

## Widwhood Woes: The Bayelsa Experience

Rachel D. Uche (Ph.D)

Department of Educational Foundations  
Guidance & Counselling Faculty of Education  
University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria

### Abstract

The death of a husband is traumatic enough, yet the plight of the widow oftentimes, is further compounded by society and its traditions. The study, therefore, sought to determine the extent of adjustment among widows in Bayelsa State. The ex-post facto design was used and a sample size of 200 was derived through probability sampling technique. Two hypotheses were formulated and data collected using questionnaire which was analysed using Independent t-test. Results revealed that widwhood adjustment significantly differed on the bases of (1) Spirituality and (2) Age. It was concluded that adjustment tend to be easier for widows of higher spiritual level and those who are older. It was recommended for counsellors to be aware of the spiritual and other issues in their widow-clients lives and assist them to capitalize on these areas of strengths.

**Key Words:** Widwhood, Recovery, Spirituality, Adjustment

### INTRODUCTION

The death of a spouse is believed to be the most stressful of all events because it may signify the end of a relationship, long or short - the loss of shared history of significant events, the end of a satisfying sexual relationship, the loss of a best friend, trusted companion and in some cases, the bread winner. The death of a life partner may also mean that the surviving spouse will have to assume household responsibilities that she never performed before, such as school runs, car repairs or doing yard work. The situation gets compounded when the death, especially, that of the husband is accompanied by other emotional issues such as hostilities, maltreatment and aggression from in-laws (Olusakin, 2006).

The death of a spouse and the resultant effects are not the same for males and females because widows are more likely to receive injustice and unfair treatment than widowers, from members of their community, in some places in Nigeria (Ahonsi, 2008). The experience of widwhood has been rendered even more traumatic by some of the obnoxious practices carried out in some parts of Africa: widows' subjection to sitting on the bare floor, shaving of her hair with sharp objects, swearing before shrine to prove her innocence in his death and worse of all, drinking the water used in washing the husband's corpse (Ekime, 2009).

Grief is a universal reaction to loss or separation and upon the loss of their husbands, many women become deeply grieved which manifest in a number of behavioural forms, such as, active distress, protest and search for the lost attachment figure (Bowlby, 1982). Grief is so unsettling to observe that it elicits from others a desire to give comfort and solace, thus many religious and circular customs have gone a long way to help individuals, especially widows, survive the rigours of suffering and give meaning to death (Glick, Weiss & Parkes, 2005). Culture plays a role in determining how grief is expressed as well as mitigating or aggravating the grief experience (Kleinman & Kleinman, 1985).

Religious coping behaviours appear to kick in and help individuals function quite well in periods of grief and times of high stress, instead of disintegrating (Koenig, 2001). In Manton's (1989) study of a highly stressed group, spirituality was significantly related to personal adjustments, indicated by low depression and high self-esteem. Besides, socialization provided by religious organizations can help prevent isolation and loneliness (Koenig & Larson, 1998). Thus, widowed women who worship regularly report more joy in their lives than those who do not (Siegel & Kuykendall, 1990).

Indeed, after various kinds of traumatic experiences, such as divorce, unemployment or death, religious women seem to recover more quickly and regain happiness faster than the non-religious (Ellison, 1991). Moreover, those who participate actively in religious activities such as attending services, praying, and meditating tend to bounce back from their negative experiences faster than those who described themselves as inactive practitioners (George, Larson, Koenig & McCullough, 2000). Thus, spirituality cultivates in traumatized women resilience which refers to the presence of healthy coping and adaptation in spite of challenges and role, that is, the capacity to flourish under fire (Ruff & Singer, 2003).

Stroebe and Stroebe (1987) further identified age, socio-economic status, number of children, support from family and religious inclination as likely factors of influence on widowhood adjustment. According to Victor (2003), younger widows are more likely to seek for help than older ones; and younger widows are more likely to have lower income and in need of better living situation (Oniye, 2000). Ball's (2001) study showed that younger widows manifested symptoms of acute grief such as restlessness, irritability and depression than older ones. Moreover, the study of Carr and others (2000) associated widowhood with increased anxiety among those who were extremely dependent on their spouses.

Also, the study of Sevak, Weir and Willis (2004) indicated that younger widows are at greater risk in their grieving due to economic hardship and daily challenges of single parenthood; they are financially ill - prepared and are often concerned about what to do with the rest of their young lives. Young widows worry more about making important decisions and economic survival while older ones focus more on handling different daily chores (Kaunonen, Astedt-Kurki, Paunonen & Erijanji, 2000). Generally, older widows do better than younger ones, perhaps, because, the death of a partner is more expected for older women (Van Den Brink & Others, 2004).

Freud (1957) in theorizing about grief work, stated that loss causes great pain, and bereaved people inevitably need to struggle with the process of letting go. He continued that, mourning is manifested through loss of interest in the world, isolation from others, dwelling on thoughts of the deceased and suffering from depression. Gradually, the reality of loss is accepted, then there is emotional detachment from the former relationship and reinvesting of psychic energy into the formation of new attachment, all of which indicate successful resolution.

Bowlby (1982) depicts his view of typical bereavement reaction to the experience of separation from or loss of attachment figures. His description of the grieving process involves four phases. First, the loss is met by disbelief, which he referred to as shock. The bereaved may experience numbness or feeling of unreality. Emotions may be blunted and some individuals may even appear unaffected. Emotional outburst, dizziness or other physical symptoms may also be present. Eventually, reality sets in and a second phase protest, follows. The bereaved may experience obsessive yearning or searching for the lost loved one as well as periods of restlessness and irritability.

The third phase, he referred to as despair, may be characterized by great sadness; social withdrawal; sleeping; eating or other somatic disturbances; and other symptoms of depression and emotional upset. Individuals may experience flashbacks or memories of the deceased and may seek out other people to tell and retell their story of loss yet, as with a child whose attachment figure has left him/her, the comfort of others cannot replace the lost presence of the loved one.

The fourth and last phase, he referred to as reorganization, where the bereaved discover ways to hold on to the memory of the deceased and integrate that memory into their current life and new attachment. According to Fraley and Shaver (1999), they heal in part by drawing comfort from the sense of the deceased person's presence.

In order words, there are specific reactions peculiar to the bereaved and according to Ambakederemo (2011), wives often receive the news of their husbands' death with shock and disbelief that they would shout and cry aloud to attract neighbours and sympathizers; some would even attempt suicide. She further opined that these types of extreme reactions are common among widows resulting from sudden deaths.

Bayelsa State, which is located in the heart of the Niger Delta is one of the most backward and underdeveloped states of the federation, perhaps, because of its peculiar terrain, yet it is the source of a large chunk of the nation's natural resources and revenue. The underdevelopment, inadequacy of infrastructure and facilities, high level of unemployment, poverty and deprivation have led to the feeling of neglect and frustration among the people, especially, the youths. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report (2006) indicated that the Niger Delta is a region of frustrated expectations and deep-rooted mistrust.

Resources are depleted, yet the people do not seem to be benefitting from it, leading to agitation for resource control which has resulted in persistent violence and armed conflict between government forces and militants; bloody conflicts among rival militant groups for territorial control. There is also political assassinations which is becoming very frequent coupled with death as a result of poverty, ignorance and disease that have swampy terrain related origin(Uche,2015).

The aggregate of all these have resulted in unprecedented number of deaths in the region, especially among the males. It is reported that about one thousand (1000) get killed each year in the region (Hamilton, 2005) and according to Alagoa (2006), widows constitute about 7% of female adult population in Bayelsa State. The death of a husband is traumatic enough but the plight of the widow is further compounded by traditions and society. In many communities in the Niger Delta, women are expected to give thorough account of their husbands' deaths to the satisfaction of the in-laws and in some cases, they are forced to undergo some rituals in order to prove their innocence or guilt over the death.

Each time a husband dies, the wife is considered the first suspect, even when the cause of death is glaring. No husband seems to die of natural causes as such widows are often subjected to untold emotional and physical stress. In many cases, she has to be dispossessed of all that belongs to the man, down to even the furniture. That is, all assets may be seized from her while she is left with the liabilities, such as taking care of the children's needs. Thus, widows are oftentimes subjected to torture, physical humiliation, social and economic deprivation (Ambakederemo, 2011). There are even situations whereby a man dies testate, yet the

aggressive family members set aside the will, and still go ahead to pillage and take over the entire estate. Instances abound where widows had to relocate to their homes of origin with children in tow and penniless.

The misery experienced by widows has been a nagging and reoccurring issue in social discourse and in spite of the efforts made by governmental and non-governmental organizations towards mitigating their plight, the torture and ill-treatment still persist. Obviously, the efforts are not far reaching enough, perhaps just mere lip service. The problem of this study can therefore be summarized thus: What is the coping mechanism of widows in Bayelsa State? What is the level of adjustment to widowhood among the widows of Bayelsa State?

The purpose of the study is to determine the extent of adjustment among widows in Bayelsa State. Two hypotheses were formulated to guide the study:

1. Widowhood adjustment does not significantly differ on the basis of level of spirituality.
2. There is no significant difference in widowhood adjustment on the basis of age.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Ex-post facto design was adopted for the study since the variables under study were already manifest in the respondents and as such are not subject to manipulation. The area of study is Bayelsa State, located in the creeks of the Niger Delta in Nigeria. The State has a swampy terrain and is relatively underdeveloped, even though, it is one of the oil producing States from which the national revenue is derived. Hence, there are lingering and incessant agitations and sometimes, bloody conflict over control and equitable allocation of the national revenue. This is one of the smallest States in terms of population and geographical size, with its capital in Yenagoa.

The Bayelsa State Social Welfare Unit (2014) put the estimate of widows in the State at one thousand, six hundred and fifteen (1615), though their record keeping is believed to be faulty. Out of this number, only two hundred and twenty (220) are registered as widows in the state. Probability sampling technique is therefore adopted in order to include all the widows in the registration list of the state, and more so, these can be easily assessed. However, the sample size was reduced to 200 because 20 were earlier used for the reliability test of the instrument. The age of sampled women ranged from 25 – 60years. Out of this number 73 were under 40 years and 127 over 40years.

A 3-part questionnaire was used to collect the data. Part A, was made up of 4 background information items such as age, number of children, level of education and occupation. Part B, comprised 8 items that sought spirituality-related information such as “I feel very close to God”, “any time I prayed, I feel the weight of my anxiety lifted”, “my faith in God is the most important influence in my life”, etc. Part C consisted of 10-item statements that sought information on adjustment to widowhood, statements such as, “I have decided to grieve no more”, “I don’t feel so lonely anymore”, “the fact that I am still young gives me hope”, etc. Responses were made on a 4-point scale – Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD), for both the Part B and C.

Based on the list provided by the Social Welfare Unit, respondents were contacted and visited in their homes where the questionnaire was administered. The accruing data was analysed, using Independent t-test and the summaries are presented on the following tables.

### HYPOTHESES 1

Widowhood adjustment does not significantly differ on the basis of level of spirituality. Independent t-test was utilized to test the hypothesis and the result is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Independent t-test comparisons of levels of spirituality and adjustment among widows**

Spirituality level	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	T
High	112	33.05	7.08	8.43
Low	87	24.61	6.92	

\* $P < 0.01$ ;  $df = 198$ ;  $t_{crit} = 2.576$

From the data presented on Table 1, the calculated t-value (8.43), is greater than the  $t_{crit}$  (2.576) at .01 level of significance and 198 degrees of freedom. This means that there is a significant difference in widowhood adjustment between those of high level of spirituality and those of low spirituality level. In other words, widowhood adjustment significantly differs on the basis of levels of spirituality. Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected.

### HYPOTHESES 2

There is no significant difference in widowhood adjustment on the basis of age.

**Table 2: Independent t-test comparisons of age and adjustment among widows**

Age	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	t
Under 40 years	78	25.67	5.91	6.91
Over 40 years	122	31.96	6.83	

\* $P < .01$ ;  $df = 198$ ;  $t_{crit} = 2.576$

The data presented on Table 2 indicate that the calculated t-value (6.91), is greater than that  $t_{crit}$  (2.576) at .01 level of significance and 198 degrees of freedom. This shows a significant difference in widowhood adjustment between younger widows and older ones. That is to say, widowhood adjustment significantly differs on the basis of age. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected.

### DISCUSSION

The results for hypothesis one reveal a significant difference in widowhood adjustment on the basis of their spirituality levels. Widows of higher spiritual level adjusted faster and better from their grief of loss and trauma visited on them by in-laws, than those of lower spiritual levels. This implies that widows of higher spirituality are more efficient in going through Bowlby's (1982) stages of grief and eventually resolving to reorganize and reintegrate their memory of the bereaved into their current and new ones, than those of lower spirituality. This corroborates the findings of George, Larson, Koenig & Larson (2000) which stated that women who were active in religious services, prayers and meditation tend to bounce back faster from their negative experiences than those who described themselves as inactive practitioners. It is also the finding of Ellison (1991) that religious women seem to recover more quickly than the non-religious ones, after various kinds of traumatic experiences such as divorce, unemployment or death. Manton's (1989) study of highly stressed group, revealed spirituality

to be significantly related to personal adjustment in the form of low depression and high self-esteem. In essence, spirituality cultivates in traumatized women, resilience, that unique capacity to flourish under fire (Ryff & Singer, 2003).

Result for hypothesis two indicated that significant difference exist in the widowhood adjustment to grief and traumatic experiences on the basis of their age. Younger women (under 40 years) seem to take it harder and recovery is slower than older women (over 40 years). This finding is in line with Ball's (2001) study which reported that younger widows manifested symptoms of acute grief such as restlessness, irritability and depression than the older ones. Perhaps, because they are younger, they were still trying to build up their career or businesses and as such were economically dependent on their deceased husbands. According to Carr et al (2000), increased anxiety was associated with widows who were extremely dependent on their husbands. Furthermore, Sevak, Weir and Willis (2004) revealed that younger widows are more likely to grieve deeply as a result of financial hardship since they are financially ill-prepared and are more disposed to financial hardships, challenges of single parenthood and concern about what to do with the rest of their young lives. It is the conclusion of Van Den Brink et al (2004) that, in general, older widows fare better than younger ones in their grief and adjustment, probably because, the death of a partner is more expected for older women than the younger ones.

### **CONCLUSION**

The death of a husband is a painful loss and when that is coupled with ill-treatment from in-laws and other bystanders, it becomes even a more traumatic experience. Nonetheless, recovery, reorganization and adjustment can be achieved after a period of time. However, the indication from this study is that, this is easier and faster for widows of higher spirituality level, because of their belief in God, active participation in church activities and support from church members, than those of lower spirituality levels. Furthermore, older widows are indicated to achieve adjustment faster and better than the younger ones.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations are therefore proffered:

- Counsellors need to be aware of religious and spiritual issues in their clients (widows) lives and assist them to capitalize on these strengths.
- Counsellors may need to provide vocational counselling to widows, especially the younger ones who are often anxious about means of livelihood, in readiness to join the labour market after the intense grief period.
- Since most of the widows in this particular study area are Christians, the church may need to step up its support, both in cash and kind.
- Advocacy from counsellors and the church, by creating awareness in the society and lobbying the National Assembly to legislate against all oppressive, barbaric and dehumanizing mourning rites and customs that aggravate stress and hamper adjustment to widowhood.

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