

WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES AND SPREAD OF HIV/AIDS IN THE NIGER DELTA: (A CASE STUDY OF AKWA IBOM STATE OF NIGERIA)

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Abstract

It has been observed that HIV/AIDS prevalence rate is on the high side especially in the riverine areas of the Niger Delta States. As high as 300,000 people were infected with HIV/AIDS in Akwa Ibom State (Nairaland Forum, 2011); This paper sought to find out how widowhood practices contribute to spread of HIV/AIDS in Akwa Ibom State. This work adopted Survey method of research using unstructured interview questions; secondary data was also taken advantage of. The study was carried out in Eket and Uyo Senatorial Districts; two villages in Etinan local government; one from Urue-Offong/Uruko local government; two villages in Uyo local government and Uyo Metropolis. Major findings include cultural practices which increase contract of HIV/AIDS through wife-inheritance and exchange of partners. There is also the frequency of unprotected sex as women are engaged in the act of getting attached to fishermen; men are also engaged in the exchange of partners in the villages near the beach. Another major factor that also contributes to contract of HIV/AIDS is poverty. Major recommendations include: increased awareness in HIV/AIDS issues highlighting the dangers of exchange of partners and wife-inheritance. Government should also empower widows financially for small scale farming and trading to make them less dependent on men who are out to exploit them.

Background of the Study

The following quotations show the experiences of widows and widowers globally (United Nations: Women 2000).

We are considered bad omens. We are excluded from all auspicious events (Lakshmi, Rajasthan, India, Aparajita, Newsletter 1995).

*I am accused of being a witch who killed her husband
(Terezinha, Zambezia Province, Mozambique, 1997)*

*We have no shelter; my children can no longer go to school
(Ishrat, Bangladesh, 1995).*

*We are treated like animals just because we are widows
(Angela, Nigeria, 1999).*

*I and my children were kicked out of the house and beaten by my
in-law (Seodhi, Malawi, 1994).*

*As soon as my husband had died, they took everything away,
even the pots, blanket and sacks of maize (Renana, Gujarat,
India, 1995).*

*My husband died of AIDS and slept with many women; I am
now dying, but his family blames me for his death (Isabel,
Kenya, 1996).*

*Women don't need property of their own we take care of them...
like we take care of our cows'' (Male elder in Bagamoyo,
Tanzania (Tenga and Peter, 1996))*

Quotations from other sources include:

*I don't know this man's HIV status, and if I die my children will
suffer (Jiwa Felister, 55 year old Luhya widow; Kenya forced by
in-laws to undergo ritual cleansing (HRW, 2003)*

*Mmo ebo ke ami ndo ifot, yak nkpong ufok ke ami nwot ebe mi.
(meaning)*

*They say that I am a witch; I should leave the house, that I killed
my husband (Adiaha, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria (Field Survey,
2006).*

Widowhood is a state of living that is caused by the death of a wife or husband in any society. For example, such factors as illness, child birth, accident, societal attacks such as kidnapping, armed robbery, a conflict that arises from disagreement and fighting. Apart from factors listed here, man was not created to live forever; eventually death must come through natural cause, that is, old age. Widows or widowers are those women and men who have lost their husbands or wives through death. Amongst such groups of women and men include those who have been married with young children and are struggling to survive, perhaps those who were not loved and appreciated by their families and utterly shattered by bitter experiences of life. Some of these experiences occur during the death of their husbands or wives.

In certain circumstances, when a husband or wife dies, the condition of the widow or widower automatically changes psychologically and economically. This is a situation where two people had lived together for some years, a few months or even a week only to realize that one partner is no more.

The condition is worse for the widows especially where the children are young. It is a different condition when it concerns the widower who is still the head of the house and the children have confidence in him. However, where the widower had a very active wife taking care of the home, conditions may deteriorate to a stage where there is urgent need for a mistress or house girl. For the widow who has young children, the option of accepting the in-law as husband or care-taker is imminent.

In most countries women and men are subjected to various forms of accusations, for example, in Nigeria, any husband that dies "is killed by the wife" so that she can inherit the man's property; also, any wife that dies "is killed by the husband" so that he can re-marry. However, the widows suffer more than the widowers because of widowhood practices that they are subjected to. In the traditional African society the custom of widowhood is practiced to punish the widow. Whatever reason is advanced for those widow-hood practices cannot be justified.

The custom of widow-inheritance whereby the brother or whoever may be the heir, steps in to control the property of the deceased, especially where the children are young was, and still remains a way of protecting and providing for the family left behind. Whatever benefits seem to accrue is outweighed by so many disadvantages. The widow is forced to stay with the in-law and obey his commands. Whether these commands are reasonable or not, she must try as much as possible to obey for the sake of seeking protection for herself and the children. However, in some circumstances, this action is no longer tenable as some traditional obligations are regarded as burdensome especially the issue of a second wife. Sometimes, where widows can take care of themselves, fewer problems occur as the children are taken care of by the mothers. On the other hand, widowers face fewer problems as the society demands less from them. Where a widow is expected to scrap her hair, stay indoors, not dressing well, a widower is not expected to perform these rites.

According to Connidis (2009), the death of a spouse and its consequences are not the same for males and females. Typically, the widow faces a lot of problems after the death of her husband. The problems faced by widows include the fact that there is socio-economic change immediately when the husband dies. Same author holds that widows are not well treated by the Nigerian society compared to widowers. According to same source, some reasons have been adduced in support of practices for women across different societies especially in Africa.

These include the necessity to prove her innocence in her husband's death and supposedly sever the link between the living (herself) and the dead (her husband) so as not to be harmed by the spirit of the dead among others. According to same source, many societies pretend to protect women with many rituals they are made to pass through in form of widowhood practices when they lose their husbands while the same society spares men when they lose their wives. According to same author, in some Igboland, the widow is fined when she does not cry or the crying is judged insufficient. On the contrary, the author says, men are not expected to cry in public or to show outward grief, but on the death of a husband, a widow is dethroned, defaced and disinherited.

In Ibibio society, some local governments are very demanding where it concerns widowhood practices. A widow must scrap her hair, wear black clothes, must not go out for a stipulated period, depending on which part of Ibibioland.

In the Ibibio society some widows are forced out of their matrimonial homes especially if their in-laws are interested in the property of the deceased.

They are accused of killing their husbands and are forced to take oaths to prove their innocence. It is a common practice for the in-laws to make love advances to the widows, especially where the widows are young and beautiful; sometimes it may result in wife-inheritance. Through this act of wife-inheritance, a widow or widower whose husband or wife was deceased through AIDS definitely may contract HIV; also, a widow or widower who was HIV negative may get infected. This multiplying effect in the society calls for immediate solution to curb the ills associated with widowhood. The problems of the children left under the care of the widows are manifest as some of these widows cannot pay school fees for these children. Some of the illiterate widows send out their children for sex trade thus compounding issues for the family.

Conceptual Clarifications and Theoretical Postulations

Potash (1986) opines that widows make up about half the female population in Africa. According to Women (2000), the state of widowhood is exacerbated by conditions of poverty, armed conflict, and a lack of access to services and resources. The death of a husband who is supposed to be the bread provider for the wife, automatically, exposes the widow to lots of financial, social, physical, sexual, emotional and societal difficulties (Abolarin, 1997). According to 2Kings 4 vs.1, a woman's husband died and the widow faced economic hardship; when she could not pay the debt owed by her husband, the creditor went to take her two sons. This incident shows that the problem of widowhood has not just started, but had existed many generations ago. As observed by Strunsee (2004), the huge increases in the numbers of widows have resulted in millions of children being withdrawn from school, early marriages, life on the streets, prostitution, servile domestic services, child labour, and human trafficking. Some of the children get pregnant and give birth to children that they cannot cater for. Widows also face series of problems that attract interest of many writers. Circumstances abound where widows are raped by their in-laws or other men (Umoh, 2005).

In the opinion of Goldman and Lord (1983) mourning and widowhood are opposite sides of the same coin with wide range of implications for those affected. Given where it is the woman who struggles for the acquisition of the property, the male relations of the husband or even the parent of the husband immediately take over the property of the husband. Millions of widows are young mothers, some still very young, all subject to extreme discrimination practices and victims of neglect at times by families (Oching-Odhianbo, 2002). According to Wiebo (1987), McGlosen and 'O' Byrant (1998), widow's adjustment to bereavement is a function of her personality trait, socio-economic status and socio-cultural opportunity. Babangida (1988) is of the view that widows who are deprived of certain opportunities in life are lost in the ocean of life without a clear picture of what the future holds for them. According to Kabir, (1991) women resort to begging, petty trading or other survival strategies to keep body and soul together. According to Owosanoya, (1997), the trauma associated with widowhood is a well recognized phenomenon especially among women.

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

As observed by Seymour (1986), Nigerian women frequently face the threats of polygamy without prior consultation, are exposed to sexual harassment and the possibility of sexual mutilation. Least access to birth control facilities and must obtain their husband's consent as married women cannot own their property. According to Struensee (2005), physical, emotional, and sexual violence is a common accomplishment to widowhood.

Abolarin (1997) defined widowhood as the state of mourning the loss of one's husband or wife through death. The stress of this phenomenon is as real as those of loneliness and divorce. According to Ewelukwa (2002), a widow may be forced to have sex with her husband's brother, the first stranger she meets on the road, or some other designated male. The report presented by the Global Fund for Women showed clearly a resentment of wife-inheritance. As observed by Mhoja (2004), widows accept wife-inheritance owing to financial dependency and this contributes to the cycle of women's development and spread to the cycle of women's disempowerment and spread of HIV. According to Owosanyo (1997), the trauma associated with widowhood is a well recognized phenomenon especially among women.

According to Ochieng Odhiambo (2002), the traditional rites such as in the institution of 'Widow' Guardianship among the Luo is one of the main factors in the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS among the Luo of Kenya. Helena Lopata (1977, 1979) has done extensive research with more than 1000 widows and widowers. According to same source, major problem for both sexes is economic hardship.

Researchers documented that the HIV/AIDS was first detected in Nigeria in 1986. The first case of HIV/AIDS infection in Akwa Ibom State was reported in 1989.

- 1 Federal Ministry of Health HIV/Syphilis sentinel sero- prevalence studies conducted so far in 1999, 2001 and 2003 in succession had placed Akwa Ibom State among the first five HIV/AIDS most affected states in Nigeria. Since HIV/AIDS status test is voluntary (VCCT), it was increasingly difficult to know the rate of infection among men and women in the State.
- 2 The Federal Ministry of Health (FMOH) sero-prevalence study of 2003 put Akwa Ibom State at 7.2% prevalence rate.

Study Conducted in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria on Widowhood Practices and Spread of HIV/AIDS

Table 1: Demographic factors

<i>Age Range</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>%</i>
22 – 32	60	25	10	12.5
33 – 44	90	37.5	35	43.8
45 – 54	50	20.8	20	25
55 and above	40	16.7	15	18.7
Total	240	100	80	100

Academic Qualification

No education	45	18.8	6	7.5
Primary school	80	33.3	25	31.2
Secondary school	60	25	30	37.5
Diploma, NCE Degree and above	55	22.9	19	23.8
Total	240	100	80	100

Religious Affiliations of Respondents

Christians	180	75	58	72.5
Traditional religion	60	25	22	27.5
Moslems	nil	nil	nil	nil
Total	240	100	80	100

Employment Status

Farming	65	27.1	30	37.5
Petty trading	80	33.3	18	22.5
Public/civil servants	55	22.9	22	27.5
Others	40	16.7	10	12.5
Total	240	100	80	100

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Etinan	70	29.2	15	18.7
Orue-Offong/Oruko	60	25	20	25
Uyo	85	35.4	35	43.8
Uyo Metropolis	25	10.4	10	12.5
Total	240	100	80	100

Responses for the questions asked**Cause of husband's/wife's death**

HIV/AIDS	10	4.2	12	15
Natural cause	230	95.8	68	85
Total	240	100	80	100

Tested HIV Status

Yes	100	41.7	20	25
No	140	58.3	60	75
Total	240	100	80	100

Relationship with in-laws

Good relationship	120	50		
Fairly good relationship	70	29.2		
None at all	50	20.8		
Total	240	100		

Marrying late husband's brother

No	200	80
Yes	40	20
Total	240	100

Accepting the wife of late brother as second wife?

No	40	50
Yes	25	31.3
Depends on the character of the woman	15	18.7
Total	80	100

Abolishing wife- inheritance

Yes	155	64.6	50	62.5
No	85	35.4	30	37.5
Total	240	100	80	100

Oath taking practice when husband died

No	150	62.5
Yes	90	37.5
Total	240	100

Occupation as a widow or widower

Farming/trading	120	50	45	56.2
Civil/public servant	120	50	35	43.8
Total	240	100	80	100

Source of Empowerment

Through Micro Finance Bank	60	25	20	25
Through private sources	180	75	60	75
Total	240	100	80	100

With a total of (240) widows and (80) widowers, data gathered on the ages of respondents from Uyo, Etinan and *Urue-Offong/Uruko* local governments, sixty-five (65) percent of the female respondents were below 45 years old while Seventy-five (75) percent of the males were aged below 45 years; 45 (18.8) percent of the female respondents did not go to school; 80 (33.3) percent of the women stopped at primary school; 60 (25) percent did not go beyond secondary school; 55 (22.9) percent had Diploma and other higher degrees; 9 (7.5) percent of male respondents did not go to school; 25 (31.2) percent did not go beyond the primary school level; 30 (37.5) percent did not go beyond secondary school level and 19 (23.8) percent of the respondents held Diploma and other higher degrees.

On religious affiliation, everybody claimed to be a Christian but some were able to distinguish themselves from others by leaning more on traditional religious system; for female respondents, 180 (75) percent of the respondents adhered to Christianity while 60 (25) percent claimed traditional religion and no Moslem respondent; for male respondents, 58 (72.5) adhered to Christianity while 22 (27.5) claimed traditional religion and no Moslem respondent.

Employment status has it that 65 (27.1) percent of the female respondents were farmers; 80 (33.3) percent were petty traders; 55 (22.9) percent were Civil/Public servants and 40 (16.7) percent did other businesses. For male respondents, 30 (37.5) percent were farmers; 18 (22.5) percent were petty traders; 22 (27.5) percent were Civil/Public servants and 10 (12.5) percent did other businesses.

Table 1 indicates that Etinan local government had 70 (29.2) percent female respondents while the male respondents were 15 (18.7) percent. From *Urue-Offong/Uruko* local government, 60 (25) percent were females while 20 (25) percent were males. From Uyo local government, 85 (35.4) percent were females while 35 (43.8) percent were males. From Uyo metropolis 25 (10.4) percent were females while 10 (12.5) percent were males.

Information gathered from the interview showed that 10 (4.2) percent of women died of HIV and 230 (95.8) percent died of natural cause while 12 (15) percent of men died of HIV; 68 (85) percent of men died natural death. Responses regarding test of HIV revealed that 100 (41.7) percent of the women tested HIV status because most of them did the test during ante-natal clinic; those who did not test amounted to 140 (58.3) percent. For men, 30 (25) percent found out their HIV status mostly when they were sick and went to the hospital for treatment; 50 (75) percent of the men did not test for the mere fact that they did not want to find out if their status.

Responses regarding the relationship of widows with in-laws were as follows: good relationship 120 (50) percent; fairly good relationship 70 (30) percent while no relationship at all had 50 (20) percent. On the issue of the widows marrying their late husband's brother 200 (80) percent said no while 40 (20) percent said yes. On the issue of wife-inheritance 40 (50) percent of the respondents said that they would not accept the wife of one's late brother as a wife; 25 (31.3) percent said that they would accept while 15 (18.7) percent said it depended on the character of the woman. Female respondents, 155 (65) percent said that they would want wife-inheritance to stop while those who said that it should not stop were 85 (35) percent. On the issue of abolishing wife-inheritance, for female respondent 155 (64.6) percent said that wife-inheritance should not be abolished while 85 (35.4) percent said that it should be abolished; 50 (62.5) percent of the male respondents said that wife-inheritance should not be abolished while 30 (37.5) percent said that it should be abolished.

On the issue of oath taking, 220 (91.7) percent did not practice oath taking when their husband died while 20 (8.3) percent practiced it.

Information regarding occupation of the female respondents shows that 111 (46) percent engaged in farming/trading while 129 (54) percent were Civil/Public servants; for male respondents 45 (56.2) percent engaged in farming/trading while 35 (43.8) percent were Civil/Public servants. Information from respondents revealed that 60 (25) percent were empowered through Micro Finance Bank while 180 (75) percent were empowered through Private sources; for male respondents 20 (25) percent were empowered through Micro Finance Bank while 60 (75) percent were empowered through Private sources.

Methodology

This research was conducted in a period of two months September to October 2006 with the aid of 6 research assistants. The main research 'Women and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS was a sponsored research. Since a widowhood practice was one of the causes of HIV/AIDS, the researcher desired to get more facts from widows and widowers.

Widows and widowers from the ages of 22 to 55 and above were chosen as respondents. The study adopted purposive sampling as each widow or widower in a household was chosen as respondent. They were interviewed using unstructured questions to probe how widowhood practices were affecting their lives as regards to HIV/AIDS transmission.

Results and Discussion

Some widows whose husband's died natural death said that they accepted to be the wife of their late husband's brother because the in-laws feed them and their families. One of them said:

Ami nnyimme ndido enye koro enye ono mi ye ufok mi udia
(identity of respondent withheld) meaning
I agree to marry him because he provides food for me and my family.

Another respondent said:

Nyomke ndido owo enwen koro mfioke me enye eyene udongo
itiaita (identity of respondent withheld) meaning
I don't want to marry another man because I don't know whether he has AIDS.

Another respondent further said:

Udongo itiaita ibaha, ifot akama (identity of respondent withheld)
meaning
There is no AIDS, it is from witchcraft.

A male respondent said:

I do not want to re-marry I want to be left to myself (identity of respondent withheld)

Interview with widows whose husbands were fishermen revealed that 12 percent of them were able to take care of themselves after the death of their husbands. Some of the widows were civil servants even when their husbands were dead; they were still able to take care of themselves. Information gathered from respondents revealed that 10 percent of these women who were married to the fishermen were also infected with HIV/AIDS. When asked how they contracted the disease, they admitted that their husbands contracted the disease while dealing with women traders. They knew that their husbands may have contracted through women or girl friends called "Eka Ufok", meaning mistress. This action is common among the riverine areas of the Niger Delta especially in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States of Nigeria.

Interview with widows who were HIV positive in Etinan and Uyo urban showed that they were very much aware of the existence HIV/AIDS and they resorted to taking treatment in the University Teaching Hospital because it is free but that there is still fear of stigmatization once they were identified by people they know. Some of the widows who tested negative at the time of interview said they were happy to have their husbands dead because they were the "architect of their problems"; one of them preferred to take care of her children without the husband who, she said, "brought mischief to himself".

Some widowers accused their wives of flirting with other men. One of them said "she wanted to appear like a politician's wife." Interview with some widows and widowers

revealed that they had information about HIV/AIDS but the challenge was their lean finances. In one of the households in Etinan local government was found a man critically ill of HIV/AIDS and members of the household were waiting for his final breathing. The "widow to be" was advised to visit the Teaching Hospital but she complained of lack of money. She was, however, assisted by the researchers.

Major findings of the study include the following:

- ❖ **The entrenched tradition of wife- inheritance.** Women who were not infected tended to be infected because they had to be forced to accept a male member of the family as a husband.
- ❖ **The belief that witchcraft causes AIDS.** Some widows are indoctrinated to believe that what killed their husbands is witchcraft and that if they are taken to witchdoctors and some spiritual acts performed, they will be free from what killed their husbands.
- ❖ **Fear that they could be positive:** fifty (50) percent of the respondents said there is fear that they could be positive if tested. People who were tested were pregnant women who had to undergo the test as one of the conditions in ante-natal clinic; some men that tested did that while testing their blood sample in the course of treatment in the hospital.
- ❖ **Poverty:** this is a major factor that pushed 80% of the widows out to find food for their families.
- ❖ Since HIV/AIDS status test is voluntary (VCCT), it was increasingly difficult to know the rate of infection through widowhood practices.

Recommendations

Although this work was conducted to find out how widowhood practices was affecting the lives of both widows and widowers, major findings permit this work to make recommendations in issues affecting widows:

- ❖ Widows should be empowered, after being trained in various skills, through micro-credit facilities, with minimum interest rate. It has been observed that widows who borrowed from micro finance banks were unable to pay back owing to high rate of interest.
- ❖ Customary laws governing ownership and control of land should be reviewed in favour of widows. Property should be willed to widows and this should be entrenched in customary laws.
- ❖ Men should be educated on the ills of wife- inheritance as it increases contract of HIV/AIDS.
- ❖ Awareness campaigns should be intensified on HIV/AIDS issues and ills of wife-inheritance.
- ❖ Widowhood has been an age-long entrenched practice of demoralization in the society. Once a husband dies, the respect the widow had is gone and any person can now visit her for various reasons. Most of the men who approach her are married men who, may, already been HIV positive or irresponsible ones who talk to every "Tom and Dick".
- ❖ Harmful traditional practices like taking of oath should be discouraged because blood is let out through unsterilized instruments.
- ❖ Widows should be enlightened on the services of lawyers who volunteer to protect the rights of widows.

- ❖ Where wife-inheritance is practiced, there should be intense teaching on the need to allow young widows to re-marry outside the deceased husband's family.

Conclusion

From this study, it can be concluded that widows get infected more where they (widows) are unemployed. Widows who are, either self-employed or civil/public servants have a choice to reject the husband's male brothers as new husbands, some of them are bold enough to refuse wife-inheritance and move out of the deceased husband's family to a neutral apartment. Widowers have fewer problems on the death of their wives as they easily get married to women, even to those that are richer than them.

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