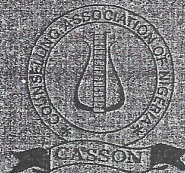


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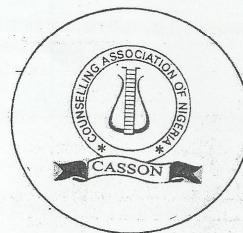


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**STRESS LEVEL OF NIGERIAN WIDOWS AND
REHABILITATIVE COUNSELLING AS AN AGENDA FOR
SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY.**

BY

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ABSTRACT

The paper examined the stress levels of Nigerian widows on the basis of three independent variables of age at bereavement, educational level, and duration of bereavement. The sample consisted of 865 widows purposively drawn from the three major ethnic groups of Nigeria namely: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The stress rating scale for widows (SRSW) developed by the researchers, was administered to the widows in their offices, meeting places, religious gatherings and their homes respectively. Frequency counts, simple percentages and Analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistics were used for data analysis. The results showed that majority of the widows had moderate (medium level) experience of stress, (59.9%) , while only 29.9% and 10.3% of them experience low and high levels of stress respectively. No significant differences in stress levels on the basis of age, educational level and duration of bereavement was found. It was concluded from the findings that widowhood practices in Nigeria result in stress for the widows. On the basis of the findings, useful recommendations were made to Government, with a strong suggestion for the establishment of a National Commission for Widowhood Affairs so as to provide a basis for poorer rehabilitation services, and as a way of building a truly democratic society.

INTRODUCTION

The human society is an interactive community of people joined together by ties meant to ensure the sustenance and propagation of the human race. One of these ties is the institution of marriage, which exists as a socially recognized, durable, although not necessarily life-long relationship between the individual man and woman. In the opinion of rice (1980). A well adjusted marriage is the dream of every Couple and it is one of every in which each spouse is a Source of emotional and economic support, companionship, sexual gratification and physical protection for the other.

The man and the woman in the family co-operate through a division of a labour, based on gender. This division of labour and responsibilities varies in rigidity and the task performed. For example, child care, household tasks and crafts closely connected with the house-hold, are mostly to be done by women, while provision of money for feeding, payment of

school fees, settlement of medical and other bills for essential facilities like electricity bills, protection of the family among others are assignments traditionally allocated to men.

Among the factors that affect the marital adjustment/happiness of couples is death. Death, especially that of a very close person, is often seen as an ultimate loss, which invariably is accompanied by grief. Thus, the death of a person most times constitutes a by grief. Thus, the death of a person most times constitutes a great loss to the deceased person's immediate family his/her society and at times the nation at large. The death of a relation is usually mourned in all cultures in different ways (ojedapo, 1994).

Cultural variation in mourning in Africa for example is manifested in the form of intense wailing, weeping and hysteria. Other features of mourning in Africa include seclusion and general isolation of the widow from the wider community, restrictions with regards to choice of dressing and socialization among others. Among the North American Community mourning include such practices as laying of wreath on the door, folding of the National flag, wearing of black costumes by co-workers, neighbours and relations of the deceased, and holding of a solemn assembly etc.

The death of a spouse and its consequences are not the same for males and females. For example, because of some cultural practices and role expectations that prescribe intense wailing, seclusion and general isolation of the widow in Nigeria, the agony of losing a spouse that widow faces a lot of problems after the death of her husband. This is because; recent social - economic changes and family system have aggravated the widow's loneliness. This is especially true of widows of nuclear family system, because after the funeral, relatives, friends, and siblings often return to their personal and individual responsibilities, leaving the widow to face the stress and emptiness widowhood alone.

In the contemporary society, the plight of widows has become the focus of modern social psychology and rehabilitative counselling. Thus, the question being asked is how do widows cope with life in a society which ordinarily is cure' to weaker sex of which widows are one (Abduisalam, (1995). The plight of Nigerian widows seems to be naturally embedded in the culture that preaches gender inequality. For example, the typical widow in rural Nigeria is taken through harmful widowhood rites, by older women in her children and her husband (Olusakin, 1998).

Consequently, the death of a spouse is regarded as the most devastating source of domestic stress for the widows. According to Ekennia (1998), the death of a spouse initiates for the widow social, psychological and physical separations of a longstanding human attachment. As a result of the multiple economic, social, cultural, physical and psychological implications inherent in widowhood, this phenomenon is invariably considered a major stressor for the widow whose general being is made pathetic by our cultural inequality (Imam, 1991). The widow equally faces the problem of psychological warfare often experienced due to lack of emotional support,

warmth, companionship, and sexual gratification previously provided by the deceased husband, on such days when nothing would seem to work right.

The implication of the above is that the widow is bound to experience various dimensions of stress, which invariably constitutes stress level in her life from then on.

The cultural rules governing the age at which one can marry is the first source of stress for women in almost all cultures of the world.

For example, it is perfectly acceptable for men to marry women as much as fifteen or twenty years younger than they are, while it is generally unacceptable (especially in African culture) for men to be married to women a little older than they are, even if the margin is one or two years. Thus, the difference in life expectancy between the sexes make the women to be at a disadvantage. In a number of ways, one of which is the fact that she would be widowed at an age when she is not expected to remarry. Unfortunately her marital status notwithstanding, she is expected to single handedly, face the task of rearing the children left behind by her deceased husband.

Another issue for widow's stress is lack of suitable marital partner, at such an age, to provide her with the necessary emotional support, warmth, companionship, sexual gratification, and physical protection, especially if she belongs to the nuclear family system. Although, it is true that her children may provide some sorts of emotional support, companionship and security; there is a limit to such supports. Coupled with this is the problem of financial handicap, which the widow now has to grapple with. This is because with the death of her husband (the traditional breadwinner), she is left to fend not only for herself, but also for their children.

Loss of identity is another issue that affects the widow's stress level. This is because, when her husband was alive, she had invested her identity in her marriage as a faithful housewife to her husband. However, with this death, she loses not only her spouse but also her marital vocation and identity. This is more pathetic when the woman cannot remarry, and has no gainful employment in which she could invest her time/energy (Gbenda, 1997; Goldman & Lord, 1983).

Closely connected to loss of self-esteem. To this is due to the fact the presence of her husband while alive, gave to her vicarious power or status. This is especially true of widows of the ruling class and wealthy husbands. For example, a widow accustomed to being treated with a deference because of the position or social status of her husband, would suddenly become a nobody, once the husband is no more. It can thus, be seen that the stress of the widows, as they go through the widowhood process will/may affect such areas as they psychological and social-economic aspects of their lives.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The incidence of bereavement has been found to be stressful for widows (Wiebe, 1987), the same way it has been found that the resultant

effect of bereavement are not the same way it has been found that the resultant effect of Berea vent are not the same for males and females. Specially, while our cultural inequality in Africa tend to adequately protect men from widowhood stress, the same cultural practice appears to heightens the widowhood stress of the women folk. Consequently, a number of studied (foreign and local) have been carried out bereavement, widowhood practice and widowhood stress.

METHODOLOGY

The research design adopted for this study is the descriptive survey method, which according to Kerlinger (1978), is a research approach that focuses on people and their beliefs, opinions, motivations and behaviors. Thus, in an attempt to study Nigerian widows about their stress level, the choice of descriptive survey is considered appropriate. The target population for the study is considered appropriate. The target population for the study is made up of widows from the three major ethnic groups of Nigerian (Hausa, Igbo, & Yoruba). They were purposively sampled across the major ethnic groups from three former regional headquarters namely Kaduna, Enugu and Ibadan and were 865 widows in number. The instrument used to collect data is called Stress Rating Scale for Widows (SRSW). The instrument is made up of two sections A and B, section A seeks demographic information while section B consists of four sub-sections meant to assess level of stress confronting the widows. These sub-sections are labeled: (i) Social-psychological Stressor; (ii) Financial stressors; (iii) Health and Emotional Stressors; and (iv) Authority and Responsibility Stressors. Each of these sub-sections has five items scored on a five point likert rating style ranging from one to five.

The instrument was administered personally by the researchers in conjunction with research assistants who have been trained on how to administer the instrument. The administration was done at such places like the widow's meeting place, religious gatherings, co-operative society meeting centers, individual houses etc. In the scoring of the researchers used the five point likert rating style. Thereafter, the researchers categorized the stress experienced by widows into three levels viz: low, medium and high with the score range for these levels being 20-45 (low), 46-74 (medium), and 75-100 (high) stress levels respectively. The data collected for the study were analysed through three statistical analysis measures Viz: Frequency count, simple percentage and Analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by Age, Educational Level and Duration of Bereavement.

VARIABLES	NO.	OF RESPONDENTS	PERCENTAGE (%)
AGE AT BEREAVEMENT			
25-35 years		235	27.2
36-55 years		366	42.3
56 years and above		264	30.5
Total		865	100.0

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL		
Primary six	355	41.0
Sec. Sch-NCE/OND	352	40.7
First degree and above	185	18.3
Total	865	100.0
DURATION OF BEREAVEMENT		
2-5 Years	397	45.0
2-6 6-11 year and above	468	54.0
Total	865	100.0

Table 1 shows that of the 865 widows used for this study 235 (27.2%) fall between 25-35 years of age, 366 (42.3%) fall between 36-55 years of age and 264 (30.5%) are 56 years and above. In respect of educational level, 355 (41.0%) of the respondents had primary six certificate or less, 352 (40.7%) had at least Secondary School qualification but not more than NCE/OND qualifications while 185 (18.3%) possessed either first degree or other higher education qualifications. In terms of duration of bereavement, the table indicates that 397 (46.0%) of the widows lost their husbands within 2-5 years, 468 (54.0%) between years and above.

RESULTS

The results of the data analysis are presented in three parts namely: 1, demographic data on the main research question B, the report of data on the testing of the hypotheses generated and 3, summary of findings.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents by stress levels

VARIABLE	NO. OF RESPONDENTS	PERCENTAGE (%)
STRESS LEVEL		
Low	258	29.8
Medium	518	59.9
High	89	10.3
Total	865	100.0

Table 2 reveals that of the 865 widows studied in this research work, 258 (29.8%) reported low stress level, 518 (59.9%) reported medium stress level while 89 (10.3%) reported high stress level.

Hypotheses Testing: Table 3 present the result of hypotheses tested for the study.

Table 3: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on stress level of Nigerian Widows on the Basis of age, Educational Level and Duration of Bereavement.

Age	DF	S.S.	M.s	Cal.F.	Critical F.
Model	2	1400.86	700.43		
Error	862	230208.51	267.06	2.62	3.00
Corrected total	864	231609.38			
Duration					
Model	2	149.58	74.49		
Error	862	231459.79	268.51	0.28	3.00
Corrected total	864	231609.38			

The Table 3 showing the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on stress level of Nigerian widows on the basis of age, educational level and duration of their bereavement indicates that there is no significant difference in the stress level of Nigerian widows on the basis of age-groupings, educational level and duration of their bereavement.

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Research findings have shown that human experience reaction to certain phenomenon is a product of certain factorial inter play in their lives. For example it has been found that among the factors that are likely to influence a widows reactions to spousal bereavement are age at bereavement, education level and duration of the widows bereavement. By implication studies on these variable inconclusively points to glaring difference among widows and other disadvantaged groups in their response to Berea vent, widowhood and its attendant stress.

According to Friedman and Rose man (1974), individual personal characteristics are now known to be predisposing factors to stress. In the same vein, Gbenda (1997) contended that the society is displaying double standard because in forbidding remarriage, the society does not take cognizance of the widow's age at bereavement and by implication her sexual and financial needs. It can thus be inferred that certain factors do influence widow's experience and adjustment to bereavement during widowhood. These factors according to researchers (Friedman & Rose man, 1974; Sanders, 1981; & Saple, 1991) include widow's age, childbearing status; social-economic status, duration of bereavement among others.

It has also been shown by research findings that widowhood is fraught with stress and stress symptoms peculiar to widows. These symptoms/stressors cut-across psychological, sociological and financial sources. These stressors are known to emanate from problems marital partner;

- (i) Lack of suitable identity
- (ii) Loss of personal identity
- (iii) Loss of self-esteem;
- (iv) Lack of emotional support; and
- (v) Problem of financial constraints.

Based on the result of the data analysis conducted on the data for the hypotheses generated, it was found that there is no significant difference among Nigeria widows in their stress level, on the basis of age at bereavement. The similarity found in their stress level is possibly as a result of the general stressful nature of widowhood in Nigeria. A typical Nigerian widow is by tradition expected to undergo certain mourning rites and widowhood practices, to a great extent, constitute widowhood stressors, to the widow because of their inherent deprivations. Thus, a widow's stress could be from any one or a combination of these deprivations, economic constraint, lack of sexual partner (for sexual gratification), lack of warmth and emotional support, and lack of suitable marital partner to satisfy her numerous needs.

Further more, the finding that there is no significant difference among widows in their stress level is possibly because majority of them (60.0%) expressed experiencing medium stress level. Coupled with this is the fact that most widows in Nigeria live under pathetic social-economic and psychological conditions compounded by the practice of many retrogressive and dehumanizing mourning/widowhood rites and customs. These practices merely accorded to the widow a position of public scorn and disdain, especially, in such societies like Igbo society where the wife is literally held responsible for the death of her husband.

However, while the finding of this study buttressed the submission of o' Byrant and Morgan (1989) that there is age difference in grieving and adjustment, it refuted the claim by Pfeiffer's (1977) and Ball (1977) that widowhood has more and immediate negative effects on the health, social status and psychological state of young widows than older ones. On the contrary, the finding of this study is that older widows do not adjust to bereavement better than younger widows, it is equally clear from the findings of this study that, irrespective of age, educational attainment or duration of bereavement, widowhood is typically stressful to Nigerian widows. The findings of this study as earlier on highlighted, have a number of implications for the society, the widows, the government and counselors among others.

Firstly, the finding that widowhood is stressful irrespective of age, educational level and duration of bereavement implies that widowhood practice in Nigeria is generally fraught with problems. The implication is that, if a true democratic society is to be built, everybody from the government to the society, including counsellors, must pay attention to the plight of widows in order to give them a true sense of belonging.

Similarly, the findings of the study implies that in order to integrate the widows fully into a true democratic society, the government as a matter of urgency would have to legislate against those age long but retrogressive widowhood practices that tend to heighten widowhood stress and tension in such societies where these practices are still in existence.

On the other hand, the findings of this study implies that Counselor in training and practice must be alert to the stressful nature of widowhood

in Nigeria. In the light of this alertness, adequate preparation must be made for rehabilitative counselling, if widows are to be assisted to function effectively as members of truly democratic society where both minority and majority would have their say and their way respectively. The ability of Counsellors to provide appropriate enlightenment to the society and opinion leaders about the stressful nature of widowhood practice in Nigeria is a major step toward the provision of effective rehabilitative counselling and building a democratic society. It is therefore recommended that the government, the society a help (counsellors specifically should do the following:

- (1) That Nigeria lawmakers (legislators) should legislate against all oppressive or barbaric mourning rites and widowhood customs that tend to heighten widowhood stress.
- (2) That the Federal, State and Local Government of Nigeria should provide functional basic education to all citizens as specially the female folks to enable them understand their right and privileges in order to actively play their parts in a truly democratic society.
- (3) That the government should establish a National Commission for Widow Affairs with social, legal, financial and educational advancement of widows as its focus.
- (4) That bereavement and Widowhood Counselling programme should be incorporated into the training syllabus of all prospective counsellors. This is necessary for counsellors to adequately meet the challenges of providing rehabilitative counselling to widows.
- (5) That Nigeria widows, especially those bereaved before the age of 23 years should be encouraged to remarry. This is crucial if their physiological and psychological needs like sexual gratification, provision of emotional support and social support are to be legitimately satisfied.

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