man (Human Rights Web, 2011). Some of these rituals are to prove whether the woman killed her husband or not. In most societies, it was meant to wade off the spirit of the dead man away from the woman to allow her to remarry again. In most other cultures the woman becomes a tool to be inherited by the husband's relative (Human Rights Web, 2011).

The concept of patriarchal culture

Widowhood practice is reinforced by the patriarchal culture. As rightly observed by scholars' patriarchy as found in Africa and in the Middle East is a cultural reality where the kinship unit is dominated and controlled by the males (Wheatley, 2012). Male members of a lineage and indeed the community inherit and own properties while the women are denied these privileges or rights. It is a culture where the males occupy several important positions and functions within the society including governance, socialization, economic support, nurturing, and protection of members, and perpetuation of the family institution (Wheatley, 2012). The female is regarded as a second-class citizen, and who does not have a say in family and community meetings. Consequent to this, the lives of women in patriarchal societies are characterized by lack, subordination, and chaotic experiences (Loomba Foundation, 2015).

Wealth is usually accumulated in the hands of men while women are dependent on men for their needs to be met (Pierik, 2022). The economic system in any patriarchal society renders women vulnerable to financial losses. Also, property inheritance is an exclusive right of the males, which makes it obligatory for women including widows not having any right to claim any of their husband's property. However, if the widow has a male child for the dead husband, it is the male child that stands to inherit the property through which the widow may benefit from it (Tembo, 2012). Besides, in modern societies, written wills and legal interventions may protect the widow from property disinheritance (Sulumba-Kapuma, 2018).

Patriarchy has helped to place widows in low status and a level where they can be sexually exploited. In Northern Nigeria, the patriarchal culture supported by the Islamic religion permits a man to marry as many as four wives. It thus became a practice where a married man is free to marry a widow in addition to his wives. Similarly, women cannot own landed property, house, or a capital project through inheritance. This has indeed denied so many widows of means of livelihood and financial security (Edet et al, 2017). Socio-cultural forces that promote power imbalance and economic disparities between men and women manifest in various aspects of patriarchal societies (Kalichman & Rompa, 2017).

In patriarchal societies, widows are financially insecure and may not have the collateral to access credit facilities from banks.

Patriarchy deals with the unique difference between masculinity and femininity and forms an important basis for appreciating males more than females in virtually all aspects of human relationships (James et al, 2017). It is a social relationship that gives the males the customary right to treat the females as subordinates and less human compared to the males. Patriarchal culture influences the distribution of powers to the advantage of the man and how responsibilities, claims, and values are allocated to the man to the detriment of the woman (Buckingham, 2020). It is worth noting that the most dominant and persistent aspect of patriarchal thought patterns is the belief in male superiority and female inferiority. Hence, there is the problem of unequal distribution of gender roles in patriarchal societies, thereby, giving rise to male violence against females.

In patriarchal societies, males are preferred over females in economic power and property rights. There is implicit bias as far as gender relationships are concerned, seeing that the males are given more rights and privileges than the females (Adetunji, 2021; Sultana, 2011). In the western world, the wall of patriarchy was broken and collapsed by feminist movements and propaganda whereas in third-world countries, both the man and the woman tend to accept and engage in it with helpless abandonment. Patriarchy is a custom or tradition that manifests extreme favouritism toward males at the detriment of females (Van, 2015). Gender roles in a patriarchal society more often than not influence the type and pace of development in a patriarchal society. In patriarchal cultures, men exhibit marginalized gender tendencies over widows (Dessler, 2017). For example, if a man loses his wife, he receives all forms of favourable treatment but the reverse is the case when a woman loses her husband. Indeed, the prejudice against widows is most prominently visible within low and primitive societies.

The plight of widows

The plight of widows simply refers to widows' experiences after the loss of their spouse. In most communities in Nigeria, the experiences of widows are positive and highly commendable while in many others it is pitiable. In the developed world, widows have greater opportunities in terms of economic power, employment, earnings, assets, health care, sufficient empowerment, and government support (Djuikom & Dominique, 2018); Li & Huey-Shyan, 2019). Adequate care and support to widows will increase their socio-economic growth because it will enable them to be productive and contribute to the -economic growth of society. Among rural communities, the socio-economic well-being of widows essentially means the provision of shelter; food, clothing, finances, and any assistance that will make the widow live well and for optimal well-being. Widows living in rural communities in Nigeria need care and support from the government and individuals to meet their daily needs. These include helping them to play active roles in different social and economic need contexts, and to ensure the needs reflect the roles and responsibilities associated with their position within the socio-economic hierarchy (Tembo, 2012).
Unfortunately, in some parts of Africa and the world in general, widows are denied certain rights and privileges. They are confronted with issues such as stigmatization and discrimination, lack of sexual autonomy, and inability to make informed decisions (Shreeves& Martina, 2016). In most rural communities in Nigeria, widows could not access health care. The absence of care had led most widows to indulge in immoral sexual intercourse and compromise their integrity and their normal process of livelihood. It is estimated that in developing countries, about 1.5 million widows live in abject poverty and more than 2 million widows had become victims of sexual assault and exploitation (OHCHR, 2013). Widows in third-world countries are believed to be highly vulnerable and therefore susceptible to depressive moods, worries, and trauma as well as decreased opportunities for self-advancement (Sulumba-Kapuma, 2018). Many widows are finding it difficult to meet their basic needs of life such as food, clothing, and housing. According to Carter (2016), the well-being of widows is a fundamental human right, yet millions of widows around the world are neglected or abandoned. This category of women represents a significant portion that ought to be given adequate care and attention but is rather made to experience torments and woes through traditional and cultural instrumentalities (Edet et al, 2017). The widows' especially those from poor socioeconomic backgrounds face a myriad of psychosocial challenges such as homelessness, food insecurity, and limited access to education (Triandis, 2022). Others include mental depression, loneliness, trauma, and insecurity. Some widows are particularly vulnerable to health challenges. Most widows appear very unkempt; usually with a feeling of hopelessness especially if their husband dies living behind enormous responsibilities such as care of children. They are most times abandoned by in-laws due to their inability to cater for them.
Dube (2021) opined that in Nigeria, the number of widows with mental depression has increased from 32 per cent in 2010 to 76 per cent in 2020. There is a common outcry and rising concerns about the growing rate of widows who are suffering in penury. Some of these widows have no source of livelihood and might have experienced sexual assault, and physical, emotional, or psychological torments. Other challenges widows battle with include poverty, family issues, socioeconomic limitations, societal pressures, neglect; impoverishment, stigma, and abuse (Dube, 2021).
Widows' plight may also manifest as pathological stresses and fear including the fear of death. It is not uncommon for widows to also develop intense rage and feelings of guilt, and be physically traumatized. It is also believed that widows are more likely to be over-reactive, hostile, impulsive, aggressive, or defiant. Some of them may have withdrawal syndrome, dissociating themselves from people. Their development may be impaired, finding it

difficult to concentrate, becoming hyper-vigilant. Some may have low self-esteem and think negatively about themselves or people around them based on their cognitions; and may think 'everyone hates them. On their physical health, they may experience some illnesses like headaches, stomach aches, stress reactions such as rashes or immune system-related illnesses, and sleep disturbances such as nightmares, insomnia or bedwetting (Dessler, 2017).

Widows in the developing world encounter various forms of woeful experiences. In most societies, they are accused of their husband's death (Samuel, 2011), and ostracized by the deceased husband's family or the community for mere as a result of the stigma attached to widowhood generally (Olumukoro, 2011). Most of the widows found it difficult to survive without support and therefore with the loss of their husbands' resort to immoral activities to survive (Agumagu, 2007). Widows are in most cultures treated with pity and of inferior status; some were discriminated against and denied certain rights and opportunities (Lynn et al, 2018). Widows are particularly vulnerable for being single and often have less access to treatment for economic reasons (Vijayakumar & Nagaraja, 2018). For widows, the psychological burden of losing their husbands is great.

In some, African societies, widows may be accused of witchcraft, especially when they prove stubborn and refuse to remarry the late husband's relative or consent to ritual practices related to the husband's death (Byrnes, 2012). In most cases, the widow is forced to marry the deceased relation on the pretext that the marriage will continue to produce children to her late husband's lineage (Van, 2015). Widows in some cultures have restricted movements, compelled not to socialize with persons outside their family or in-laws (Durojaye, 2013).

Widows who are non-income earners more often than not find it difficult to meet their needs. It was further alleged that most widows in developing countries particularly, in Sub-Saharan Africa do not access health care on account of lack of money leading to agonizing experiences of ill health (Ewelukwa, 2012).

Social work interventions

Social work practice is dynamic, humanitarian, and goal-driven; it encompasses the enhancement of the client's social functioning. The roles of Social workers are vast and enormous; some of the roles include rehabilitation, support, teaching, advocacy, social broker, enabler, facilitator, modelling, and liaison (Okolo, 2022). The approaches applied by the social worker will depend on the social diagnosis or identified social problems during the casework process. The role of the social worker is enormous and distinctive from other professional healthcare workers (Agba, 2018). A basic part of the mission of the social worker is to act as, an advocate, counsellor, trainer, facilitator, enabler, liaison, motivator, and caregiver. The social worker's role and duties start with first and foremost engaging the client in an interactive process, building a mutual rapport with the client, carrying out a comprehensive psychosocial assessment of the client, identifying/diagnosing the client's social problems, strategizing and planning a way forward in helping the client find sustainable solutions to problems identified (Idyorough, 2015). This includes enhancing the social functioning and capacity of the client through the application of skills and knowledge in human relationships, Social Work practice models, techniques, and approaches in the helping process.

The effective utilization of available resources and client participation in the intervention process will promote proper re-socialization, rehabilitation and reintegration of the client in need of care (Parast & Allaii, 2014). Social workers are concerned with people rendered vulnerable through physical, emotional and situational difficulties or crises that may be temporary or on-going; and by engaging with clients' they assist them in maximizing their recovery and enable medical and other allied health practitioners to fulfil their roles (Beddoe, 2023). This implies that the patients seen or attended to by the Social worker in the hospital present themselves with lots of social, psychological, and emotional crises.

The Social workers can identify clients' problems by carrying out a comprehensive psychosocial assessment during the casework process. The duties of Social workers in hospital settings may include assessing the psychosocial functioning of patients and families and inferring facts as necessary, connecting patients and families to necessary resources and support in the community, providing psychotherapy, supportive counselling, or grief counselling; or helping a patient to expand and strengthen their network of social support (Ugiagbe, 2018). Social Workers are fully involved in the formulation of the ethical aspects of healthcare policies and administration.

Social work services for the vulnerable can be categorized as follows but not limited to providing counselling services and palliative care, soliciting financial assistance to clients, working with clients to identify resource

systems, do home contact tracing, collaborating and networking or linking the clients to resource-based centres such as faith¬based organizations, philanthropic organizations, and NGO'S that are readily available to provide some form of material and financial support for the patients (Okoye, 2023).

In contemporary times, the population in most industrial countries enjoys social work services that are financed through a combination of general tax revenues, social insurance, private insurance, and charges (Preker, 2018). More so, many of the world's 2.3 billion people do not have access to Social work services because of ignorance (McGregor & Cale, 2019). How to create awareness for the African population to know and benefit from Social Work practice is one of the challenges facing Africa. In addition to this, there are no policies put in place by respective governments to promote Social Work practice

Social work practice involves the deliberate acts and processes of helping clients to achieve a functional state and to meet their needs. The services social workers render involve the assessment, diagnosis, care, and solving of the various problems of clients assigned to them. Some of these practices include Social Work counselling, advocacy services, social rehabilitation, referral, sensitization, awareness creation, and education among others. Social workers also help clients to rebuild skills cope with social situations, and reduce distress in everyday life (Rawat, 2014). Social workers are trained to provide support and psychosocial services to clients in need of care. It is unfortunate however that so many persons have little or no awareness of social work practice that can expertly care for widows. Even in some societies, the few social workers available are unable to adapt their knowledge and skills to the demands of a variety of situations to care for widows. It is more worrisome that most widows fail to provide optimum responses to Social Work programmes that would have helped them to live meaningful existence and be socially functioning in society.

In modern societies, the most effective means of care is through social work practice. It is more often used to solve and resolve physical and psycho-social issues and guide clients on how to become socially functioning (Adekunle & Tayebri, 2015). According to Azuogu et al (2021), social workers provide care through psycho-social counselling, advocacy, sensitization, awareness creation, and interview, education, and referral services. Ideally, the profession of social work promotes a high level of care for widows with mental, emotional, or psychological challenges such as depression, stress, psychosis, and distress (Azuogu et al, 2021). As Laima and Jurate (2020) point out, some of these social work practices are more effective than others depending on the type of case. For example, the use of psychosocial counselling makes a client to develop and maintain a stable and supportive environment. It also helps the client to cope with difficult situations. It enables social workers to address issues such as past trauma, depression, and other emotional issues. Social workers may also use rehabilitation services to restore clients who suffer some losses. They may do this through tutoring, mentoring, counselling, and provision of resources among others. Rehabilitation services can also be used to measure clients' recovery progress.

Advocacy service is another social work practice that can be used in the care of widows. Advocacy enables the social worker to mobilize support and resources from within and outside to care for the client. It also helps to create links for social support and versatility un-behalf of the client. Referral service is also very important in social work practice. It facilitates the transfer of a case or service from one facility to another. A client's case that could not be managed appropriately may need to be taken to a more competent facility to be managed. Referral service can be used to synchronize cases and enhance collaboration between two or more service providers. Besides, with referral service, the interface amongst resource centre is enhanced and keeps them connected at all times. Social workers today need to care for widows using appropriate interventions with minimal cost (Ibekwe, 2020). More importantly, the complex nature of widowhood caused by harmful cultural practices makes the utilization of social work services on widows inevitable.

Theoretical Perspectives

The social support theory by Cohen and Wills (1985) was adopted to analyze the cultural barriers to widows' wellbeing and social work intervention strategies in Central Senatorial District of Cross River State, Nigeria. This theory assume that social support is needed to enable those who are distressed, stressed, traumatized or found wanting in any area of their lives to cope, recover or improve themselves. Social support may be tangible or intangible, emotional, physical, informational or social. Social support is usually provided to reduce the effects of a negative experience. The social support theory is an invaluable coping strategy and has helped to change the

behavioural patterns of people as well as their concepts about life. The availability and access to social support can change a stressful situation encountered by an individual.

The social support theory is relevant to this paper. Thus, the social worker is to provide social support to widows through various intervention strategies. For example, social workers can employ intervention strategies such as advocacy, rehabilitation, sensitization, counselling, referral and other support services to curb the harmful cultural practices and to ameliorate the plight of widows. More so, social worker provides social support to widows through psychosocial therapy and support groups.

By the social work intervention on the challenges faced by widows, they help to strengthen the social work intervention strategies such as awareness creation, counselling, sensitization, among others.. Through these intervention strategies, social workers were able to dismantle the strongholds of obnoxious traditional practices. Social support theory emphasizes that social workers can play a crucial role in building the capacity of widows by facilitating access to resources, healthcare, education, information, income and opportunities. The theory also believe that social workers can help widows understand how widowhood rites and the culture of patriarchy can be dismantled in order to improve their well-being. Indeed, the social support theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the role of social workers in supporting widows improving their socioeconomic well-being.

METHODOLOGY

The research area for this study was rural communities in the Central Senatorial District of Cross River State, Nigeria. The population of this study comprises widows and resident in the study area as well as social workers who were directly involved in the design and implementation of intervention programmes targeted at vulnerable populations within Cross River State, Nigeria.

Because of the informal and undocumented nature of widows' population at the rural levels, it is often challenging to have an accurate enumeration. Thus, the sample size was determined using Leslie Lazh formula (1982), which gives us 650 widows. The second component of the study population comprises social workers working on vulnerable populations in Cross River State. The sample size for this category of respondents was determined using Taro Yamany formula to produce a sample size of 312. Social workers are considered relevant for inclusion in the study as key informants and complementary respondents. Therefore, the total sample size is = 962.

The multi-stage and non-probability sampling techniques such as purposive, snowball, and convenience samplings were employed. This method is widely accepted for studies involving vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations. Widows were purposively selected. This is to ensure that apart from targeting women who actually lost their spouses, it helped to reach at those that have actual exposure to social work intervention programmes, which is critical for explanatory analysis. Snowball sampling was also used in some places to identify widows through peer referrals. Initial respondents assisted in introducing other eligible participants, thereby improving access to other widows. Also, social workers were purposively selected based on their role relevance and direct engagement with vulnerable populations.

The combination of purposive, snowball, and convenience sampling techniques is justified on methodological and practical grounds. Methodologically, widows lack a formal sampling frame, thereby making non-probability sampling pertinent and practicable. Practically, the sample structure reflects similar cultural characteristics in form of widowhood rites, patriarchy and behavioural patterns.

Data for this study was collected from primary and secondary sources. The primary data was gathered with In-depth Interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) while the secondary data was sourced from documentary materials. The primary data was used because it gives first-hand information as well as insights into the feelings and opinions of stakeholders like widows and social workers about harmful traditional practices and how they can be curbed through social work practices. Moreover, it helped to authenticate, validate, and support the information from secondary sources.

The in-depth interview was conducted for widows in their various communities. They were interviewed on issues bordering on:

1. Whether harmful traditional practices such as widowhood and patriarchal practices exist in their communities
2. Factors that trigger these harmful traditional practices

3. Effects of widowhood rites and patriarchal culture
4. Measures to curb harmful traditional practices
5. The extent to which social work practices and other measures were able to curb these harmful practices.

The in-depth interview was done by the researchers and assisted by 10 research assistants. The secondary data gathered from various articles, reports, and online sources was used to draw inferences from available documentary sources and the reviews were useful for contextual analysis and illuminated the fact that harmful traditional practices are pervasive social problems.

In regard to ethical considerations, the researcher got an introductory letter from the Cross River State Research Ethics Committee for approval to conduct the study. The letter of approval was presented to village heads of the various communities for their consent to the study. The informed consent was equally obtained from respondents. Pseudonyms were used to ascertain anonymity and voluntarism of participants to the study. All participants to the study were assured of utmost confidentiality. Also, given the vulnerability of these widows, strict ethical measures were observed to include, among others avoiding questions that could cause emotional harm or distress, and respecting respondents' right to withdraw from the study at any point.

The literature review comprises journal articles, newspaper reports, and online materials.

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was organized for social workers from the six local government areas that constitute the Central Senatorial District, Cross River State. Two social workers were purposively selected from each of the six local government areas to participate. Thus, 12 participants were purposively selected based on their knowledge and experiences about social work intervention strategies. The session lasted for one hour. To guide the discussion, 8 predetermined questions were developed.

The interview and FGD data were systematically analyzed with NVIVO software. NVivo was used to support analytical process, explaining how data from interviews and focus groups were coded and analyzed. First, Interview and FGD transcripts were uploaded into NVivo and the data were managed and analysed with inductive thematic method. The transcripts were first read repeatedly, for us to familiarize and understand them appropriately. The interview and FGD data were coded accordingly and grouped into similar or broader categories as the case requires. These categories were later integrated into overarching themes that answer the research questions.

On reliability checks, we ensured that two or more researchers independently coded the same subset of transcripts. Where differences occurred, discussions were made until consensus is reached.

The validation method adopted the triangulation method where multiple data sources were used to corroborate findings.

On the rigor of findings (Trustworthiness), findings were based on data applicability of findings to similar contexts. We ensured transparency and organization of data was made through the systematic coding of datasets, maintaining coding consistency through node structures. Coding reports, matrices, and visualizations were generated through auditable record of the analysis process.

The FGD was a qualitative research method, used in gathering detailed opinions, perceptions, experiences, and beliefs about widowhood rites and how it could be curbed by the social workers. It facilitated easy understanding of the thought processes and behaviours of all stakeholders to the phenomena under investigation.

DISCUSSION

Cultural barriers to widows' wellbeing in Central Senatorial District of Cross River State

a. Widowhood rites:

Widowhood practices and patriarchal culture were found to cause the plights of widows in the Central Senatorial District of Cross River State experiences. Widows were subjected to the observance of certain traditional rites when once their husbands died. Such rites last as long as dictated by tradition in those communities. Among the Igbo and Ekureku-speaking communities of Abi Local Government Area it was believed that the observance of widowhood rites facilitates easy repose of the deceased husband's soul. But among the Yakurr rural communities, widowhood rites were observed to prove the innocence of the widow on whether she had a hand in the death of her husband or not. Among the Mbembe and Ovunum communities in Obubra Local Government Area, widows were subjected to ritual baths with the water used to bath the dead bodies of their husbands, to prove whether they killed their husbands or not. These rites differ from one community or tribe to another. For instance, in Agbo and

Ekureku, communities, the widow must shave her head and remain indoors for six months or more while in Etung, the widow swears before a deity or the corpse to prove her innocence. Among the Agoi people in Yakurr Local Government Area of Cross River State, widows are compelled to wear peculiar beads and clothing that marked them out. Some are entitled by tradition to put on waistbands, so as not to have any sexual intercourse for a period which may last between 6 months to a year. This finding supports Gadi et al, 2018) who reported that the most commonly used methods to identify widows in rural Nigeria include the use of special beads tied around their waist, wearing of black clothing for many days, kept incommunicado from public glare for days.

b. Implications of widowhood rites:

Some of these traditional rites could be very risky. Indeed, the rising incidence of widows' maltreatment has become a critical issue of concern to widows in the area. The widowhood rites denies the widow her rights. If the widow is sick, she might have little or no time to visit a healthcare facility for a check-up. The widowhood rites also denies the widow opportunities to work and be financially independent as she would be compelled to observe certain rites that may make her remain indoors for some periods. Also, the culture forbids widows from venturing out during the mourning period but to stay in a mourning mood for some time. Most widows suffer from physical, social, and psychosocial harm. The inability to access health care was also attributed to poor sources of income within the period of mourning and therefore could not afford the hospital bills.

In these rural communities, stigmatization of widows especially those suspected to have killed their spouses was pervasive. That is, some widows were alleged to have been responsible for their husbands' deaths and therefore were labelled as 'husband killers'. Some were labelled 'witches' while many were branded 'prostitutes'. For these reasons, a greater percentage of widows were discriminated or suppressed from having a say in a public gathering. In some families, the widow was denied care and made to bear her burdens alone. In a bid to survive, some became vulnerable to sexual exploitation and assault. Also, many of these widows suffer from depression, emotional stress, and distress.

c. Patriarchal culture:

Another basic harmful traditional practice that perpetrated the plights of widows in these rural areas was patriarchy. The patriarchal culture was deeply entrenched, which justifies why the men treated women as second-class citizens. In all the communities in the Central Senatorial District, men have so dominated the women just because they inherited landed properties and resources while the women had nothing. The patriarchal culture also promoted discrimination against women, suppressing and relegating them to the background in virtually all aspects of life. Patriarchal consideration to a greater extent determines the social and work patterns of widows. For example, majority of widows were peasant farmers or engaged in small-scale businesses. The patriarchal consciousness has created a stereotyped conception that the man must have control and exercise authority over the woman in all affairs of the community. Patriarchal culture has brought about the problem of unequal distribution of resources to the disadvantage of widows. More often, the widows do not have the finances to cater for their immediate needs due to patriarchal culture. Because of patriarchy, widows cannot make decisions on matters that concern them unless with the permission of their in-laws. Also, to a greater extent, patriarchy constitutes barriers to widows' appointment to positions of authority. This is so because, without the permission of their in-laws, she cannot make a move.

Also, widows in these communities were seen to be generally poor and unable to access health care as the need arose. Most of the widows lost their earning powers immediately after their husbands died. The husband's relatives more often than carted away the properties including the money the deceased must have gotten, leaving the widow in a helpless condition. Only a few widows could boast of being wealthy with enormous income, but majority of the rural widows had no source of income. Indeed, majority of widows were poor because they were denied landed properties and assets by the late husband's relatives.

D. Social work intervention strategies on the plights of widows in Central Senatorial District

The finding of this study revealed that social work interventions such as awareness creation, sensitization, psychosocial therapy, education, counselling, monitoring, advocacy, rehabilitation, counselling, referral services have helped in curbing some harmful practices that negatively affect widows in these rural communities. The

National Association of Social Workers (NASOW), Cross River State branch organized a three-day workshop on the topic: "Social work practice and the pride of widowhood" during which period, social workers were at the various communities in Central Senatorial District in Cross River State intervening on cases of lack, impoverishment, neglect and abandonment of windows. They also dealt with mental issues like depression, distress, hallucinations, isolation, and trauma experienced by widows. Most, if not all of the challenges faced by widows were given social support. Indeed, social workers advocated for widows, by seeking support from NGOs, religious organizations, and civil society organizations. For example, the "Nko Virtuous Ladies" through the instrumentality of social workers supported the widows who suffered from or experienced hardship, isolation, lack of communication, family distractions, role overload, and stress among others with Medicare and food items. In Ikom Local Government Area, social workers organized prayer sessions for widows once a month to deal with issues involving spiritual attacks and manipulations. The social workers had equally contacted government agencies such as the Ministry of Humanitarian Service and the Social Welfare units of the Governor's office, Calabar to support widows who need welfare and social provisions. During the FGD session, it was reported that the First Lady of the state who was also the wife of the governor had paid courtesy visits and donated money and food items to widows. In Obubra, community-based organizations and Nongovernmental organizations had visited the widows on several occasions during which period provisions were given to them.

The most significant impact of social work interventions was influencing the political class to come to the aid of widows. For instance, the member representing the Central Senatorial District in the Senate through social work contacts enrolled some of the widows in skill acquisition programmes. Through this, the widows acquired skills in various vocations such as sewing, craft making, and fashion designing. In the six local government areas of the zone, social workers organized a meeting with the chiefs and elders, upon which they were sensitized to curb some of the harmful traditional practices as they affect widows.

Social workers in the area were dutiful in helping widows cope with some of the harmful traditional practices such as wearing black clothes during mourning. Social workers have done a lot to convince the elders and chiefs to deemphasize the functionality of some cultural rites and practices. For example, some participants in Ikom and Obubra said that the activities and operations of social workers had helped to deemphasize the practice of widows bathing with the water used to bathe the deceased husband. The social workers also succeeded in stopping the practice of causing widows to remain indoors for days during the mourning period.

Generally counselling activities were equally used among social workers to cause behavioural change among the people concerning harmful traditional practices. In other words, most people in the study area were able to change their belief in widowhood practices. The psychological well-being of most widows was guaranteed by social work counselling and sensitization activities. Social workers equally utilized rehabilitation services comprising coordinated schedules such as interactive sessions, psychosocial therapy, counselling, physical exercise, monitoring, and control, all in a bid to restore most widows to better statuses. The social workers consider rehabilitation service as a fundamental task of their profession. Social Workers were able to restore some widows who had indulged in sexual escapades to survive. Some of these widows were not only impoverished but also were complicated with health challenges such as physical illnesses, ailments, and mental disorders. Social work referral services were also applied in some cases. When a case is difficult to handle, they resort to transferring the case to a better place it could be taken care of appropriately.

LIMITATIONS

The challenges encountered by social workers in their efforts to address harmful traditional practices militating against the wellbeing of widows in the study area has been a growing concern to scholars. For instance, the role of social workers in addressing these challenges is critical, yet there is a perception that the current involvement of social work services is inadequate. Social workers are often the first point of contact for widows seeking help, and their role in providing counseling, advocacy, and awareness is vital. However, there is a concern that there is a huge lack of trained professionals, resources, and effective programs specifically tailored to address the unique needs of widows in the study area.

Indeed, social workers has made some strides in addressing harmful traditional practices through policies and institutional frameworks in form of national policy on the elimination of female genital mutilation (FGM), gender-based violence, widowhood abuses, prohibition of harmful widowhood rites, National gender policy among

others. However, the implementation of these policies, especially at the rural areas in Cross River State, remains a challenge. Despite the efforts made, there is a significant knowledge gap in understanding the effectiveness of social work services in improving the wellbeing of widows in the entire Central Senatorial District of Cross River State.

Furthermore, there is a gap in terms of lack of comprehensive data on the prevalence of widowhood rites and culture of patriarchy that militate against the wellbeing of widows in the study area. Besides, research on the impact of social work interventions on curbing obnoxious harmful traditional practices is limited. This gap in knowledge hinders the development of effective social work strategies and programmes to support the well-being of widows in the study area.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that a greater number of challenges faced by widows in the rural communities of Central Senatorial District of Cross River State include stigmatization, high level of illiteracy, poor income level, and discrimination among others caused by widowhood and patriarchal cultural practices. Consequent upon this, widows' contributions to society's development were being undermined. Besides, the society members under the guise of these cultural factors were engaged in actions and behaviours that triggered acrimonies, discrimination, oppression, and exploitation of widows. It became therefore imperative for social workers to intervene and they played enormous roles in the lives of widows in these communities. In other words, social work services in the form of social work advocacy, social work rehabilitation, social work counselling, and social work referral have impacted the well-being of widows. These social work intervention measures assisted most widows to recover from hardship and pains and to become socially functioning. It was social work services that enabled most widows to have hope of sustenance. It was also found that social work intervention was critical to curbing harmful cultural practices in most of the rural communities in the study area.

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