

## Effects Of Widowhood Rites On The Psychosocial Well-Being Of Women In Nadowli District (Upper- West Region-Ghana)

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**Abstract:** *The present study was conducted to find out the effect of widowhood rites on the psychosocial well-being of widows in Nadowli District of the Upper West Region (Ghana). The study generally examined three aspects of the well-being of the widows viz psychological, economic and social of widows mainly as a result of the ordeal they go through during widowhood rites. The psychosocial Well-being Scale (PSWS) was used to collect data on eighty widows from Nadowli District. The statistical analysis was done mostly by the t tests. Findings indicated that the younger widows experience higher levels of psychological effects of widowhood than the older widows. In addition, results showed that younger widows tend to experience higher economic setbacks. However, results indicated that there was no difference in social effect widowhood between younger and older widows. Based on this it is recommended that the District Assemblies, Traditional Authorities, NGOs and Gender Based Organizations should come together and abolished some of the widowhood rites that tend to have negative psychosocial well-being on the widows in the Nadowli District.*

**Key words:** *Widowed women, psychosocial well-being, widowhood rites, Upper West Region.*

### INTRODUCTION:

#### Background to the Study

A widow is a woman who has lost her husband (Ayagiba, 2010) and widowhood rites are cultural

rituals that any surviving spouse undergoes to honor the dead spouse (Abanga, 2009). Although it is prescribed for both widows and widowers, the latter go through less stringer rituals as compared with the (Dolphyne, 2009)

Akujobi (2009) stated that widowhood rites are found in every community in Africa and the hardships that they experience stem from the

society, the husband's family and from tradition.) In every African society, the widow goes through emotional, psychological and spiritual violence whether she is a Christian, non-Christian, literate or illiterate, young or old (Martey, 2005).

Many people have considered this practice as being cruel, archaic, dehumanizing and unnecessary. Therefore there have been calls for its abolition (Sossou, 2002). However, there seems to be no sign of its stoppage because NGOs and Government Agencies cannot come to terms with the tradition (Oduro, 2007). It can be seen that widowhood rites come with a lot of problems such as economic, social and psychological particularly in the first year or so after the death of their spouse. These are discussed below:

#### *Psychological Impact of Widowhood Practices*

Previous studies have found that most widows experienced clinically significant depression during the first year after death, the proportions ranging from around 15% to 30% (e.g. Lund et al 1993; Harlow et al. 1991; Zisook, 1991). This primarily results from the loss of the husband and feelings of loneliness. Mendes de Leon, Kasl & Jacobs (1994) found elevated depression beyond the first year of widowhood for their young-old widows (age 64-74) but not for their old-old widows (over age 75). However, not all investigators have found significant depression among the bereaved (Gallagher et al. 1989), while others find that depression experienced is relatively short-lived (Murrell & Himmelfarb, 1989).

#### *Economic Effects of Widowhood Practices*

Certain studies also suggest that widows experienced economic hardships after the death of their spouses. The findings from the study indicated that younger widows experienced higher levels of economic effects than older ones. Wheaton (1990) conducted a research to examine the risk factors that account for the economic effects experienced by widows as a result of the death of their husbands. The findings indicated that the major risk factor here was lack of coping

resources. The economic impact on the widowhood rites include loss of income, extreme poverty, financial dependency on men, negligence of the widow and her children, high school dropout rate and denial of education (Voice of the Widows, 2006).

#### *Social Effects of Widowhood Practices*

There have been mixed findings on the social effects of widowhood. Roberts (1998) conducted a study on the kind of support widows receive from their families, friends and the families of their late husbands. In this study of a sample of widows between ages of 30 and 75, Roberts (1998) indicated that widows between the ages of 30 and 50 received more support from families and friends than widows who are above 60 years. However, findings from McCalley (2000) show that widows above 60 years received more support from their families because these people are so old and cannot do any difficult work to fend for themselves. This present study will rectify the situation in Ghana.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

As part of the widowhood rites among the people of Nadowli district of the Upper West region of Ghana, the widow is taken to a crossroad at dawn where her hair is shaved and then she is smeared with clay after which she is supposed to wear a white cloth and white scarf to prove her faithfulness to the man while he was alive. She is also not allowed to bath nor change her clothes for 40 days. A rope is tied around her waist (bagaana) to identify her as a widow. It is also expected that she should choose a husband from her deceased husband's brothers.

If a widow refuses such an offer, she would be disowned by late husband's family and banned from inheriting any of the dead man's property while all the household properties. Such a widow would then rely on the help from friends and social organizations to earn their living. It is therefore undeniable that some of these practices have all kinds of effects on the widows who go through them. In view of this, the study examines the effect of widowhood practices on psychosocial

well-being of women in Nadowli District of the Upper East of Ghana.

### Objectives of the Study

This study examines the effects of widowhood practices among women. The study addresses the following key objectives:

1. To determine the psychological impact of widowhood on women.
2. To determine the social effects of widowhood on women.
3. To determine the economic effects of widowhood on women.

### Relevance of the Study

Researches have explored psychosocial well-being among widowed women. Few studies have examined widowhood practices on depression of women, especially when it comes to Ghanaian widowed women. This study will be undertaken with the intention of broadening our knowledge and understanding of the psychosocial effects of widowhood on Ghanaian women. The findings of this study will be useful to care agencies to know the psychosocial problems of these women and help them of their plight. The outcome of the study will educate caregivers about the psychological well-being of widowed women to help their families realize their responsibilities to them.

### Statement of Hypotheses

Based on the objectives and review of the literature, the following hypotheses were formulated and tested.

1. Younger widowed women are more likely to experience higher levels of psychological effects than older ones.
2. Older widowed women are more likely to experience greater social effect compared to young widowed women.

3. Young widowed women are more likely to experience greater economic effect as a result of widowhood compared to older widowed women.

### METHODOLOGY

#### Population

This study aims at finding out whether widowhood practices affect the psychosocial well-being of widowed women in Nadowli District in Upper West. This place was chosen because of the prominence of this practice in the area. Eighty (80) widows were purposively selected for the study.

#### Instrument

The Psychosocial Well-being Scale (PSWS) was used to gather information about participants. This Scale which was designed by O'Hare, Sherrer, Cutler and Garlick in 2002, is an internationally well-validated screening tool for emotional, economic and social network experience. It is known to generally have high Cronbach alphas for various samples in the range of .77 to .88. The PSWS scale contains 14 items with minimum score of 14 and a maximum score of 42. The scale has two sub-scales: psychological, economic and social well-being. The psychological construct measures widowed women's experiences of trauma and stress. The social construct measures the social connectedness of widowed women. The economic construct measures the economic effect of an experience of financial shock. The Psychosocial well-being questions related to experiences in the past month had three answer categories: never or rarely, sometimes, or most of the time.

### RESULTS

The first hypothesis of the study stated that younger widowed women are more likely to experience higher levels of psychological effects than older ones. This hypothesis seeks to examine differences in psychological effects of widowhood rites between younger and older widows. In view of this, the independent sample *t* test was used to

test this hypothesis. Results are summarized in the table below.

**Table 1**

**Results of the Independent Sample *t* test of psychological well-being of widows by Age**

Age	N	Means	SD	df	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$
Young	25	26.16	5.40	78	4.312	.000	1.04
Old	25	21.65	3.76				

From Table 1, results from the independent *t* test shows that younger widows ( $M = 26.16$ ,  $SD = 5.40$ ) were significantly more affected psychologically,  $t(78) = 4.312$ ,  $p = .000$ , than older females ( $M = 21.65$ ,  $SD = 3.76$ ). Therefore, the hypothesis was supported by the results of the study. The effect size estimated with Cohen's *d*, was 1.04 implying that the differences in psychological effect of widowhood between the younger and older widows was very large.

The present study also tested the hypothesis that 'Older widowed women are more likely to experience less social support compared to young widowed women'. This hypothesis seeks to find out differences in social support widows receive after the death of their husbands between young and old widowed. Like the first hypothesis this one was also tested with the independent sample *t* test. Summary of results are shown in tables below.

**Table 2**

**The results of the independent Sample *t* Test of Social Support by Age**

Age	N	Mean	SD	df	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Young	25	13.20	1.56	78	1.750	.084
Old	25	12.55	1.55			

Results from the independent *t* test show that there was no significant effect of age on social support widows have,  $t(78) = 1.750$ ,  $p = 0.84$ . This implies that no significant difference exists in

social support between younger widows ( $M = 13.20$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ) and their older counterparts ( $M = 12.55$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ). In view of this result, the hypothesis was rejected by the results.

The third hypothesis of the study stated that 'Young widowed women are more likely to experience greater economic effect as a result of widowhood compared to older widowed women'. The hypothesis was also tested with the independent sample *t* test. The results are shown in table below.

**Table 3**

**The Results of the Independent Sample *t* Test of Economic effects by Age.**

Age	N	Mean	SD	df	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$
Young	25	13.12	3.67	78	3.390	.001	.75
Old	25	10.49	3.00				

As can be seen from the table above, results from the independent *t* Test indicates that there was a significant effect of age on economic conditions,  $t(78) = 3.390$ ,  $P = 0.001$ . This means that there was a significant difference in economic conditions between younger and older widows. Younger widows ( $M = 13.12$ ,  $SD = 3.67$ ) experience worse economic conditions than older widows ( $M = 10.49$ ,  $SD = 2.99$ ). This means the hypothesis was supported. The effect size of 0.75 was estimated with Cohen's *d* meaning that the difference in economic effect of widowhood between the young and older widows was not large.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the effects of widowhood on psychosocial well-being of widows in the Nadowli District. After thorough consideration of problems surrounding the practice of widowhood, the study examined the degree of psychological impact of widowhood on various practices had any psychological effect on widows. The study also looked at social effects of



widowhood rites. Finally, the study sought to examine the economic effects of widowhood on women. The research was conducted using data gathered on eighty (80) widows from Nadowli District. Results from study indicated three major findings.

Firstly, the study discovered that younger widows experienced higher levels of psychological effects of widowhood than the older ones. Most of the psychological effects widows experienced was depression. This primarily results from the loss of the husband and feelings of loneliness. In a study conducted by Mendes de Leon, Kasl, and Jacobs (1994), the findings indicated that depressed younger widows experienced higher levels of depression beyond the first year of their widowhood than their older counterparts. This was confirmed by the results of the present study. Older widows experienced less psychological effects mostly due to the fact that these women found their spouse's death less distressing since it was more expected at that point in the life cycle. In addition, the magnitude of the difference between younger and older widows with respect to the psychological effect was found to be so large. It is evident that the younger widows' psychological problems results not only from the effects of the widowhood rites but also as a result of the fact that these people feel lonely due to the unexpected death of their husbands. Even though, the older ones also feel that loneliness as a result of the death, it is clearly known that most of them expected the death of their husbands during that time of their life cycle. In view of this, although the older ones feel depressed of the loss of their husbands, the extent of loss felt by the younger ones is more than theirs. Hence the very large effect size in this study.

Secondly, the findings from the study indicated that younger widows experienced higher levels of economic effects than older ones. Wheaton (1990) conducted a research to examine the risk factors that account for the economic effects experienced by widows as a result of the death of their husbands. The findings indicated that the major risk factor here was lack of coping resources. The loss of the husband has several impacts on the

widow. In our Ghanaian society and for that matter, among the people of Nadowli District, it is well known that the husband is the traditional breadwinner of the family. The death of the husband poses an intense economic burden on the entire family. Here, the wife (now widow) takes responsibility of the household and may not be able to provide enough for herself and family.

In certain situations where the widow refuses to choose a husband from the deceased spouse's brothers as is the practice of a widow, the family of the deceased then takes away all belongings of the deceased from the widow. In this way, such a widow has to start something on her own so as to earn money. This makes this widow to experience greater economic drawbacks. Unlike the older ones, most of the young ones solely depend on the husband for daily home keeping money. With the death of her husband, this widow has nothing to do so as to keep the family. This makes the widow to experience greater economic draw backs.

This explains why younger widows tend to experience higher levels of economic impact than their older counterparts. However, the magnitude of the difference between younger and older widows with respect to economic effects they experience was not so large. This is probably due to the fact that, both old and young widows experience similar economic effects. The economic effects experienced by younger widows especially when the family of her late husband has taken all possessions from the widow also adds to other psychological effects experienced by these widows. This explains the large effect size observed in psychological effects of widowhood between younger and older widows.

The study finally found out that no differences exist in social effects of widowhood between younger and older widows. This is contrary to studies of Roberts (1998) and McCalley (2000). Roberts (1998) conducted a study on the kind of support widows receive from their families, friends and the families of their late husbands. In this study of a sample of widows between ages of 30 and 75, Roberts (1998) indicated that widows between the ages of 30 and 50 received more

support from families and friends than widows who are above 60 years. The findings from this study could probably result from the fact that these young widows had lots of friends as is the case of the youth. As such, they tend to receive more social support than older widows.

However, findings from McCalley(2000) show that widows above 60 years received more support from their families because these people are so old and cannot do any difficult work to fend for themselves. This present study does not agree with both previous studies probably due to the fact that these widows feel they are no longer part of society due to the ordeals they go through as a result of the widowhood rites. Such rites make most of the widows lose their identity. One such ritual is disallowing the widow to bath for forty days. These practices tend to make them feel they are no longer part of society since both the young and older widows experienced these rituals.

### Recommendations

The present study found out that younger widows experienced more psychological effects of widowhood rites than the older ones. In view of this it is recommended that such widows should be screened and given the appropriate counselling. Furthermore, widowhood practices that subject the widows to psychological trauma should be eliminated by the traditional authorities. It was also found out that younger widows encountered more economic hardships after the death of the spouses as compared to the older ones. In view of this special attention should be given to them by NGOs to enhance their economic lives. Finally both age groups of the widows have low social status as a result of the widowhood rituals they go through. Based on this it is recommended that the District Assemblies, Traditional Authorities, NGOs and Gender Based Organizations should come together and abolished some of the widowhood rites that tend to reduce the social status of the widows.

### Conclusion

The present study was conducted to find out the effect of widowhood rites on the psychosocial

well-being of widows in Nadowli District of Upper West Region. The study generally examined three aspects of the well-being of the widow including psychological, economic and social well-being of widows mainly as a result of the ordeal they go through during widowhood rites. Findings from present study indicate that younger widows experience higher levels of psychological effects of widowhood than older widows. In addition, results show that younger widows tend to experience higher economic setbacks mainly due to the loss of the husband (breadwinner). However, results indicate that there is no difference in social effect of widowhood between younger and older widows.

Findings from the study imply that although widowhood had negative effects on the psychosocial life of widows, younger widows are more negatively affected than the older ones. This is evident in the fact the younger widows experience higher levels of psychological as well as economic effects of widowhood than their older counterparts.

It is therefore suggested that widows especially the younger ones should be well cared for by their respective families. The study also draws attention to organizational bodies especially human rights advocates as well as the government to create awareness in the public and for that matter people of the Nadowli District the adverse effect of widow hood on the welfare of these widows. This would help reduce if not eliminate the incidence of these widowhood rites which cause much harm to the well-being of widows and society at large.

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