



## Cultural Abuses of Young Widows and Associated Trauma in Igbo Society: An Ethical Critique

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** In Igbo society, widowhood—particularly when experienced in youth—often exposes women to severe cultural abuses and psychological trauma. This study examines the lived experiences of young widows who, following the death of their husbands, face dispossession, social stigma, emotional neglect, and accusations of culpability for their spouses' deaths.

**Objective:** The study documented persistent practices such as dispossession of property, stigmatisation, forced rituals, and denial of inheritance rights of young widows.

**Method:** Using a qualitative research method that includes interviews and open-ended questionnaires, the study explores the forms, frequency, and effects of these abuses.

**Result:** Findings indicate that Igbo society is patriarchal. Hence, cultural practices account for a significant proportion of approximately 25% of reported abuses, with significant adverse effects on physical health (31%) and socio-psychological and socio-economic well-being.

**Conclusion:** Young widows are frequently stereotyped as gold diggers and, in extreme cases, subjected to harmful ritual practices that endanger their physical health. The study argued that these practices constitute violations of fundamental human rights and natural justice.

**Unique Contribution:** The work distinguished young widows from other classes of widows and documented their ordeals in Igbo society.

**Key Recommendation:** The study recommended targeted psychological therapy, legal protection, and legislative interventions to safeguard the dignity, inheritance rights, and well-being of young widows. And legislative reform is a necessary measure for safeguarding the dignity, autonomy, and well-being of young widows in Igbo society.

**Keywords:** Young widows; Widowhood; Cultural practices; Trauma; Igbo Society.



## INTRODUCTION

In Igbo society, many traditional practices are embedded in belief systems that have historically positioned women as subordinate to men. These systems often perpetuate discrimination, deprivation, and patriarchal control, particularly in matters relating to marriage, inheritance, and family authority. The preference for male children further reinforces gender inequality, as lineage continuity and property ownership are largely determined through patrilineal descent.

When a young woman loses her husband, the consequences extend far beyond emotional bereavement. Her social identity, autonomy, and material security are frequently compromised by the deceased husband's family, who often assume decision-making authority without her consent. In the absence of a grown-up male child to symbolically replace the deceased father, young widows may face eviction from their marital homes and dispossession of property jointly acquired during marriage. Decisions concerning residence, inheritance, and mourning practices are often made without her consent.

This work examined widowhood cultural practices and their aberrations in Igbo Society. The study examined abuses suffered by many young widows among the Igbos of Southeast, Nigeria. It also examines the effects of these cultural abuses on these young widows and the attendant traumas associated with these cultural abuses.

## PROBLEM OF THE STUDY

One of the major problems of young widows is the fear of the unknown. Many young rural widows are intimidated by the male relatives of their deceased husbands, who deny them the right to inherit their husbands' property (Mt 23:14; Mk 12:40; Lk 20:47). Many young widows, especially those who are not educated, are afraid of ostracization, deprivation (7% in *figure 1*), discrimination (7% in *figure 1*) and thus, shy away from fighting for their rights. However, the consent form helped us navigate the difficulties.

This study is based on cultural practices and their aberrations in Igboland. The Igbo people occupy the geographical location of Eastern Nigeria, which is made up of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. They are known for culturalism (Ezinwa, 2014). However, culture is dynamic and can change for good or worse. It is relative and particular to ethnic and tribal groups (Ezekiel, 2024). Other tribal and ethnic groups in Nigeria have their own cultural practices. "I am an Igbo, Yoruba, or Hausa first before a Nigerian" (Ezinwa, 2014).

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

The primary objective of this study is to examine the Cultural Abuses of Young Widows and Associated Trauma in Igbo Society. The specific objectives were to:

1. Determine the Cultural practices in Igbo Society of the southeast, Nigeria;
2. Impact of Cultural Abuses on Young Widows;
3. Determine associated trauma among young widows of Igbo society.

The study asked why young widows face harmful cultural rituals and are denied inheritance rights, and it provided an ethical critique of these practices.



## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

We reviewed current literature on widowhood and widows in Igbo culture (Ama, 2024 and Eze et al, 2024), where some people see young widows as liabilities, powerless and voiceless, who are vulnerable and should be exploited or those who are there for sexual gratification. When the husband of a young woman dies, “she automatically becomes vulnerable to suffering the humiliating transformation into being a widow” (Eze et al, 2024). Some family members of the bereaved see victimising young widows who lost their husbands, making them feel ashamed of their misfortune and limiting their capacity to heal and rebuild their lives as a means of revenge for their dead son (Ama, 2024). Life as a widow is a painful learning experience. She had just found herself in a new traumatic situation that is hostile and unacceptable to her. She may even deny the reality of the loss (Donnell, 2023). However, no one learns how to be a widow. Widowhood begins with the death of a husband. It ushers in pain and grief, which were never anticipated. She was taught how to be a wife and probably groomed from infancy to see herself as a girl who is destined to be a wife and prepared to live a happy life with the husband of her dreams. A young widow was someone who anticipated that in due time, she would turn into a woman, but she was never taught how to be a widow. “She had been groomed to expect a life with her husband who gets taken away from her the moment she is finally about to begin her life with him” (Ama, 2024). She spends the rest of her life in grief, suffering and pain, as well as in total quasi-denial of the reality of his being no more.

Some women heal after a few years; many remain at the depressive stage in a culture that does not know what mental health is. If care is not taken, her life will be derailed, because “Grief is a dynamic thing that can take hold and derail one’s entire life.” Furthermore, “Losing a spouse is one of the most devastating forms of pain, but even more so for women who had no other life but the one brutally taken away in this manner” (Ama, 2024). The situation of young widows is precarious because they have no social security system. Igbo society is highly patriarchal and male-dominated. This work adopted the theoretical view of Ugo Oji Ama (2024), who maintains that every young widow needs free socio-psychological treatment for their therapeutic healing, which would ease their trauma, and that the cultural abuses and societal factors that young widows go through should be abrogated.

## **METHODOLOGY**

We used a qualitative research method. The qualitative research method is a non-numerical approach that uses textbooks, video clips, short interviews, and open-ended questionnaires to interact with the people involved. It allowed us to examine the lived experiences of young widows (Donnell, 2023), the cultural abuses of young widows in Igbo society and their daily pains (Chollom, 2021). The work interviewed young widows, whose names cannot be mentioned here because of the consent form; read journal articles (Ude & Njoku, 2017, 1) and other texts. We watched online videos (Grey, 2024) and listened to audio recordings. What they found out from the respondents is revealing. The frequency of abusive words and the effects are enormous (Tables 1 & 2).



### **The Literature Gap**

Our work moved a step further from other literature by singling out young widows from older widows in general (Ama, 2024) and widowhood practices (Eze et al, 2024; Anuforo, 2025) that are central in other literatures. The social stigmatisation, cultural abuses, denial of inheritance rights and financial needs of young widows are not the same worries of older widows whose children have grown up (*figure 3*). The grown-up children easily fill the vacuum created by their deceased father. Furthermore, the culture of *nkuchi* (levirate marriage) does not apply to older widows. The emotional problems of young widows who are still sexually active and economically dependent are not the problems of the older widows who have entered menopause (*Figure 4*). Our work recognised the need for specifications and the separation of widows and their needs from lumping them together. Hence, the adjective “young” that qualifies the noun widow. Therefore, the focus of our work is on young widows.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The constant variable or hypothesis of this study is the young widow. A young widow is a woman who lost her husband and chose not to remarry. However, widowhood is larger than the loss of the husband. For Eze et al., (2024):

Widowhood not only involves the loss of the role of a wife to the husband but also the loss of a person most supportive of the woman, the person who has played a central role in the woman’s life, the father of her children, the family breadwinner and the companion of the woman. This transition from wifhood to widowhood happens so suddenly and swiftly that in one minute, a woman who is a wife transitions to a widow.

The variables are the trauma, a deep emotional distress suffered by young widows, which often comes with the sudden loss of their husbands or in the form of physical or verbal abuse from the family members of the deceased. The reality is that trauma is inevitable for the young widow (Nwube, 2024).

Culture is the people’s way of life. Culture is a secondary imposition on nature. It is dynamic and not static (Ezekiel, 2024). It is a product of human creative ingenuity that distinguishes groups and societies from each other (Chukwu, 2011). Unfortunately, certain aspects of Igbo cultural practices seem static and unwilling to change. Obnoxious widowhood practice is one such. The hypothesis tests the reality of the abuse of young widows and its effects on their daily lives.

### **Igbo People and Society**

The words *Ibo*, *Igbo*, and *Ndigbo* simultaneously refer to the territory, language and people of Southeastern Nigeria (Uchendu, 1965). While foreigners prefer *Ibo* due to the difficulty in pronouncing “*gb*” in *Igbo*, for Edeh (1985), the people themselves prefer *Igbo* (*ig-bō*) or *Ndigbo* to designate their people, language and homeland (p.14). The Igbos constitute one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. They number about 40 million people, approximately 20 per cent of Nigeria’s 200 million. The ancestral homeland of the Igbos is southeast Nigeria, comprising Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. However, a significant number of



Igbos live in Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Delta and Rivers states. Hundreds of thousands of Ndigbo live throughout Nigeria and all over the world (Chukwu, 2011).

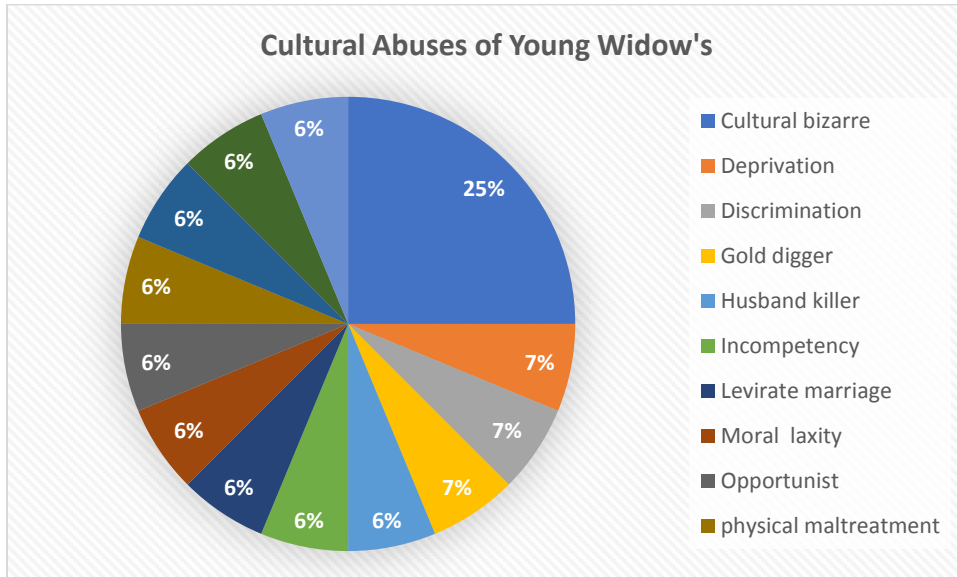
Igbo society, like other African societies, is patriarchal. Elucidating on this point, Chukwu (2011) states, “Preference is always given to the male child. Men are regarded as the heads of women. Women are essentially perceived more as mothers and wives and are expected to be submissive to their husbands and men.” This preponderance of men over women has given rise to systemic abuses of women that are culturally sanctioned.

Central to this obsession with male children is the cultural perception that they guarantee the perpetuation of the family’s lineage and prevent outsiders from inheriting the family’s possessions due to the absence of a male heir” (Onyebueke et al, 2024). When young women lose their husbands, male family relatives make decisions without their consent. The young widow could be dispossessed of the family property (Nwube, 2024).

### Cultural Abuses of Young Widows

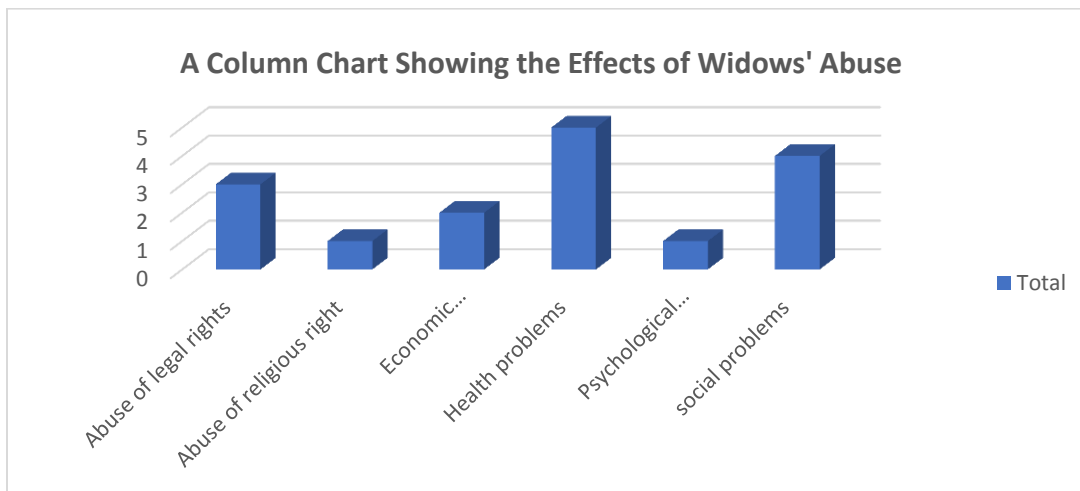
**Table 1: Representation of the Abuses of Young Widows, Examples and Side Effects**

Abuses	Examples	Effects
Gold Digger	Ceasing of the property of the husband	Economic starvation of the widow and her children
Husband Killer	Ostracisation of the widow	Psychological imposition of guilt
Opportunist	Denial of rights and freedom of movement	Abuse of fundamental human right
Incompetency	Denial of inheritance right	Lack of access to daily upkeep
Moral laxity	Not allowed to have male friends	Freedom of association and right to remarriage
Theft of family assets	Forceful removal from the property of the deceased husband	Economic vulnerability: the withdrawal of children from school, hunger and starvation
Bizarre cultural practices	Forced to sleep near the corpse or drink bath water from the corpse.	Detrimental to health: Poisoning of the widow
Bizarre cultural practices	The dress code for widows is either black or white, spanning from one month to one year or more.	Impassion of cultural identity
Levirate marriage	Forced to marry a relation of the husband	Lack of the right to choose a husband or male friend
Witchcraft or bad luck	Forced to take oat	Denial of her faith and abuse of freedom of religion.
Stigmatization	Forceful shaving of hair	Made to look unkept
Discrimination	Denial of family farmland	Malnutrition because of lack of food and resources
Deprivation	Not allowed to take her bathe	Poor hygiene: Low self-esteem
Physical maltreatment	Sleeping on the bare floor	Exposure to cold. Detrimental to health
Cultural bizarre practices	Early morning cold bathe	Detrimental to health
Cultural bizarre practices	Early morning weeping at the grave	Mental stress



**Figure 1: A Pie Chart Showing the Proportion of Cultural Abuses of Young Widows**

The pie chart shows that 25% of the abuses are cultural. Other abuses like deprivation of rights (7%), discrimination (7%), gold digger (7%), etc., hinged on what the culture provided.



**Figure 2: A Column Chart Showing the Frequency of the Effects of Widows' Abuse**

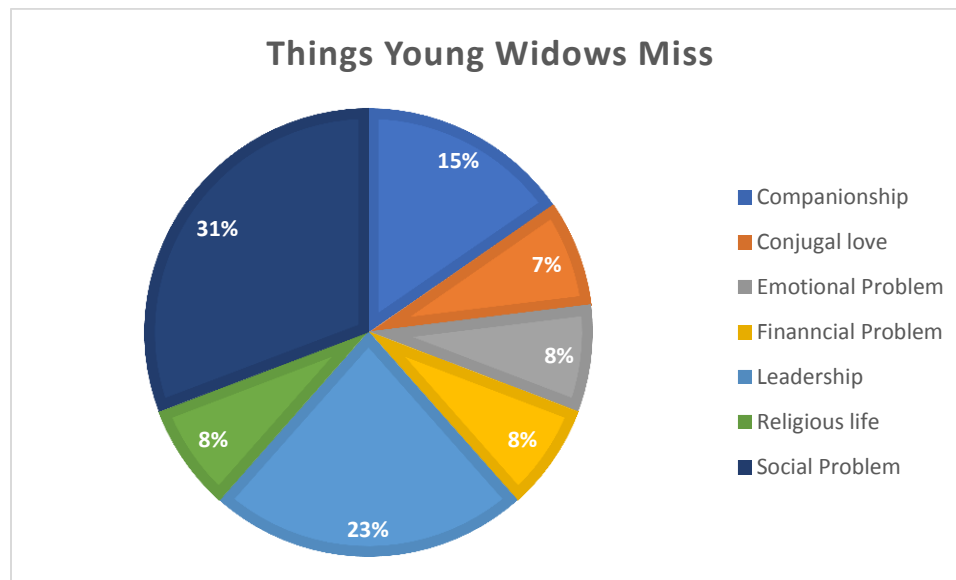
The frequency indicates that her health is at the highest risk level (Anuforo, 2025, p. 184), followed by social problems. The effects reveal that the physiological and psychosocial well-being, legal rights, economic support, and empowerment of widows are completely neglected. Some are most likely to suffer from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Ezeh, 2022).



**Table 2: What Young Widows Go Through in Life**

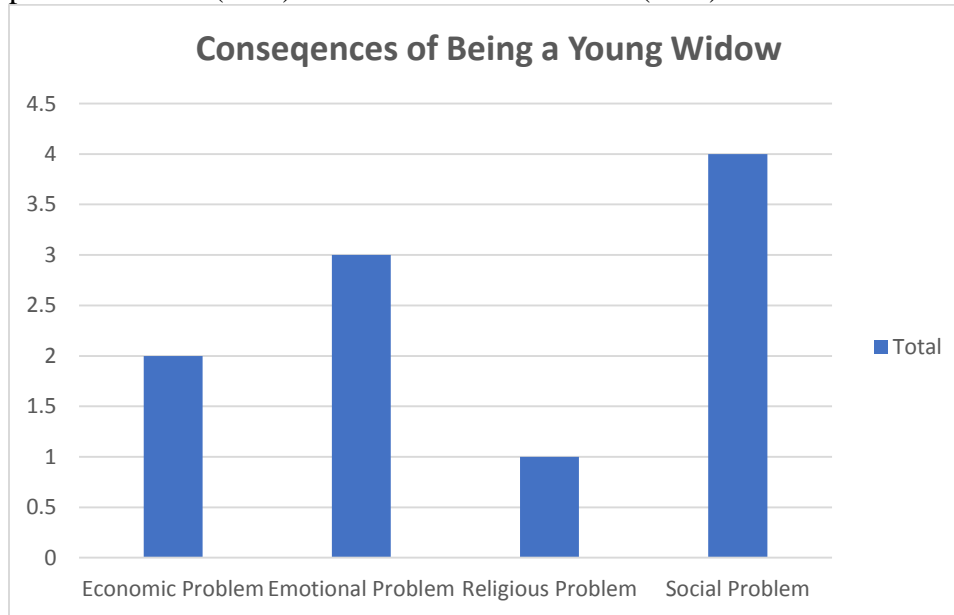
While there are cultural impositions and abuses, maltreatments, deprivations and accusations that the young widows must go through, there are basic things that they miss. These are as follows:

Things Young Widows Miss	Examples	Consequences
Companionship	Going out alone for a social gathering	Alone in the crowd
Financial Support	Unable to meet the financial demands of the family	Financial inadequacy
Father figure to the children	Correcting the mischievous children	Fatherless wild children
Religious Life	Praying and singing together	Questioning God
House leadership	Policing the house	Rude and fearless children
Encouragement	Knowing that you can share your worries with him	Loneliness and helplessness
Conjugal love	Demand of nature	Wondering how long it will last
Emotional distress	Confidant	Feeling of emptiness
Leadership presence	Aura of his presence	Intruders invade the house
House leadership	Distributive roles	Mismanagement of resources



**Figure 3: A Pie Chart Showing the Proportion of What Young Widows Miss**

The biggest problem for a young widow is societal (31%), such as discrimination, deprivation of rights, children’s delinquency, etc. This is followed by house leadership. She deals with all the problems alone (23%). She is alone in the crowd (15%).



**Figure 4: A Column Chart Showing the Frequency of the Consequences of Being a Young Widow**

The column chart shows that the major problem is society, which has the highest column. This is followed by emotional issues, while the third is financial inadequacies.

## DISCUSSION

Many young widows are accused of all sorts of evil. They are maltreated physically and emotionally. Below are the explanations of our Tables 1 & 2.

### Husband Killer

The label “husband killer” is one of the most stigmatising accusations imposed on young widows. Immediately following the death of her husband, the widow is expected to engage in intense public displays of grief, not only as an expression of sorrow but also as a means of demonstrating her innocence. Within this cultural context, failure to meet these expectations may attract suspicion, sanctions, or punishment (Eze et al., 2024). Consequently, young widows often become objects of social ridicule and discrimination, as prevailing cultural narratives implicitly associate them with the cause of their husbands’ deaths (Onyebueke et al., 2024). This stigmatisation exacerbates their emotional distress, discrimination and reinforces their marginalisation at a time of profound vulnerability (Onyebueke et al, 2024).



In some places in Igboland, when a young widow is accused of killing her husband, she must suffer to prove her innocence before the *umu Ada* (the women from the kindred of the deceased man). On some occasions, the widow is forced to “drink the water with which her husband’s corpse was washed, to prove her innocence” (Ama, 2024). The practice is not only egregious but traumatising. The young widow is equally forced to sleep beside the corpse of her husband and shave her hair.

### **Dress Code & Imposed Identity**

Young widows are forced to undergo other ridiculous traditional practices. Immediately after the burial of her husband, “the mother-in-law will take her to the back of their house early in the morning to bathe with cold water in harsh weather conditions, and custom demands that she will be calling her husband’s pet name as if he is alive for four days” (Eze et al, 2024).

For socio-cultural reasons, widows are often required to wear distinctive mourning attire for extended periods, ranging from six months to several years. Typically, this attire consists of black or white garments, which are culturally associated with bereavement and, in some contexts, negative symbolism. Within this framework, a young widow is expected not only to adopt this dress as an outward sign of her status but also as a marker that may be interpreted as carrying an ominous or unfortunate identity (Eze et al., 2024). The clothing is usually worn continuously and cannot be changed or removed until ritually sanctioned. However, the duration and strictness of this practice often vary depending on the family’s social and cultural status.

The period of mourning is seen as a period of social exclusion. It does not matter if she needs to continue her business, which is the source of her income. “During this period, what she wears, where she goes and what activities she engages in are dictated by cultural obligation” (Ama, 2024). Refusal to remain indoors or abide by the dress code leads to ostracisation. Young widows are traditionally obliged to perform these rites if they are to be part of the family of the deceased husband. Refusing to perform them is tantamount to alienation from the community and the family of the deceased husband.

### **Denial of the Right to Inheritance**

In many parts of Igboland, young widows are denied their right to inherit their husbands’ property. At the death of her husband, the buildings, farmland, yam barn, the cow, movable assets, etc., of her husband revert to the family (Anyanwu & Anyanwu, 2017). The only thing a young widow is left with is her kitchen. For the sake of family continuity, the widow is to be inherited (*nkuchi*) as if she were a piece of property. In this way, “the widow is assured that she will not be disinherited of her husband’s properties” (Eze et al, 2024). She may be subjected to *nkuchi* levirate marriage with or without her consent. Their family property, including the widow, must be kept intact. Thus, the expression *ife anyi diri anyi*, “let our own belongings remain with us.”

The issue is that the widow is inherited alongside the landed property, yam barn, livestock, etc., but she cannot inherit anything on her own because “gender often determines land access, use, control, and inheritance under the customary land tenure system” (Onyebueke et al, 2024, p. 28).



The land tenure system and the right to inheritance are gender based. The yam ban with the lines of tubers of yam is a status symbol (Echiegu, 2021, p. 19). “Restrictions on, or lack of access to land, as well as the repudiation of the rights of land inheritance and succession, especially in rural and often urban communities, frequently plunge women and female-headed households into vicious cycles of poverty, food insecurity and disease vulnerability.” (Onyebueke et al., 2024).

The main problem with the denial of inheritance rights is patriarchalism, which has “remained in conflict with women’s right to property in Igbo land” (Anyanwu & Anyanwu, 2017). Condemning the evils of patriarchalism in Igbo culture, Chukwu (2011) argues that patriarchalism exposes women to violence, rape, obnoxious widowhood rituals, and denial of rights of inheritance.

### **Sleeping with Strangers**

In some parts of Igboland, a young widow is required, willingly or unwittingly, to sleep with strangers or a relative of her deceased husband to sever all ties with the late husband. It is assumed that any young widow who “does not do this has mental deficiencies and is unfit to receive benefits from the husband’s property. According to Ama (2024), “This cultural practice serves her late husband’s family, as they tend to become the cultural beneficiaries of his properties.” There was an instance where a young widow was forced, as required by custom, to sleep with a stranger, which she did to assuage the fears of her husband’s family members. Unfortunately, she contracted Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) from the stranger. She not only suffers sexual abuse but also faces health challenges associated with HIV infection (Adetunji, 2001).

Once a young woman loses her husband, she becomes vulnerable and can be treated like a piece of rag. According to Ugo Oji Ama (2024), “A young widow’s ordeal generally begins from the moment her husband’s death is confirmed. Physical hardship, mistreatment from the family, deprivation, imposition of cruel cultural practices, emotional instability and varying degrees of trauma become the widow’s reality.” She is relegated to second-class status.

### **Befitting Burial Rite & Squandering the Family Wealth**

The burial planning committee and burial rites rest squarely on the shoulders of the men. The condolences and the gift items are also managed by the kinsmen. Once the husband is late, the young widow is secluded, and when she comes out of seclusion, whatever she meets is what was left of the property of her late husband. In the name of befitting burial, the money, the yam barn, cow, goats, etc., would be lavishly squandered. If the widow is childless, she might not have access to the remaining property. The young widow will be given nothing as she could be seen as the reason for their deceased son’s childlessness. It is their belief that she wasted the man’s progeny (Nwube, 2024). However, these abuses are not “only repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience” but discriminatory and contrary to section 42(2) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and its implications for the protection of women’s rights (Anyanwu & Anyanwu).



## CONCLUSION

The tables and figures above show that cultural abuse of young widows is real. These abuses also have consequences. These cultural abuses are contradictory to fundamental human rights, natural justice, equity and good conscience. These abuses are patriarchal, thus, contradictory to natural justice. Young widows are human beings, and they belong to womanhood. They are created in the Image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27; *Imago Dei*); thus, they have rights outside their culture. But *Figure 1* shows that the cultural bizarre has 25% of the cultural abuses of young widows, while *figure 2* indicates its high frequency on the health of the young widows. The health challenges are risks to the life of the young widow.

The social consequences of the maltreatment in *Figure 3* are also high at 31%. The emotional consequences in *Figure 4* are also alarming. However, many international laws and organisations protect women from exploitation and cultural abuses. They include the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Anyanwu & Anyanwu, 2017). Young widows should be helped to access these organisations to overturn the obnoxious cultural practices. All hope is not lost.

Human rights activists are taking up cases of abuse of widows' fundamental rights. In some quarters, women "used subtle stratagems, 'silent politics, or 'maternal manoeuvres' to overcome patriarchal restrictions or constraints" (Onyebueke et al, 2024). The Scripture also allows women the right to inherit their father's property. An example is the case of the daughters of Zelophehad, who went to Moses to request a portion of land so that the name of their father would be remembered in Israel. A piece of land was given to them (Numbers 27:1-11). Again, in II Kgs 4:1-6, a widow inherited the debt and a jar of Olive oil left behind by her deceased husband. Thus, nothing should stop a young woman from inheriting the property of the deceased husband.

## RECOMMENDATION

Death is the lot of all humans. We are a being unto death. As such, young men should learn to write their Wills. The Will is the only legal tool that a young widow can hold on to. Where no Will is stating who inherits what, the young widow has no chance at all. The young and/or childless widow is left at the mercy of the husband's family. The family of the deceased will most likely appropriate the property of the deceased man from the young widow. Again, discriminatory cultures, cultural stigmatisations, ostracizations, and gender bias that led to abuses of young widows should be expunged from Igbo culture. This could be done through the House of Assembly or State legislators. There is also a need for Mass Media campaigns, non-governmental organisations, and religious bodies to design means through which young widows could be trained, enlightened and empowered. Furthermore, the government should have a structure that takes care of young widows' mental and physical health. Where there are doubts, women's organisations should intensify their efforts to provide legal aid to young widows. They should be provided with free legal aid to help them prosecute abusers. No young widow should be allowed to go through the trauma of losing her husband, oppression and suppression by the family of the deceased. The oppression of one young widow is the suppression of womanhood.



### **Ethical Clearance**

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that the research was conducted without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

### **Authors' Contributions**

Joseph Monday Orji conceived and designed the study as well as wrote the initial manuscript. Donatus Oluwa Chukwu & Joseph Monday Orji collated the data, and Joseph Monday Orji handled the analysis and interpretation. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

### **Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure**

The author(s) declare that no generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted technologies were used in the writing, analysis, or preparation of this manuscript.

### **Data availability statement**

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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