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The Widow's Dilemma: Economic Hardship And Remarriage Challenges In Ikwo Local Government Area, Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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Abstract
In rural Africa, widowhood continues to be a significant social and economic issue for women, especially in situations where men's traditions, inadequate institutional protection, and poor opportunities affect how women access resources and choose to remarry. This study is an investigation of the problem of economic hardship and remarriage challenges among the widows in Ikwo Local Government Area, Ebonyi State of Nigeria. It addresses the economic challenges experienced by widows following the death of their husbands, cultural and social norms that impact on their remarrying and coping mechanisms used by widows to provide for themselves and their families. Based on Feminist Theory and Social Exclusion Theory, the study underscores the vulnerability of widows due to various gendered power dynamics, customary inheritance, social stigma, childcare responsibilities, and limited access to property. Among the findings of this paper, it is observed that widows face household income losses, loss of property, problems accessing food, problems accessing credit, burden of education, and psychological stress in Ikwo. It also shows that there are limits on remarriage due to the expectations of mourning, family pressure, inheritance issues, religious factors, age-related bias, and societal suspicion. However, widows show resilience in petty trading, in farming, in being involved in co-operatives, in the religious sphere and social support. This study establishes that widowhood in Ikwo is not only a personal experience of loss, but also a structural issue arising from the gender inequality and social exclusion that exists in this society. It recommends legal protection, economic empowerment, psychosocial support, cultural reorientation, and enhanced community-based interventions for enhancing widows' welfare, dignity, autonomy and long-term wellbeing.

Keywords: *Widows, Economic hardship, remarriage challenges, Ikwo*

1. Introduction

Widowhood is one of the most life-changing events that women face worldwide, often a deeply distressing experience. Loss of a spouse often brings about a host of social, economic, psychological and cultural problems that can impact women's life paths and living circumstances beyond the emotional trauma of a spouse's death (Milazzo & Van de Walle, 2021). In many developing societies, including Sub Saharan African societies, widowhood is a socio-economic crisis and a personal loss for women, who become more vulnerable to poverty, social exclusion and discrimination (van den Berg, 2021; United Nations Women, 2023). This is especially marked in societies with male-dominated economic resources, inheritance and social protection systems. In such settings, the sudden loss of the husband's financial support alongside the loss of social standing and of productive assets, and the added burden of care-taking are common consequences of his death. This makes widows one of the most economically vulnerable groups in their communities (Shahin, 2022).

Nigeria is an interesting case to study widowhood because there is a dual legal system and entrenched customary laws that may affect women's welfare. Even though women are free from discrimination under the Nigerian Constitution and several judicial rulings have established women's inheritance rights, widows are still very much at risk of dispossession, economic deprivation and social stigmatisation after their husbands' death (Anuforo et al., 2025). These problems persist as a legacy of the continued strength of the culture systems of the patriarchy which are based on the preservation of lines, male inheritance, and community control of family property.

In the south-eastern part of Nigeria, especially among the Igbos, widowhood is usually associated with all kinds of customary practices that involve extended mourning periods, for example, women being barred from social events, land ownership being confiscated, suspicions of complicity in the husband's death, and limitations on remarriage options (Iloka, 2022). Some of these practices are justified as cultural means of maintaining the family line and social status quo, but a growing body of literature suggests that they perpetuate gender inequality and structural violence against women (Aderemi & Ogebe, 2024).

The case of the widows in Ebonyi State is particularly relevant because the State is still one of the least developed states in the country with a high percentage of the populace relying heavily on subsistence farming and informal livelihoods. The poverty rate in Ebonyi has consistently been higher than the national average and widowhood can easily turn into chronic economic insecurity (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS] 2020). From the context, it is important to consider the case of Ikwo Local Government Area as this is an area with a high rural population, and with a greater reliance on customary institutions among the population and limited access to formal social welfare mechanisms.

The current studies on widowhood in Nigeria have been mostly concentrated on issues concerning harmful widowhood practices, inheritance claims and human rights abuses (Nwaoga et al., 2021). The above-mentioned studies have brought forth vital insights, however, there is comparatively less focus on the relationship between economic hardships and remarriage concerns of widows in rural areas. Moreover, studies published so far usually focus on widowhood as either an economic problem or a cultural phenomenon, without making an effort to investigate the impact that economic deprivation has on the situation of remarriage, or the impact that the situation of remarriage has on economic vulnerability. This paper posits that

widowhood is a multi-faceted problem that involves the interplay of economic difficulties, patriarchal social framework, cultural norms and inadequate institutional assistance in Ikwo Local Government Area. The study identifies the specific economic challenges faced by the widows after their husbands' deaths, looks at the social and cultural constraints on remarriage, discusses the underlying causes of these problems and reviews the coping mechanisms used by widows to deal with their situation.

This research is not only an academic exploration, but also a practical one. To design successful social protection policies, improve gender-inclusive legal systems, design economic empowerment programs and strengthen community support systems, it is crucial to understand the lived realities of widows and their unique vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the documentation of resilience strategies among widows further supports the larger debate on women's agency, survival and adaptation in the face of structural disadvantage. This paper, therefore, aims to add to the existing body of literature on gender, poverty and social exclusion by showing that widowhood in Ikwo is more of a social phenomenon than a mere result of the loss of the husband. To solve the dilemma of the widow, therefore, a comprehensive approach involving both legal protection and economic empowerment, cultural change and psychosocial support systems is necessary.

2. Literature Review

Widowhood is a complex social situation that refers to the loss of a spouse and the resulting economic, psychological, cultural and social vulnerabilities. Widowhood in many African societies is not an end in itself but also is characterised by economic hardship, social isolation, loss of assets and diminished personal power (Eze, Egwuagu & Namani, 2024). Widows are often affected with economic hardship, which includes loss of household income, decreased access to productive assets, more reliance on others, food insecurity, and limited job opportunities (Oguche, Afu & Osagie, 2024). For some societies like those in South Eastern Nigeria, these are exacerbated in patriarchal societies where customary inheritance systems give male lineage and ownership rights greater importance than those of females (Ugwu et al., 2020). This study is based on the Feminist Theory and Social Exclusion theory. Feminist Theory states that the sexed-power structures within social institutions systematically disadvantage women, especially widows, in relation to access to resources, decision making, and to inheritance rights (Umeh et al., 2021). The Social Exclusion Theory also focuses on the need for better institutional support systems, cultural norms, and discriminatory practices to marginalize widows and deny them opportunities for social and economic participation (Ugwukah & Ume-Ezeoke, 2024). Widows' economic precarity, lack of equity in land ownership and social stigma have been documented in empirical studies conducted throughout Nigeria after the husband's death (Onadeko et al., 2023). Some studies have also revealed that societal perceptions of the motives and the morality of widows, cultural norms and expectations, child care duties and age-related biases are other factors that limit remarriage among the widows (Essien et al., 2020). However, there is limited research that has specifically investigated the interplay between economic hardship and remarriage problems of widows in rural areas like Ikwo local government area of Ebonyi State. This study seeks to fill this contextual and analytical gap.

3. Economic hardship of the widows in Ikwo local government area Ebonyi state

For many rural Nigerian women, the death of the husband is the start of significant economic upheaval. Widowhood is often associated with sudden loss of household livelihoods, leaving women in Ikwo LGA of Ebonyi State vulnerable to various forms of economic deprivation. These adversities go beyond being a result of loss to being embedded in structural inequalities, patriarchal inheritance and the constrained economic prospects for rural women. Consequently, widows end up in a complicated situation of social vulnerability, dependency and poverty (Fasanmi & Ayivor, 2021).

i. **Loss of Household Income and Economic Security**

The direct impact that widows feel when their husbands die is the loss of their husbands' income and economic support. Men make the major income in households in Ikwo while women contribute to the income through subsistence farming, petty trading and domestic work. When a man dies, a financial emptiness usually exists that many widows are hard pressed to fill. Research has revealed that widows' households' income falls drastically after the death of their husbands, which causes their households to become more vulnerable to poverty (Amoo et al., 2022). This is especially dire for women who are widows, with little or no formal education and vocational skills. Historically, many female farmers have not had access to prosperous economic opportunities, and when their husbands die they do not possess the people skills to find stable employment. Many women experience widowhood as a state of poverty and precarious status as a secondary income earner, because they have been completely unprepared and/or without the necessary resources to sustain their household.

ii. Property Dispossession and Inheritance Deprivation

One of the most devastating economic problems facing widows in many Igbo communities is property grabbing. Women's rights to succession are often denied in favour of male relatives, even though the constitution provides for their rights and courts have ruled them to have inheritance rights (Igwe & Nwammuo, 2025). In most instances, in-laws take over family properties of land, house, livestock, farm produce, and other productive assets at the time of the husband's death. Agriculture is a major source of livelihood in Ikwo, with land being of special significance to widows. Widows lose not only their primary livelihoods, but their primary livelihood activities, when they lose access to their farm lands. This forms a vicious circle of dependence which frequently are driving the affected household further into poverty. Studies have shown that besides losing economic resources, it also reduces the social status and bargaining power of widows in the community through disinheritance (Fasanmi & Ayivor, 2021).

iii. Funeral Expenses and Widowhood-Related Financial Burdens

In many places in southeastern Nigeria, traditional funerals involve significant monetary commitments. For example, elaborate funerals, prolonged periods of mourning and community ceremonies are often required and impose significant financial demands on bereaved families. In many cases widows are forced to borrow money, sell their home or property, or take on debt to settle these obligations. The need for socially acceptable funerals is especially onerous for poor families. Funerals are not just about the death; they are often an occasion for the public to show how these people were important to them. Thus, the expense of funerals can impose further

hardship on widows who are already facing the financial challenges of their spouse's death (Shahin, 2022).

iv. Food Insecurity and Household Poverty

Another great problem related to widowhood is food insecurity. Historically, Ebonyi State had a high prevalence of rural poverty, and widowhood can aggravate people's vulnerabilities. When a husband dies, the household food production and purchasing power can be diminished due to the loss of his labour, his income and social support. Inability to feed self and children is a common problem reported by widows. Some people will cut down on the number of times they eat, on the quality of their food or rely on others to provide for them, such as family or religious groups. Inadequate food security can have significant psychological impacts, such as stress, and can also lead to lower productivity, which can perpetuate cycles of poverty and deprivation (FAO, 2022).

v. Educational and Childcare Burdens

Women are usually left with the sole responsibility of raising and educating their children after their husbands' death. The surviving spouse will be solely responsible for school fees, books, uniforms, health care, and living expenses. Meeting those obligations is very difficult for many widows in Ikwo because of the downward trend in household income and lack of access to financial support. Eliminating education expenses, particularly for children, becomes a priority for some widows due to economic strain, or they defer education expenses completely when a widow's economic situation worsens. This could be a short-term economic solution, but can also be a way of passing down poverty from generation to generation, restricting children's future opportunities. Previous studies have consistently shown that the children of widows are at a higher risk of education disruptions and less likely to develop human capital than children in two-parent families (World Bank, 2023).

vi. Financial Exclusion

Formal financial services continue to be difficult for widows in rural areas. Widows may not have collateral, guarantors or formal documentation that many financial institutions require (Nwaoga et al., 2021). Also, widows, who have lost their family assets, may not have the resources to pledge in a loan to secure a loan. This financial exclusion prevents businesses from growing, farmers from investing in their farms, and people from diversifying their income. Widows often find themselves stuck in low-paying economic activities with little potential for profit and are vulnerable to market fluctuations because they lack access to inexpensive credit. They have limited ability to regain their livelihoods following the death of husband/wife due to lack of access to capital (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2023).

Structural Drivers of Economic Hardship

Widows in Ikwo are facing economic struggles caused by other structural issues. The norms of patriarchy remain influential in property ownership, inheritance and division of resources. Women's economic independence is also limited by the gender gap in education and work. Moreover, low social protection systems, the fact that inheritance is not well enforced and the lack of adequate rural development policies contribute to widow vulnerability. A feminist political economy approach highlights the unequal distribution of economic power in households and communities in the context of widowhood. The problems women experience as widows are thus not only problems

of bad luck but also expressions of systemic gender inequalities that are deeply entrenched in social, cultural and economic institutions (Eze, Egwuagu & Namani, 2024).

Implications for Widows' Wellbeing

Loss of income, loss of assets, food insecurity, debt burdens and financial exclusion all have an impact on overall wellbeing, and the combination can be quite severe. Chronic stress, anxiety, depression and decreased quality of life are common among many widows. Economic disadvantage also makes it harder for individuals to be independent, rely on others less, and improves chances for social mobility. Widowhood can thus be a catalyst for long lasting poverty and vulnerability in a previously stable household. Economic hardship, in the context of Ikwo Local Government Area is thus not only a result of the loss of spouse but is a multi-dimensional phenomenon which is situated within the context of cultural norms, institutional weaknesses and structural inequalities. However, they need interventions that go beyond giving to legal protection, economic empowerment, financial inclusion, and gender-sensitive development policies.

4. Remarriage Challenges among Widows in Ikwo Local Government Area, Ebonyi State

Remarriage is frequently seen as a means by which widows can find emotional, economic, social and family reintegration after the death of their husband (Santos et al., 2024). Remarriage, though is not an easy or a common practice for many widows in rural communities like Ikwo local government area of Ebonyi state. Marriage is often a complex, yet fraught process that does not alleviate the difficulties that often arise when a woman's husband dies, but rather complicates these issues (John & Adjiwanou, 2022). Remarriage is often a complicated and difficult process, not a solution to widowhood-related challenges, but rather a factor that adds to these challenges, due to cultural pressures, traditional gender norms, economic constraints, family responsibilities, and societal stigma. As a result, many widows find themselves in a dilemma between the need for companionship and the restrictions of their social context (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). The deep-rooted cultural attitudes about widowhood and wailing are one of the largest challenges in the way of remarriage for widows. In many Igbo communities, widowhood is not only considered a marital status but a social condition that needs to be carefully observed with elaborate ritual practices before reintegration into social life. There are also strict mourning rituals for widows, frequently involving seclusion from others, forgoing community events, changes in personal appearance, and avoiding romance. The traditional beliefs that widows should prove their loyalty and respect to their deceased husbands before being allowed to remarry (Ferrer & Pan, 2020) are the basis of these practices. As a result, there may be a tendency to see attempts at remarrying soon after the death of the spouse as insensitive, immoral, or even complicit in their husband's death. Similarly, social stigma is a closely related issue to these cultural expectations. If women are interested in remarrying, they face suspicions and negative social attitudes. In many patriarchal circumstances, widows are supposed to uphold values of lifelong commitment to their deceased husbands, especially with children. This can result in a

feeling of betrayal of the deceased spouse's memory or a giving up of maternal duties when the marriage is remarried. The Nigerian study reveals that the widows are often discouraged from expressing their own wishes for companionship out of fear of being criticized, gossiped about and marginalized from the society (Crystal-Wong, 2021). This stigma is particularly visible in the case of older widow women who are perceived as ‘socially inconvenient' to remarry although they still have emotional and economic requirements.

Another huge issue is the dependent children. In Ikwo, many of the widows are mothers of children and their impact on re-marriageability is significant. The potential suitors might not want to take care of children who are not their own, especially in poor communities, where there is a shortage of resources. Several studies have demonstrated that men are less inclined to invest in families that do not have direct benefit to their inheritance or continuity of family (Ayadi, Fatehizade & Etemadi, 2025). This means that there will be fewer opportunities for the remarriage of widows if they have more children than the childless widows or the widows with fewer dependants.

Other factors that affect remarriage are inheritance and property issues. In many customary contexts, the rights of widows to live in the family home, or to farm or to claim assets of the deceased husband depend on affiliation with the deceased husband's lineage (Jackson, Carrese & Willoughby, 2023). Remarriage outside the husband's family may then lead to the forfeiture of property rights, housing security and family resources (Beachy, 2021). This poses a dilemma for widows as they have to decide between how they will be happy if they remarry or how they will remain economically stable for their children (Daneshvar, Moradi & Karami, 2023). Indeed, in a rational choice scenario, a lot of widows may decide that they are better off staying unmarried even though it means that they will be emotionally lonely and socially isolated.

Remarriage is further complicated by the continued influence of patriarchy in family structures. Typically, the deceased's family wields strong influence over the widow, such as over her household, children and social behavior. Traditional widow inheritance has been reduced in many areas of southeast Nigeria through modernization and the influence of Christianity, but there are still some expectations that are left over. Some widows may prefer to stay in the deceased husband's lineage, rather than marry outside the family, because they think the marriage is a way of protecting the property of the family or ensuring the continuity of the family line (Sumari et al., 2024). Extended family members might subtly or overtly apply pressure to the widows to conform to the expectations.

Another aspect to the issues of remarriage is religious factors. The practice of Christianity which is prevalent in Ebonyi State has helped to eliminate some of the bad widowhood practices and has fostered a better understanding of the rights of widows. However, there are different interpretations of religion that can also cause conflicts over remarriage. Some faith groups suggest that widows remarry, and others that they mourn for a long time, pray to their god or take care in finding new partners. This can lead to confusion among widows on the timing and suitability of remarrying from the religious, family and cultural perspectives (Foerster, Obermeier & Schulz, 2024). Remarriage opportunities are also influenced by the differences in

attractiveness perceptions between age groups and genders. In patriarchal societies, the value of younger women in the marriage market may be higher than the value of older widows, thus creating a real disadvantage for older widows. Widowers' opportunities to win socially desirable partners for remarriage decrease as they get older. As women grow older their prospects of being able to get socially desirable partners to remarry them decreases significantly. This mirrors wider attitudes in the community which place value on women in terms of their youth, fertility and marital status (Santos et al., 2024). Hence, many widows in older age groups find that they are invisible in society with restricted options in terms of remarriage and social support.

In addition to structural and cultural barriers, there are also psychological barriers. Grief, emotional trauma, anxiety and fear of future relationships may all result from a spouse's death. Others are hesitant to remarry because they do not want to experience the same bad situations in their marriages, or risk losing out again or risking the well-being of their children. Others might have unhealed wounds that make it challenging to get attached to a new partner emotionally. Studies examining the psychological adjustment to widowhood repeatedly indicate that the process is complex and highly individual, and can have a significant impact on decisions whether to remarry or not (John & Adjiwanou, 2022). Significantly, the remarriage problems of widows in Ikwo are a result of the interweaving of gender issues, cultural norms, economic insecurity and social exclusion. These obstacles are not individual occurrences, but rather symptoms of more pervasive patriarchal systems that affect women's sexuality, mobility, and resource availability across the life cycle (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). Therefore, although there is comparatively little social stigma attached to the remarriage of widowers, there is a strong social stigma and regulation attached to the remarriage of widows, indicating that there are still strong differences between the two sexes in regard to marriage institutions.

In essence, remarriage of widows in Ikwo Local Government Area is influenced by a multitude of factors which include cultural norms, family obligations, economic factors, religious factors and personal experiences. All of these factors make for a very controlled social process, rather than one that is personal. In order to overcome these challenges, it is necessary to implement legal and economic measures but also to shift the attitude of the society towards widowhood, gender roles and women's independence in their marital life.

5. Coping Mechanisms and Resilience Strategies of Widows in Ikwo Local Government Area, Ebonyi State

Although widowhood in Ikwo Local Government Area (LGA) is a socio-economic hardship, many of the widows display great adaptability and coping mechanisms. Widows' resilience is defined as their capacity to endure, respond to, and bounce back from the negative impacts of spousal death, while keeping up their life's work, family obligations and social sense of self. These coping mechanisms can be influenced by social networks, economic opportunities, religious beliefs and personal agency (Ferrer & Pan, 2020). For designing interventions to build the ability of widows to deal with the challenges of widowhood, it is important to understand these pathways to resilience. Widowhood is associated with informal economic activity, one of the most commonly used coping strategies. After the death of their husbands, many widows are engaged in small business activities for income generation such as petty trading,

subsistence farming, food processing, tailoring and other small-scale activities. In rural areas like Ikwo agriculture is significant especially because of the additional purpose of livelihood. While the income generated from these activities is typically modest, they help to sustain basic household needs and minimize on the reliance of widows on their relatives or charitable support (Crystal-Wong, 2021). This is an economic adaptability, indicating the determination of widows to sustain survival of their households in the face of limited resources.

Social support networks also contribute in a pivotal way to improving resilience. During crisis, widows are often provided with emotional, material and financial support by family members, friends, neighbours, women associations and community based organisations. These can range from food donations, childcare assistance, labour sharing, temporary accommodation up to small loans. The concept of social capital is that the relationships between people are important resources that provide for vulnerability and wellbeing (Ayadi et al., 2025). In a lot of cases, a widow with a strong social network is more able to carry out economically and emotionally challenging situations than someone who is socially isolated. Religious beliefs and spiritual practices also have an important source of resilience for widows. The State of Ebonyi is mostly religiously Christian and for the majority of the widows, the acts of religion and belief provide comfort, hope and emotional stability. Church involvement offers widows a chance for social interaction, counselling, and psychological healing through participation in activities, prayer groups, and other faith-based support programmes. Spirituality has been demonstrated as a protective factor which helps individuals make sense of loss, instill positive coping attitudes, and maintain optimism in life transitions (Beachy, 2021). In many cases, religious communities serve as alternative sources of support to the traditional family structure for widows who are not well supported in the family. Widows are also resilient in organizing themselves and joining cooperative associations. Saving groups, rotating credit schemes and women's co-operatives allow members to come together to access money, provide mutual support and participate in joint income-generating activities. Such groups create not only an economic benefit, but solidarity and mutual encouragement for the widows. These initiatives, which are collective, contribute to improved financial inclusion and social cohesion in communities (World Bank, 2023).

In coping with widowhood, psychological resilience plays a crucial role as well. Many widows learn to adapt their coping through strategies like acceptance, problem solving, emotional regulation and planning for the future. Some widows do not see themselves as victims but as household heads, entrepreneurs, caregivers and contributors to the community. Through positive adaptation, these help them to restore a sense of purpose and personal control despite bad things happening (Daneshvar et al., 2023). However, these coping strategies are often limited by on-going poverty, gender inequity, and lack of institutional supports and discriminatory cultural norms. The ability of each individual to cope with a disaster is well and good, but cannot replace structural interventions. Widows need to be resilient and this will need to be achieved through supportive legal frameworks, economic empowerment programmes, social protection policies and changes at community level which tackle the root causes of widow vulnerability.

6. Implications of Economic Hardship and Remarriage Challenges among Widows in Ikwo Local Government Area, Ebonyi State

The economic hardships and remarriage issues of the widows in Ikwo LGA have negative implications for the individual widow, for children, family and community as well as for broader development outcomes. All these challenges have a combined effect of reinforcing cycles of poverty, social exclusion and gender inequality, which in turn jeopardize the wellbeing and development potential of households affected by these challenges. The economic hardship experienced by widows at the individual level is a major setback in their quality of life. When a household member dies, its surviving members frequently face poverty and financial insecurity due to loss of income, loss of inheritance rights and limited access to productive resources. Widows are often forced to take up low-paying survival activities with little or no scope for improvement, as a result of economic hardship. Financial strain is associated with emotional problems, anxiety, depression and decreased self-esteem, which in turn impacts on physical and mental health (Sumari et al., 2024). If cultural expectations and social stigma around remarriage limit the ability of widows to remarry, they may endure considerable social isolation and loneliness over longer periods of time, leading to increased vulnerability.

For the children of widow headed households the implications are also great. People who are suffering from financial difficulties may not have access to basic services such as education, healthcare, nutrition and other basic services. Widows often find it hard to send children to school, get them the necessary school resources or to feed them properly. As a result, children might miss out on schooling, poor performance in school, child labour or early involvement in the informal economy. This can help pass poverty from one generation to the next and limit societal and economic mobility (World Bank, 2023). Moreover, the lack of a father figure, together with the emotional load on the widowed mother may have a negative impact on children's psychosocial development.

Family structures are also greatly impacted. Widowhood often changes the traditional roles of women and men in the household, and may put women in a new position of leadership as the sole heads of households. Some widows are able to cope with these roles, while others can find themselves feeling isolated within their extended families. Family conflicts over property, inheritance, and re-marriage can lead to family disintegration and Chronic Relational Instability. The remarriage of widows may also lead to further problems of inheritance, continuity of the family line and child custody, with their relatives opposing this practice (Iloka, 2022).

The social and community development and welfare implications at the community level of high prevalence of widowhood poverty. A high dependency ratio can occur in the community in the event of a high population of economically disadvantaged widows, which can lead to lower productivity in agriculture, as well as a decrease in the community's participation in economic activities. Widows play a crucial role in farming activities as well as informal trade, thus leaving their exclusion from productive resources a significant setback in community development. Further, discriminatory widowhood entails social inequality and poses challenges to inclusive development and social justice. The problems that widows experience reflect the continuation of the patriarchy system that still restricts women's access to resources, opportunities and decision making power from the gender perspective. This is because widows also usually experience higher economic and social restrictions than widowers, which is a sign of deep-rooted gender inequalities in family and

community institutions (Aderemi & Ogebe, 2024). These inequalities hinder efforts to achieve gender equality and empower women, which are key goals of the national and global development agenda.

Moreover, the marginalization of widows has implications for the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including those on poverty (SDG 1), gender equality (SDG 5), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) and reduced inequalities (SDG 10). Widowhood issues are therefore not only welfare issues, but a crucial part of sustainable development. Without adequate support, widows could continue to suffer from social exclusion and community's ability to resist shocks and vulnerabilities in rural settings like Ikwo may be reduced. Finally, the ramifications of the problems of economic deprivation and restrictions on remarriage show that the condition of widowhood must be considered both as a personal and structural problem. Any effective interventions, therefore, require action beyond mere responses to current needs for widows' welfare, and must reach into the social, cultural and institutional factors that underpin the vulnerability of widows.

7. Policy Recommendations and Intervention Framework

The issues that women in Ikwo find themselves facing must be addressed through a multi-faceted approach, which involves legal recognition, economic empowerment, social support, and cultural shift. The government should improve the enforcement of property rights and inheritance regulations to prevent economic exploitation and dispossession of widows.Government should ensure better compliance and enforcement of property rights and inheritance laws that protect widows against economic exploitation and dispossession. The extension of legal aid to rural areas should be extended to boost awareness to widows and offer easily accessible means of achieving justice. Second, targeted economic empowerment programmes should be set up to increase financial independence of widows. These programmes must have vocational training, agricultural support schemes, entrepreneurship development programmes, microcredit schemes and cooperative societies. Considering the agrarian activities of Ikwo, a special attention should be given to improving access of widows to farming land, farming inputs and agricultural extension services.

Third, there is a need to involve community and religious institutions more actively in the breaking of the negative cultural norms surrounding widowhood and limiting remarriage options. Promoting more inclusive attitudes towards widows and discouraging discriminatory practices can be achieved through public enlightenment campaigns, community dialogues and through the involvement of faith groups in advocacy. Also, there is a need to incorporate psychosocial support services into community health and social welfare programmes. Emotional support is provided through counseling, peer-support groups and widow associations to help lessen social isolation. These interventions are especially vital for assisting widows in dealing with grief, trauma and social pressures that come with widowhood. In addition, a comprehensive widow support framework should be established in a participatory manner involving all stakeholders such as government agencies, traditional institutions, civil society organizations and development partners. This should involve a mix of legal protection, economic empowerment, social support and cultural sensitization to help facilitate a sustainable route to resilience and social inclusion for widows in these rural communities like Ikwo.

8. Conclusion

Widowhood is a multifaceted social phenomenon with interwoven economic, cultural and social problem in Ikwo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State. The study revealed that widows are often subjected to significant economic and social disadvantages, such as the loss of their household's income, loss of their property, food insecurity, and the burden of education, among other things. Cultural norms and social expectations that limit remarriage opportunities and contribute to social exclusion can exacerbate these challenges. The findings further reveal that remarriage among widows is influenced by multiple factors, including cultural stigma, childcare responsibilities, inheritance concerns, family pressures, religious considerations, and psychological adjustment processes. As a result, many widows remain economically and socially vulnerable long after the death of their spouses. Despite these challenges, widows demonstrate remarkable resilience through income-generating activities, social support networks, religious engagement, and participation in cooperative associations. This study argues that the difficulties experienced by widows are not merely individual problems but manifestations of broader structural inequalities rooted in patriarchal social systems. Consequently, meaningful improvement in widows' wellbeing requires interventions that address both immediate economic needs and the underlying social and institutional factors that sustain vulnerability. Thus, promoting the welfare of widows in Ikwo demands a holistic approach that combines legal protection, economic empowerment, community support, and cultural transformation. Such efforts will not only improve the lives of widows but also contribute to broader goals of social justice, gender equality, poverty reduction, and sustainable community development. By recognizing widows as active agents of resilience rather than passive victims of circumstance, policymakers and stakeholders can create more inclusive systems that support dignity, autonomy, and long-term wellbeing.

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