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## CAPACITY BUILDING FOR WIDOWS : PATHWAYS FOR SUSTAINABLE GRASSROOT DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

————— *Tayo O. George* —————

### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines capacity building for widows and pathways for sustainable grass root development in Nigeria. The increasing number of widows with little or no means of capacity for economic empowerment at the grass root has become an acknowledged social problem in most developing societies like Nigeria. This paper argues the need for capacity building as an urgent step for attaining the needed sustainable national development for this segment of the population. The study relies on survey of 942 widows across six Awori communities, in Ogun state, Nigeria. Using descriptive statistics, the result shows that, about 60 percent of the sampled population had no form of formal or informal education. Thus, they live in abject poverty. This paper recommends the need for both government and Non Governmental Organizations (NGO's) to drive capacity building through formal and Non-formal education, to enable widows especially at the grass root maximize their potentials in the ever changing world.*

### PROBLEM STATEMENT

The United States Bureau of statistics (2008) reports that annually, there are seven million - 7,000,000 widows globally. The increasing number of widows across the world in recent time has become a social problem. For instance, Potash (1986:1) opines that "widows make up about half the adult female population in Africa". Even though this view could pass for an over-exaggeration, one striking feature in most part of Sub Sahara Africa (SSA) is the fact that, very little is said about widows and their plight in any discourse. According to Oloko (1997:9), "it is a widely known folklore that all enduring marriages ultimately end with the death of either the husband or wife or both. However, the challenges and traumatic experience which accompany the death of a husband tends to be greater than that

prematurely due to a number of factors such as: ill-health, accidents and wars among other unforeseen circumstances, it is observed from relevant literature and research findings that, unlike a wife's death, the death of a husband is culturally challenged in many African societies. The common belief is that someone must necessarily cause the death of a man in Africa and that person is likely to be his wife. According to Ilogu (1974:40), "I have not come across any death that any Igbo accept as a natural and biological end". Similarly, Afigbo (1989) observed that in almost all societies, the immediate or remote cause of death is sought in the wicked machinations of human enemy or of a malevolent ancestor or ghost. Consequently, the death of a husband dramatically alters a woman's status and leaves her at the mercy of her husband's relations who are customarily empowered to take decisions concerning her and the properties left behind by the deceased not minding her welfare and that of her children if any.

Lack of capacity for the increasing number of widows at the grass roots especially those in the rural areas has become an acknowledged social problem. While the number of widows across most societies is increasing, quality education/vocational training skills required for self employment and economic empowerment seem to be decreasing. More worrisome in this 21<sup>st</sup> century is the fact that most of the widows sampled in this study are farmers and petty traders and others without any means of sustenance after the demise of the breadwinner (spouse). Even those with regular source of income can hardly make ends meet as they merely live from hands to mouth. While the farmers usually small scaled rely on obsolete equipments (hoes and cutlasses) which could barely yield high outputs, those engaged in petty trading are worse off as many attest to the fact that they lack credit facilities to enlarge their businesses much less to make higher profits in this era of financial economic crisis.

Due to lack of capacity, widows in most part of Sub-Sahara Africa (SSA) are rendered economically incapacitated and this aggravates their poverty. This paper argues that to a large extent, disinheritance pauperize most widows so much so that they lack the means of sustaining themselves and their children, particularly if they do not accept relatives allocated to them as their new husbands. It is acknowledged that, if widows have acquired skills through vocational training (arts, crafts, music etc) or schooling be it formal or adult education as the case may be, they are able to cope when unforeseen circumstances such as untimely death of spouse.

According to the United Nations Development Programme *Human Development* report:

*The basic objective of human development is to enlarge the range of people's choices to make development more democratic and participatory. These choices should include access to income and employment opportunities, education and health, and a clean and safe physical environment. Each individual should also have the opportunity to participate fully in community decisions and to enjoy human, economic and political freedoms. (UNDP, 1991:9).*

*As Jamès (1999:5) also points out:*

*The absence of labor force participation and asset ownership among women was part of a traditional family system in which husbands participated in the formal markets and wives worked in the home. Women provided non-monetized services, especially when young, while their monetary needs were supposed to be covered by their spouses and eventually their children. But in many cases, this system fails, especially in old age, when women are at the receiving end of the lifetime contract. Marriages break up and the husband is the one with the formal income. Husbands die earlier than wives, with their retirement benefits used up, and often do not leave adequate resources to support the surviving spouse.*

*Other researches and analyses suggested a negative impact on the economic well being of women, particularly widowed women in old age (James, 1999; Hard and Wise, 1991; Williamson & Rix, 1999).*

This study becomes imperative with a view to examine the militating factors affecting capacity building for widows in order to determine pathways for sustainable grass root development in Nigeria.

Philbin (1996: 1) defined capacity building as “the process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in the fast-changing world”. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1991: 2) defined capacity building as the creation of an enabling environment with appropriate legal frameworks, institutional development, including community participation (of women in particular), human resources development and strengthening of managerial systems.

One striking feature of UNDP's definition is the fact that it recognizes capacity building as a long-term, continuing process, in which all stakeholders participate (ministries, local authorities, non-governmental organizations, professional

associations, academics and others.

Essentially, Capacity building refers to “a person's ability to define and realize his/her goals or to do his/her job more effectively. Capacity also refers to the skills and capabilities of individuals. For individuals, capacity building may relate to leadership development, advocacy skills, training/speaking abilities, technical skills, organizing skills, and other areas of personal and professional development”.

The cardinal objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To identify and examine capacity building for widows at the grassroots.
2. To examine the militating factors affecting capacity building for widows in the study area.
3. To identify the roles that government and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) can play in capacity building for widows.
4. To identify the role that capacity building can play in sustainable national development.

## **THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGO's) IN CAPACITY BUILDING FOR WIDOWS**

This section presents the roles of indigenous Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) currently providing succor for widows across Nigeria. The essence of this section is to showcase how capacity building can be harnessed and achieved for widows at various levels.

### **Widow care**

Widow care is a Non Governmental Organization (NGO) established in 1994 in Abakaliki by the former first lady of Ebonyi state eastern Nigeria, Mrs. Eunice Egwu, primarily to provide advocacy, economic empowerment, protection, healthcare support services, encourage and sustain widows' social, economic and spiritual development. To actualize in full the targets of the group, the founder built a permanent structure for the NGO named The Widow care Centre otherwise called Widow care Foundation Headquarters. Emewu (2008) described the Widow care Foundation as a “dream hatched to fill the void in the life of widows by taking on the role of their reliable friend”. Through the centre, 48 erstwhile homeless widows now have their own homes, modern houses with facilities provided while over 50 widows have been trained and employed by the centre in various vocational skills: sewing and craft making. It was also reported by Emewu (2008) in *Saturday Sun* of June 21, 2008 Page 22 that, “The Widow care centre/Foundation handles healthcare matters such as providing succor for people living with HIV /AIDS through confidential counseling and testing and the distribution of anti-

retroviral drugs. Over 1000 patients are currently benefitting from the programme”. Interestingly, the centre also have a family law unit for advocacy on widows' complaints, public event facility and (Information and Communication Technology) ICT centre. In the words of the founder, Mrs. Egwu, the foundation is already reaping the fruits of its labour as the paints that adorn the centre came from the paint making facility of the foundation, and made by widows and other less privileged people who were trained and employed there.

### **Tina Sam Ibekwe Foundation**

This is another NGO established to provide succor for widows. Established in Lagos, south west Nigeria in the year 2006 by Mrs. Tina Ibekwe, the major pre-occupation of the foundation is to provide humanitarian services to widows, especially the needy and less-privileged among them. Quoting the founder through an excerpts from an interview by Adeyi (2009) in *Daily Sun*, Tuesday, February 10, “the centre is concerned with both spiritual (counseling and prayers) and material well-being of women whose joy has been cut short by the cold hands of death visited on their husbands, those whose husbands property and wealth were confiscated from them by their husbands' relations after death and are left in perpetual lack and abject poverty”. To achieve this, Ibekwe (2009) declared that, “apart from her personal efforts in using her funds to provide widows with some basic needs such as food, clothing and accommodation as well as scholarship for their children's education, the foundation organizes skill acquisition programmes and empower them with incentives to start their own businesses for self reliance”. She recalled that so far, not less than 200 widows and indigent people across the nation have benefitted immensely from the foundation.

### **Bounty Food for Hunger Relief Initiative (BFHRI)**

BFHRI is yet another NGO established to bring succor to widows in Northern Nigeria. According to Onche (2008) in a publication titled “Widows Appreciate NGO” published in the cover page of the *Leadership* Newspaper of January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009, the president of BFHRI, Mr. Bulus Makama presented some widows from Abuja and Nassarawa state with food items, and promised to provide jobs and free training in adult education. Even though the number of beneficiaries of the initiative was not stated in that report, the gesture by BHHRI no doubt indicates that, the level of awareness and social supports given to widows is increasing in that part of the country. However, among the Awori of Ogun state, currently the focus of this study, the author is not aware of any NGO addressing widows' plights nor providing relief and material supports for this disadvantaged group.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

As opposed to the structural functionalist theory (SFT) that explains the various socio-cultural variables that sustains widowhood practices in most African societies especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this study adopted the Evolutionary Theory of Social change (ETS). The concept of social 'change' was popularly described by Wilmot (1985: 174) as "the alteration in the structure or organization of society or its component parts over time", This alteration in the words of Wilmot may be in size, complexity, direction, or function. Since society is a product of interaction, and is organized as a system, it is presumed that alteration in any part will affect the structure of the whole. This theory of change attempts to explain the various factors of social change: education, technology, urbanism, industrialization etc which have assisted to facilitate significant changes in vital aspects of capacity building for widows. This theory has gained wider popularity and acceptance in today's 21<sup>st</sup> century especially because society is in a constant state of flux. In most societies, the practice of levirate widow inheritance is becoming unpopular due to the influence of western education among others. So much so, widows whether at the grassroot or not, must change their orientation and mentality and embrace change in terms of capacity building. Age, gender, religion and culture must never be seen as a barrier in this age of technological advancement, globalization and scientific breakthroughs.

## **METHODOLOGY/RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study relied mainly on primary sources of data collection. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were adopted. For the quantitative aspect, structured questionnaire containing both open and closed ended questions were administered to widows of different age categories in the study area. The qualitative data relied on In-depth interview and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) of religious leaders, traditional rulers, widows and senior citizens within the study area. A total of twelve (12) persons were interviewed, while four (4) FGD sessions were held comprising of between eight (8) and twelve (12) respondents. The choice of these respondents is premised on their wealth of experience on the research subject which puts them in a vantage position to contribute to the study.

## **THE STUDY POPULATION**

Widows, ever married men and women, senior citizens, traditional rulers and religious leaders in the study area constitute the study population. The population for the survey comprises of Awori widows of different age categories, religion and family background purposively selected from six (6) Awori communities: Atan,

Agbara Igbesa, Iju, Ilogbo and Ota. This is necessitated because the primary focus of the study is on widows. In addition to the purposive sampling technique adopted, the snow ball sampling method was also utilized whereby identified widows assisted to locate other widows within the communities.

#### **METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS**

A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis was utilized to test the validity of the hypotheses stated in this research. The quantitative methods include: frequency distribution, percentages and cross tabulations, The frequency distribution and percentages were largely utilized essentially for the cultural, demographic, economic and social data of respondents. The researcher is confident that, these statistical tools will yield significant results that will bring to light major findings in this research. Data from in-depth interviews which are pre-recorded in the local language (Yoruba) of the interviewees were transcribed and interpreted to suit the purpose of the research. Similarly, data from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Case studies and Content analysis complemented major findings in this research.



**Table 1: Cultural, demographic, economic and social Data of Respondents (Widows)**

Distribution of Respondents by Research Area		Frequency		Percent (%)
Agbara		110		11.67
Atan		161		17.09
Igbesa		238		25.27
Iju		105		11.15
Ilogbo		86		9.13
Ota		242		25.69
Total	942			100.0
<b>Distribution of Respondents by Age (Years)</b>				
Less than 40		91		9.7
40-44		98		10.4
45-49		101		10.7.
50-54		156		16.6
55-59		80		8.5
60-64		162		17.3
65-69		83		8.7
Above 70		171		17.8
<b>Total</b>		<b>942</b>		<b>100.0</b>

<b>Religion</b>			
Christianity		326	34.6
Islam		561	59.6
Traditional Religion		47	5.0
Other		8	.8
<b>Total</b>		<b>942</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Occupation</b>			
Farming		172	18.3
Trading		636	67.5
Artisan		49	5.2
Transport		9	1.0
Other		76	8.1
<b>Total</b>		<b>942</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Level of education</b>			
No schooling		565	60.0
Primary		232	24.6
Secondary		110	11.7
Tertiary		33	3.5
Other		2	.2
<b>Total</b>		<b>942</b>	<b>100.0</b>

<b>Monthly Income (N)</b>			
>10,000	491		52.1
10,001-20,000		207	21.9
20,001-30,000		108	11.5
30,001-40,000		56	5.9
40,001-50,000		33	3.5
50,000+		21	2.2
Unable to determine		64	6.8
<b>Total</b>		<b>942</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Status of Business/Career</b>			
Closed down completely		588	62.4
Skeletal services			
		133	14.2
Huge financial loss			
		166	17.6
Other		55	5.8
<b>Total</b>		<b>942</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>942</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 2: Cross Tabulation of Widowhood rites and level of education attained.

Opinion on Widowhood rites		Highest level of education				Total
		No schooling	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	
Yes		335	137	51	5	528
		63.4%	25.9%	9.7%	0.9%	100.0%
No		223	91	55	29	398
		56.0%	22.9%	13.8%	7.3%	100.0%
Exempted		7	3	4	1	15
		46.7%	20.0%	26.7%	6.7%	100.0%
Other		0	1	0	0	1
		0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>		565	232	110	35	942
		60.0%	24.6%	11.7%	3.7%	100.0%

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

From Table 1, the study area is located within Ado Odo Ota Local Government Area (LGA) of Ogun state. These comprises of both rural and urban settlements with unique socio- economic characteristics. Of the six Awori communities studied, Ota town which doubles as the ancestral home of the Awori and also the headquarter of the LGA has the highest number of widows representing about 25.69 percent of the total widows sampled. Despite the urban status of Ota with numerous industries, manufacturing plants, availability of basic social infrastructures (good roads, electricity, pipe borne water, schools, health care facilities both public and private), the number of widows here in their increasing population live in abject poverty with little or no form of schooling nor capacity for sustainable development.

93.5 percent of the widows sampled are core Awori Indigenes while the remaining less than 10 percent are partly Awori by marriage and migrants who and non indigenes but have live in Awori land for a reasonable number of years. 171 widows representing 17.8 percent of the sampled population were above 70 years

while the least respondents were between 55 and 59 years old. This implies that most of the widows are no longer young and vibrant. Notwithstanding, if they possess adequate capacity and skills, poverty in old age would be minimized to a reasonable extent. 561 respondents representing over 50 percent of the population were Muslims while the rest less than 50 percent belong to other religions : Christianity, Traditional Religion and other religions. 67.5 percent of the widows were petty traders while the remaining less than 40 percent were farmers, transporters, artisans and other vocations. Of the 942 widows sampled, 563 widows representing 60 percent of the population had no form of schooling at all. As shown by Table 1 (Panel 3) 52 percent of the respondents earn less or N10,000 monthly. About 22 percent earn between N10, 001 and N20, 000. About 12 percent earn between N20,001 and N30,000. About 6 percent earn between N30,001 and N40,000. Just 4 percent earn between N40,001 and N50,000. While only about 2 percent earn N50,001 and above monthly. The remaining 7 percent were unable to determine their monthly income perhaps due to old age and lack of records to that effect. The finding from Table 1 (Panel 4) where over half of the sample earn below N10, 000 in this current financial economic melt-down further confirms the level of sufferings and poverty experienced by the widows and calls for urgent steps to remedy the situation.

From Table 1 (Panel 5), about 62.4 percent of the respondents had their business/career completely closed down during widowhood as a mark of respect and honour to the deceased irrespective of its economic implications. 14 percent said they had skeletal services and about 16.6 percent stated that they experienced huge financial loss at the demise of their husbands. For majority of the respondents who had their business/career closed down completely throughout mourning duration, this will no doubt aggravates their suffering and poverty since their main source of livelihood is abandoned for widowhood rites.

From Table 2, 63 percent of respondents without schooling affirmed that they were subjected to various widowhood rites such as (confinement indoor, wearing of dark clothings, taking of special baths, eating with separate utensils, and disposal of all items used to mark the end of mourning) the death of their husbands. Only 26 percent of those with primary education affirmed that they were subjected to widowhood rites while about 10 percent with secondary education also confessed that they were subjected to perform widowhood rites while the mourning period lasted. Less than 1 percent of the respondents with tertiary education shared the same opinion. Of those who stated that they were not subjected to widowhood rites, 56 percent had no schooling, 23 percent had primary education, just about 14

percent had secondary education while, less than 10 percent which accounted for the least had tertiary education. Only few widows were exempted from performing widowhood rites due to old age, child birth and other disclosed reasons. Respondents without any schooling account for the highest population of about 60 percent as shown in Table 1.

Table 2 clearly shows that there is a relationship between the highest level of education attained and widowhood rites performed among the local group. The highest level of respondent's education determines the type of widowhood rites performed. As revealed by this study also, widows without schooling are more than those with one form of schooling or the other. Perhaps, their lack of formal education or schooling makes them vulnerable to the dictates of traditional widowhood rites.

## **MAJOR FINDINGS**

1. Widows above 70 years old account for majority of the population with the mean age of 55 years. This finding shows that widowed women in old age are more in the entire sampled population.
2. Most of the widows lacked capacity for skilled employment thus they resort to petty trading which require little or no formal schooling to earn a living. As revealed by the study, more than half of the population are petty traders
3. A little over 50 percent earn a monthly income of less than N10,000.00 with the current inflationary trends and rising cost of living across the globe, one wonders what difference N10,000 monthly income would make.
4. The absence of schooling for about 60 percent of the widows is very disturbing. Inability to read and write in the 21st century is a big challenge which hampers acquisition of skills required to survive in the globalization era. Much more, the widows cannot maximize their potentials in the face of social change sweeping across the globe in recent time. This view is captured by Gbadamosi (2007) when he stated that "education is a social process in capacity building and maintenance of society since creation.
5. The highest level of education attained by widows influences the widowhood rites performed. As shown in Table 2 (Panel 4), respondents without schooling were far more in terms of subjection to widowhood rites. This findings also reveals that, widows of all educational categories and those without schooling are subjected to widowhood rites among the Awori even though those without schooling seemed to be at the receiving end more than their counterparts with some level of education.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on findings in this study, the following recommendations are hereby suggested to bridge the existing wide gap in capacity building among widows and women in general :

1. The fact that most widows sampled in this work are no longer young and vibrant due to old age implies that, formal means of education to enhance capacity development is not feasible. Against this background, we recommend budgetary allocation to cater for widows welfare in form of monthly stipends as is currently practiced in some Western societies. This to our mind will bring relief and provide succor for the aged widows. Similarly, Government, NGOs and other stakeholders could assist to empower the young widows by providing jobs especially for those employable and vocational training for easy access by the affected widows will make much difference.
2. Quality education cannot be compromised in this current era of advance technology. "To cope with the changing realities and uncertainties of human life, education has been a weapon with which to equip the people to acquire relevant knowledge, skills and habits for surviving in the modern world" (Oduolowu, 2003). The need for sound quality education especially for the girl child cannot be over-emphasized. Failure to do so, will mortgage the destiny of the younger generation. However, non-formal means of education: seminars, work shops, talk/film shows in the local language of the people to disseminate new information, knowledge, and requisite skills in areas of farming and trading for widows engaged in such ventures is crucial. Trainings on improved seedlings, fertilizer application, and new farming techniques for the farmers for higher outputs could be organized for widows in the agricultural sector. For those engaged in petty trading, accessibility to credit facilities through established micro finance banks with minimum bottlenecks will motivate the widows.
3. Designated data centre at every Local Government Areas (LGAs) across the country for collection, collation and compilation of widows' statistics is highly recommended to facilitate planning for widows capacity building and policy interventions that will alleviate the current poverty situation of the teeming number of widows in various societies. Non availability of such center will jeopardize any meaningful effort or step toward achieving the needed capacity building for widows and women in general.
4. Universities and other academic centers on their part can provide formal training and certification opportunities for interested widows and women

with a view to bring a new ray of hope to this segment of the population. They can also engage in both applied and basic researches that address the multifarious plight of widows in the society. Through the Entrepreneurship Development Studies (EDS) platform of some Private Christian Universities such as Covenant University Ota whereby vocational training skills are acquired on soap making, fish farming/production, snail, and grass cutter rearing as well as . The widows without schooling can benefit from periodic training, seminars and workshops for their economic empowerment and sustainable national development.

5. Finally, grant makers especially foundations and government organizations be it local or foreign should be more proactive in the quest for capacity building either through their grants or by offering training, consulting and resources to the down trodden widows. There is a need for a sense of urgency for intervention considering the alarming rate of widows without financial capabilities and capacity building as revealed by this study.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The essence of capacity building for all citizens especially widows irrespective of age category cannot be over-emphasized in this modern age of technological advancement. Death is often described as one inevitable end of every living being. Thus the increasing number of widows in every society must not be left without adequate measures in place to bring succor to the living in terms of capacity building to empower this disadvantaged group economically. The living must continue to live even after the demise of their spouse rather than living a life of regrets, perpetual lack and want. Its time for widows to come out of their shell to express themselves in this ever changing society where skills and capacity is essential for quality living. The observed silent and hidden position of women and widows especially in capacity building will become a thing of the past if their potentials and skill are properly developed and harnessed. The era of complete house wife is over. Women should take their destiny in their hands. Participate actively in skill acquisition for their economic independence and total freedom from lack and poverty.

With the roles of some NGO's in capacity building for widows critically examined in this paper, much is yet to be achieved considering the increasing number of widows at the grass root who are still wallowing in abject poverty and want. In addition to the efforts of government, NGO's and other stakeholders, it becomes imperative for widows to rise up to the challenges ahead of them irrespective of



age, religion and socio-cultural background.

This paper concludes that, as much as observance of widowhood rites is mandatory for both educated and uneducated widows as revealed by this study, more energy should be channeled towards improving the socio-economic statuses of widows through capacity building at various levels. Most importantly, capacity building should be user friendly with local contents for easily accessibility of the target population.

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