

Knowledge And Perception Of Widowhood Rites Among Adults In Ilorin, Kwara State

¹S.A. Aderibigbe, ¹M.O. Lawal, ²F.A. Olatona, ³O.O. Sekoni, ⁴O.O. Goodman, ⁵S.K. Olubiyi ⁶M.S. Olaosebikan,

¹Dept of Epid & Community Health, College of Health Sciences, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria, ²Dept of Community Health & Primary Care, University of Lagos, ³Dept of Preventive and Social Medicine, College of Medicine, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria, ⁴Dept of Community Health & Primary Health Care, Lagos State University College of Medicine, Ikeja Lagos, ⁵Dept of Nursing Science, Faculty of Clinical Sciences, University of Ilorin, ⁶Dept of Epid & Community Health, University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital

Abstract

Widowhood rites vary from one community to another and some of these rites violate a woman's human rights. In some communities, discussion of intimate topics such as widowhood rites are considered as taboos, thus allowing for little research in the aspect of widow abuse in Africa. This study determined the knowledge and perception of widowhood rites among adults in Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria. A descriptive cross-sectional study design was used. Interviewer administered questionnaires were used to collect information from 450 respondents who were selected using a multistage sampling technique. Majority (79%) of the respondents had fair knowledge regarding widowhood rites. Knowledge of widowhood rites was not shown to be influenced by age, gender, religion, tribe and marital status of respondents. However, the level of education and occupation was shown to significantly influence the knowledge of widowhood rites ($p < 0.05$). A total of 170 (39.7%) respondents perceived widowhood rites as gender-based violence while 67.6% opined that widowhood rites violate a woman's basic human rights. There is a need to create more awareness and sensitization on widowhood rites through the mass media in order to improve knowledge of widowhood rites.

Keywords – knowledge, perception, widowhood rites, Nigeria

Introduction

All human societies have sought ways to make death acceptable and to provide opportunities for expressing grief and showing respect to the dead person. In societies where the status of women is low, the mourning and burial rituals are inherently gendered.¹ Rituals are used to exalt the position of the dead man, and his widow is expected to grieve openly and demonstrate the intensity of her feelings in

formalized ways. These rituals, prevalent in India as well as among many ethnic groups in African countries such as; Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana, Cameroon and Nigeria aim at exalting the status of the deceased husband, and they sometimes incorporate the most humiliating, degrading, and life-threatening practices, which eventually punish the widow for her husband's death.¹

It is believed that the pathetic state of widows is made difficult by some cultural expectations/deprivations associated with the phenomenon.² Some widowhood rites violate many basic principles contained in all key international human rights conventions.³ In some communities, discussion of intimate topics such as widowhood rites are considered as taboos, thus allowing for little research in the aspect of widow abuse in Africa. As a result, much of the scanty pieces of information available on the nature and effects of widows' mourning rites are raw and unprocessed information.⁴

Some widows come down with diseases such as scabies, typhoid, food poisoning, malaria and tuberculosis which are as a result of the poor standard of hygiene they are made to observe. Malnourishment, stiffness of the body from lack of movement and general stress which might lead to hypertension and death can result from harmful widowhood rites. These harmful rites also make widows prone to depression, numbness, increased feelings of emptiness and loss of self worth/confidence.⁵

Inheritance of the deceased man's wealth by his family members, neglect and abandonment leads to financial hardship, homelessness and inability of the widows to care for their children. As a result of these, some widows go into prostitution which in turn predisposes them to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.⁵

In many groups in Africa and some parts of Asia, traditional mourning and burial rites involving harmful and degrading treatment constitute gender-based violence, but governments seem to be slow in recognising this fact. The right to the highest attainable standard of health is built into many human rights charters and conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). During the process of carrying out some widowhood rites, widows through poor nutrition, lack of hygiene, a lack of access to health care and

Correspondence to:

Dr. S.A. Aderibigbe

Dept of Epid & Community Health,
College of Health Sciences, University of Ilorin
P.M.B. 1515,
Ilorin, Nigeria
+2348033889506
email: tayonov23@yahoo.com

vulnerability to violence are likely to suffer physical ill health as well as psychological pain.⁶ People see discussions about widowhood rites as taboos thus there is scanty information, since not much research has been done in this area.⁴

This study determined the knowledge and perception of widowhood rites among adults in Ilorin North Central Nigeria. This will help in the design of programmes and interventions aimed at addressing harmful widowhood rites. Findings from this study will also add to the scarce scientific literature on widowhood rites in Nigeria.

Materials And Methods

Ilorin, the capital of Kwara state is located in North Central Nigeria at the geographical and cultural confluence of the North and South of Nigeria. The indigenes of Ilorin are mainly Muslims and the major ethnic groups are Yoruba, Fulani, Hausa and Nupe. The study was conducted in Ilorin South Local Government Area (LGA), one of the three LGAs in Ilorin metropolis. It has a population of 315,000 delineated into 11 wards.¹⁷

A descriptive cross sectional design was used for the study. Multistage sampling technique was used to recruit 450 respondents into the study as follows: Simple random sampling technique by ballot was used to select four wards out of the eleven wards in Ilorin South Local Government; Simple random sampling technique by balloting was used to select one settlement from each ward and then finally, Systematic sampling technique was used at the household level to select the respondents into the study. Data was collected using an interviewer administered, semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire sought information on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, knowledge of widowhood rites and perception towards widowhood rites.

Data analysis was done using Epi-info version 3.5.3. The results were presented in frequency tables and charts. A p-value of 0.05 or less was regarded as statistically significant. The knowledge questions were scored and graded into three categories of poor, fair and good knowledge. Respondents that scored from 1-13 were graded as having poor, 14-26 fair and above 26, good knowledge. The maximum score obtainable was 39.

The study respondents were male and female adults (over 18 years of age) residing in Ilorin South Local Government Area. Informed consent was obtained verbally from the respondents before the questionnaire was administered. All information was treated with strict confidentiality and respondents were given the free will to consent without coercion.

Results

A total of 450 respondents were used in this study. Majority of the respondents were between the ages of 30 and 59 years (69%). The mean age was 46.3(\pm 11.3) years and the modal age was 48. More than half (53.6%) of the respondents were females while distribution by religion showed that majority (80%) of the respondents were Muslims. Majority of the respondents were married (89.6%). About 61.5% of the respondents had some form of Western education. With regards to ethnicity, majority of the respondents were Yoruba (76.7%) while occupational status revealed that most of the respondents were employed (95.6%).

About 429 (95.3%) of the respondents were aware of widowhood rites. Parents (59.9%) and family (57.3%) were cited as the most frequent source of information while the internet (0.7%) was the least frequent source of information on widowhood rites. About 17% of the respondents were aware of widowhood rites through their personal experiences. Majority of the respondents (389: 90.7%) also knew the health problems associated with widowhood rites.

Few of the respondents knew that widows are prevented from taking baths during the mourning period (19.8%), widows are made to sleep on the floor during the mourning period (18.2%) and widows are forced to eat from dirty or broken plates during the mourning period (12.1%). Very few (1.4%) of the respondents knew that widows are made to drink the water used to wash their husband's corpse. About 39.1% of the respondents knew that widows could develop sexually transmitted infections as a result of some types of widowhood rites while majority of the respondents (96.1%) knew that depression could arise as a result of widowhood rites. Majority of the respondents (83.3%) also knew that poverty could arise as a result of some types of widowhood rites. Majority (339: 79.0%) of the respondents had fair knowledge of widowhood rites. The mean score of respondents who had fair knowledge was 18.32 \pm 2.97.

The knowledge of respondents regarding widowhood rites was not dependent on age, gender, religion, tribe and marital status ($p=0.1379, 0.1304, 0.8346, 0.1246$ and 0.1304 respectively). The knowledge of widowhood rites was significantly associated with the educational level and occupation of respondents. (p -values of 0.0000 and 0.0162 respectively)

More than half (59.6%) of the respondents were of the opinion that widowhood rites are harmful and should be stopped. About 41.5% of the respondents were of the opinion that women are made to observe widowhood rites because they are seen as inferior to men while 39.7% perceived widowhood rites as gender-based violence. About 67.6% were of the opinion that widowhood rites violate a woman's basic human rights. More than half (54.1%) of the

TABLE 1: RESPONDENTS' KNOWLEDGE OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF WIDOWHOOD RITES

Types of widowhood rites	Frequency	(%)
Wearing black clothes for the duration of the mourning period	419	(97.7)
Confining the widow to a room during mourning	373	(86.9)
Widow cleansing (ritual cleansing)	368	(85.8)
Shaving the hair on the head of the widow	359	(83.7)
Preventing the widow from going to the market during mourning	337	(78.6)
Preventing the widow from going to the farm during mourning	329	(76.7)
Preventing the widow from doing household chores during mourning	319	(74.4)
Confiscation of the husband's property by his people	284	(66.2)
Compulsory inheritance of the widow by her late husband's kin	240	(55.9)
Preventing the widow from eating certain food items	213	(49.7)
Widows paying a fine to abstain from any of the rites	185	(43.1)
Preventing the widow from changing her clothes during mourning period	176	(41.0)
Compulsory crying at specific periods of day and night during mourning	126	(29.4)
Forcing the widow to sit on the floor during the mourning period	105	(24.5)
Preventing the widow from taking baths during the mourning period	85	(19.8)
Forcing the widow to sleep on the floor during the mourning period	78	(18.2)
Forcing the widow to eat with left hand during mourning period	74	(17.2)
Forcing the widow to eat from dirty or broken plates during the mourning period	52	(12.1)
Forcing the widow to drink the water used to wash the corpse	6	(1.4)

Multiple response N=429**TABLE 2: RESPONDENT'S KNOWLEDGE OF THE HEALTH PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH WIDOWHOOD RITES**

Physical health problems	Frequency	(%)
Hypertension	366	(94.1)
Malnutrition	343	(88.2)
Body pains	194	(49.9)
Sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS	152	(39.1)
Malaria	141	(36.2)
Tuberculosis	47	(12.1)
Scabies	42	(10.8)
Typhoid	35	(9.0)
Injuries	35	(9.0)
Food poisoning	29	(7.5)
Psychological problems		
Depression	374	(96.1)
Stress disorders	315	(81.0)
Loss of self esteem	203	(52.2)
Numbness	153	(39.3)
Others (anger and seclusion)	74	(19.0)
Social health problems		
Poverty		
Prostitution	324	(83.3)
Others(helplessness and neglect)	70	(18.0)
	14	(3.6)

Multiple response N=389

respondents strongly agreed that women should not be forced to observe widowhood rites.

Majority of the respondents also perceived that women observe widowhood rites to prove that they are not responsible for their husband's death (91.6%), to show respect to their dead husbands (90%), to break the bond between the widow and her dead husband (84.6%) and to protect the widow from harm by the spirit of the dead (80.6%). Majority of the respondents (96.5%) opined that culture is a major factor that determines what a widow should do. About 88.4% and 78.1% of the respondents were also of the opinion that religion and illiteracy influence the practice of widowhood rites respectively. Most of the respondents were of the opinion that the government (70.4%), traditional leaders (81.1%) and religious organizations (78.7%) can help to stop harmful widowhood rites.

Discussion

Until recent times there had been a silence that surrounded Gender and Cultural Based Violence (GCBV) and a resistance by international agencies to address it because of cultural differences in relation to challenging existing local norms. Widowhood rites like many other customary practices form an integral part of the cultural beliefs of most African communities.

In this study, majority of the respondents were aware of widowhood rites. This is an indication of how extensive the awareness of widowhood rites has become and how much of it is being practiced. However, the mass media played little role in providing

TABLE 3: KNOWLEDGE SCORE OF RESPONDENTS REGARDING WIDOWHOOD RITES

Score	Knowledge grade	Frequency (%)	Mean
1-13	Poor Knowledge	57(13.3)	10.88±2.44
14-26	Fair knowledge	339(79.0)	18.32±2.97
>26	Good knowledge	33(7.7)	28.45±2.52
Total		429(100.0)	

TABLE 4: MEAN KNOWLEDGE SCORES OF RESPONDENTS BASED ON THEIR SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

Socio-demographic variables	Total	Mean±SD	F/T Test	p-value
Age group (years)				
20-29	30	16.73±6.36		
30-39	88	17.41±5.46		
40-49	166	18.77±3.85	1.68154	0.1379
50-59	106	17.63±5.24		
60-69	51	18.76±5.11		
70-79	9	16.67±2.56		
Gender				
Male	209	18.28±4.65	2.29729	0.1304*
Female	241	17.56±5.33		
Religion				
Islam	360	18.08±5.00	0.0423	0.8346*
Christianity	90	17.94±4.37		
Educational level				
No formal education	173	13.07±4.95		
Primary	123	15.92±3.59	182.355	0.0000
Secondary	92	18.19±5.21		
Tertiary	62	19.69±4.96		
Tribe				
Yoruba	345	18.01±4.88		
Fulani	22	16.86±6.21		
Hausa	16	19.50±5.19	1.81603	0.1246
Igbo	14	20.71±2.09		
Nupe	53	17.68±4.50		
Marital status				
Single	18	17.06±4.89		
Married	403	18.28±5.29		
Separated/divorced	8	14.5±0.52	1.8810	0.1304
Widow	21	19.14±4.79		
Occupation				
Artisan	159	18.10±4.43		
Business	158	18.78±5.99		
Civil servant	82	19.76±5.95	2.8173	0.0162
Farmer	31	17.94±4.47		
Student	13	16.00±3.09		
Unemployed	7	14.16±0.61		

* T test

TABLE 5: RESPONDENT'S PERCEPTION OF WIDOWHOOD RITES

General perception of widowhood rites	SA(%)	A(%)	D(%)	SD(%)	UD(%)
Widowhood rites are harmful and should be stopped	125(29.1)	131(30.5)	162(37.8)	9(2.1)	2(0.5)
Women are made to observe widowhood rites because they are seen as inferior to men	43(10.0)	135(31.5)	194(45.2)	52(12.1)	5(1.2)
Widowhood rites are gender-based violence	44(10.3)	126(29.4)	216(50.3)	43(10.0)	0(0.0)
Widowhood rites violates a woman's basic human rights	121(28.2)	169(39.4)	81(18.9)	47(11.0)	11(2.6)
Women should not be forced to observe widowhood rites	232(54.1)	92(21.4)	61(14.2)	39(9.1)	5(1.2)

N=429

SA – strongly agree, A – agree, D – disagree, SD – strongly disagree, UD - undecided

information on widowhood rites as more than half of the respondents cited parents and family as their sources of information. This means that the issue of widowhood rites is not well publicised through the electronic and print media. This could be the reason why there is a paucity of studies which would have helped to form the basis for appropriate interventions aimed at addressing harmful widowhood rites. The reason for this finding could probably be due to the fact that in some communities, discussion of intimate topics such as widowhood rites are considered as taboos, thus allowing for little publications and researches.⁴

With regards to the types of widowhood rites, it was revealed that the respondents' knowledge of some dehumanising widowhood rites was low. For instance, less than twenty percent of the respondents knew that widows are forced to eat from dirty or broken plates and are forced to drink the water used to wash their husband's corpse. This could be attributed to the fact that such harmful rites are prevalent in the Southern and Eastern parts of Nigeria, therefore the respondents would not know much about them. This indicates that the knowledge of different types of widowhood rites varies with location because widowhood rites vary from one community to another.⁷

A high proportion of the respondents knew the health problems associated with widowhood rites. This finding agrees with studies that indicated that a significant relationship existed between harmful widowhood rites and the widows' health.¹² It is also in line with findings by Ilika *et al.* who reported that female respondents in Eastern Nigeria agreed that widowhood rites affected their physical and mental

health and infringed their human and reproductive rights.¹³ This finding may be an indication that knowledge about the harmful effects of widowhood rites is improving, more people seems to be more aware of it and its problems and this might probably lead to its decline.

More than eighty percent of the respondents knew about likely physical health problems that may arise as a result of the practice of widowhood rites such as hypertension and malnutrition, psychological problems like depression and stress disorders. Poverty was also identified as a social problem resulting from widowhood rites. Similarly, reports had shown that widows can come down with various diseases, become malnourished and experience financial hardship due to some forms of widowhood rites.⁵

More than three quarter of the respondents had fair knowledge regarding widowhood rites. The observed differences in age and mean knowledge score was not shown to be statistically significant which implies that respondent's knowledge of widowhood rites was independent of the age of the respondents. Mean knowledge score of male respondents was slightly higher than that of females although this difference was insignificant. Knowledge of widowhood rites was not also linked with religion, tribe and marital status of respondents as the observed differences were not statistically significant.

Education was found to influence knowledge regarding widowhood rites as knowledge scores increased with increased level of education ($p=0.0000$). Additionally, knowledge of widowhood rites was associated with employment status

($p=0.0162$). Respondents who were employed had higher mean knowledge scores than students and unemployed individuals. The probable reason for this finding could be that respondents who were employed were more exposed in their places of work and this exposure may have led to better knowledge regarding widowhood rites.

Regarding perception towards widowhood rites, less than half of the respondents perceived widowhood rites as gender-based violence although a significant proportion of the respondents agreed that widowhood rites violate a woman's basic human rights. This result is quite different from a study in Ghana which revealed that none of the widows in the study regarded the performance of the rites as infringing on their human rights, but rather as a means of honouring their husbands and avoiding any spiritual consequences that characterise non-performance of such rites.¹⁶ This difference could be attributed to the fact that the respondents in the study in Ghana were all widows and so may not be at liberty to voice out as there could be some negative consequences. The implication of this finding is that while many people may see some types of widowhood rites as violation of women's rights, the widows themselves may not see it that way.

Majority of the respondents indicated that the reasons for carrying out widowhood rites are for widows to prove that they are not responsible for their husband's death, to show respect to the dead husband, to break the bond between the widow and her dead husband and to protect the widow from harm by the spirit of the dead. This is in correlation with findings from previous studies on the reasons for widowhood rites.^{14,15}

It was also revealed from this study that a large proportion of respondents perceived culture, religion and illiteracy as factors that influence widowhood rites. In addition, majority of the respondents agreed that government, traditional leaders and religious organisations can help to stop harmful widowhood rites, connoting that respondents were aware of the bodies that can address the problem of harmful widowhood rites. This finding is consistent with Aderinto's finding in 2000 which indicated that there had been changes in the traditional widowhood rites in Ekiti and Ondo States (Nigeria), with religious organizations being the most significant force of change.¹⁴

With increased education on widowhood rites, dehumanising widowhood rites may be eroded because it is believed that people will modify their behaviour when they understand the hazards and indignity of harmful practices and when they realize that it is possible to give up harmful practices without giving up meaningful aspects of their culture. However, this process may be slow.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This study has provided insight into the knowledge and perception of widowhood rites in Ilorin South LGA. Majority of the respondents had fair knowledge regarding widowhood rites while less than a tenth of respondents demonstrated good knowledge of widowhood rites. The major source of information on widowhood rites according to the respondents were parents and family.

Knowledge of widowhood rites was not associated with age, gender, religion, tribe and marital status of respondents. However, the level of education and occupation was shown to significantly influence the knowledge of widowhood rites. Majority of the respondents were of the opinion that women should not be forced to observe widowhood rites while two thirds of the respondents opined that widowhood rites violate a woman's basic human rights. Culture was said to be a major factor that determines what a woman should do when her husband dies. The ministry of health, and women affairs should create more awareness and sensitization through the mass media on widowhood rites and the health problems associated with them in order to discourage harmful aspects of the rites.

References

1. Owen M. Widows in third world nations In: Encyclopaedia of death and dying. Available at <http://www.deathreference.com>. Accessed on 24/03/2011.
2. Osarenren N. The status of widows among the Igbos of eastern Nigeria. The Counselor: Journal of Counselling Association of Nigeria. 1998; 16(1):17-21.
3. Erinosho L. Introduction. In: Rights and widowhood rites in Nigeria. Lagos: Inter African Committee (Nigeria) on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children; 2000. p. 1-5.
4. Korieh CJ. Widowhood among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria. Bergen Spring: University of Bergen, Norway; 1996.
5. Communication for change. The truth about widowhood in Nigeria. Available at <http://www.cfcnigeria.com>. Accessed on 30/10/2010.
6. United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women. Widowhood: Invisible women secluded or excluded. New York: Division for the Advancement of Women; 2001. p. 1-9
7. Izuako O. Obnoxious widowhood rites in Nigeria: looking through gender lens. In: Nigeria Violence Against Women. Lagos: BAOBAB tree; 2003. p. 3-4.
8. Oloruntimilehin O. Widowhood Practices in

- Western Nigeria. Better Life Programme. 1991(Unpublished).
9. Odimegwu AO. Widowhood and the dignity of womanhood in Igbo land: a pastoral challenge to the discipleship of Roman Catholic Church in Igbo land [dissertation]. New York: Fordham University; 2010. Available at <http://www.fordham.edu>. Accessed on 30/03/2011.
10. World Public Opinion.Org. Poll: across the world, many see discrimination against widows and divorced women, 2008. Available at <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org>. Accessed on 23/04/2011.
11. Widows Rights International (WRI). Work of Widows and Orphans Ministry Ghana. January 2006. Available at <http://www.widowsrights.org/ghana1.htm>. Accessed on 23/04/2011.
12. Owolabi GO, Onibokun A. Health implications of harmful widowhood practices in Nigeria. *African Journal of Midwifery and Women's Health*. 2011; 5(1): 25-30.
13. Ilika AL, Ilika UR. Eliminating gender-based violence: learning from the widowhood practices elimination initiative of a women organization in Ozubulu, Anambra State of Nigeria. *Afr J Rep Health*. 2005; 9(2): 65-75
14. Aderinto AA. Wives of the grave: a study of widowhood rites and wife inheritance in Ondo and Ekiti States. In: *Rights and widowhood rites in Nigeria*. Lagos: Inter African Committee (Nigeria) on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children; 2000. p. 12-18
15. Oyeniyi AJ, Ayodeji I. Widowhood practices among the Yorubas of Southwest Nigeria: are there differences in what women experience due to their status? *Faqs.org*.2010. Available at <http://www.faqs.org>. Accessed on 19/03/2010.
16. Azumah FD. Gender and cultural based violence and widowhood rituals in Ghana and its effects on women's reproductive health rights. Oral Presentation #263 at the Penn-ICOWH 18th Congress; 2010 April 7 -10; USA: Philadelphia.
17. Federal Republic of Nigeria. Federal Republic of Nigeria Official Gazette of the 2006 national Population and Housing Census. The Federal Government printer. Lagos-Nigeria. FGP71/52007/2500 (OL24) 2007; 94(24); 175-198.
18. Ibrahim T. Research methodology. Abuja: Cress Global Link Ltd; 2009.p.70-75.