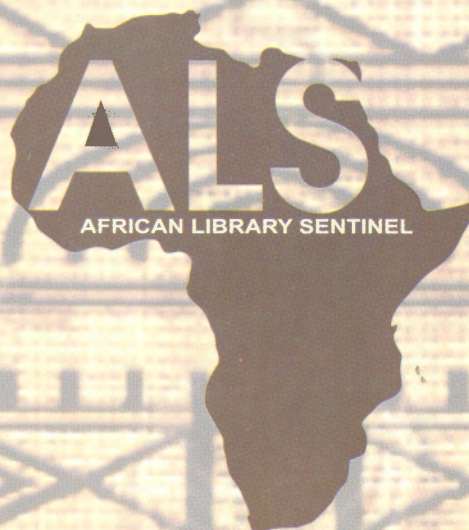


# AFRICAN LIBRARY SENTINEL

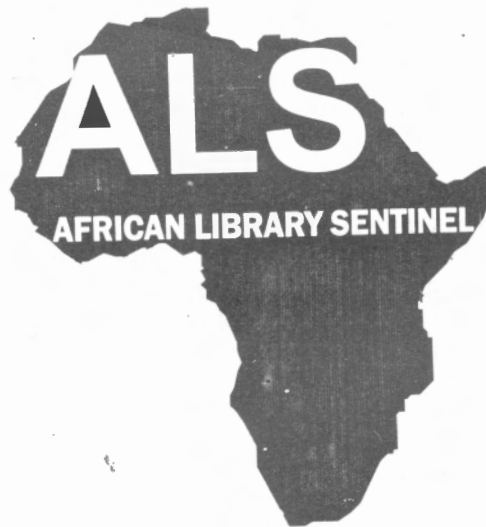


A Journal of Library and Information Science  
A bi-annual journal on practices and research in library and  
Information science in Africa



**AFRICAN LIBRARY SENTINEL  
(ALS)**

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Articles that are accepted for publication should be written in English Language and must not have been published elsewhere. All articles should be typed on font 12 using Times New Roman and should not exceed 15 double – line spaced pages. The size of the page can either be A4 or 8.5 × 11 inches. All papers for submission should bear the title, author(s), and affiliation(s), followed by the abstract. A corresponding soft copy of the work should accompany the hard copy or be sent as an attachment by e-mail.

### Reference Guidelines

All references should be listed alphabetically at the end of the paper (use latest edition of APA format).

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## EDITORIAL

On behalf of the Library and Information Science Research group, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, it is my pleasure to present the vol. 2 no. 2 of the African Library Sentinel. In line with the objectives of this group, this journal is aimed at keeping Librarians and other library stakeholders abreast of new developments in the field and current issues in the profession especially in the information age.

We also wish to express our gratitude to our consulting editors who are eminent Librarians and educators such as: Prof. Afolabi M. Dept. of Educational Technology and Library Science, University of Uyo; Prof. Dike, V. W. Department of library and information science, UNN; Prof. Anyakohà, M. W. Nnamdi Azikiwe Univeristy, Awka; Prof. Ochogwu, M. Benue State University, Makurdi; Prof. Ajibero, M. Kogi State Poly, Kogi; Prof. Omekwu, C. O. Nnamdi Azikiwe Library, UNN; Dr. (Mrs.) Ezeani, C. N. Nnamdi Azikiwe Library, UNN; and Dr Philip Akor, Department of library and Tech. Fed. Univ. of Technology, Mina. We also wish to thank the various authors for their contributions to professional literature.

This issue (vol. 2 no. 2) is focused on the theme: University library resources and services. This decision was taken due to the significant role of University libraries in the enhancement of teaching, learning and research role in African societies. In line with this focus, the authors of these articles explored this theme from different perspectives.

It is therefore our pleasure to invite our readers to use this opportunity and explore the theme of this issue further. Moreover, we use this opportunity to enjoin them to contribute to the future issues of this Journal through their articles and critiques.

Dr. Victor N. Nwachukwu  
(Editor-in-chief)



## CURTAILING HARMFUL WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES IN NIGERIA: THE LIBRARIAN'S INFORMATION TOOL AS A VERITABLE STRATEGY

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examined the librarian and use of information as a tool in curtailing various harmful widowhood practices in Nigeria. Prominent among these practices are sitting and sleeping on the floor, shaving of hair, drinking the water used in washing corpse, sleeping with corpse and jumping over corpse among others. Widows adhere to these practices to preserve tradition, as a proof of innocence and to attract love from dead husband and relations. Effects on widows range from psychological to health challenges, poverty and death. The paper further discusses information as a tool that the librarian can implore to bring such harmful practices to the fur, inform widows about their rights, including various non-governmental organizations interested in their affairs and to educate the perpetrators on the evil effects of such practices. It concludes by advising the Ministry of Women Affairs to encourage the formation of Widows' Association as a way of creating widows' visibility. The Government is also enjoined to use its position to protect Nigerian widows from molestation in the name of traditional practices.*

**Keywords:** widowhood practices, information tool, Nigeria

### INTRODUCTION

Widowhood is a known situation faced by many women today and there has been an increasing rise in the number of widows in Nigeria. It is obviously not an interesting phase of life and in some cases even the young women go through it and struggle to survive despite the sad situation (Porcino, 1985). Sandyn (2001) in the



United Nations Publication, *Women2000* observed that widows are usually given little or no attention in many developing countries. They are painfully absent from statistics and omitted from the multitude of reports on women's poverty, development, health or human rights and are oftentimes treated as the invisible group of women". It is of necessity to note here that in most developing countries, widowhood is also being experienced by young women unlike in most developed countries where the portion of widows are mostly the old and aged women (Sandys, 2001). It is pertinent to note that poor economic conditions in developing countries, cultural beliefs, low level of technological advancements and development are some of the reasons why young women become widows in developing nations

A widow is simply a woman that has lost her husband as a result of death but has not remarried. The Webster's New Explorer Encyclopedic Dictionary (2006) defines widowhood as the period during which a woman remains a widow. These categories of bereaved women go through emotional trauma, loss of hope, loss of appetite, shock, withdrawal etc.

The population of widows in African countries is quite large due to the fact that about 67% of women outlive their husbands (Fasoranti and Aruna, n.d., Heroy, 2009) and these widows are neglected and given no attention in their communities. In most African countries, they are treated with disdain and as second class citizens. The practices meted on widows by some communities in Nigeria can simply be described as 'harmful' and therefore requires attention. Widowhood practices inherent in Nigeria include crying aloud in the morning, sleeping with husband's corpse, sitting on the floor, eating from broken plates among others. These demeaning acts could be attributed to various reasons such as the cultural beliefs in these African communities, lack of knowledge or ignorance on the rights of widows, harsh traditions and lack of information about the existence of organizations readily available for the protection of widows' rights. Harmful practices subject widows and their children to suffering and poverty even when their late husbands have enough wealth for the widows well being. Gruesome practices which widows go through also result in health challenges and can lead to death.

Information is a veritable tool required by all individuals to enjoy life. Availability or lack of useful information either makes or mars the lives of individuals. Acquisition and dissemination of information on various widowhood practices in Nigeria deserve to be accorded serious attention. Widows, non-governmental agencies, policy makers, and even the perpetrators of these inhuman practices all need information to ensure that these practices become history in our nation. Olabisi (2001) maintains that reliable information is the cornerstone for building the awareness, expertise, and practical strategies necessary to improve the world. To this effect, the librarian has a great role to play towards the acquisition,

preservation and dissemination of information necessary for eliminating inhuman practices which have always posed treats to the whole lot of Nigerian widows. This work is therefore being carried out in order to:

- identify various kinds of inhuman practices meted out to Nigerian widows.
- find out the effects of such practices on the widows
- Ascertain the reasons why Nigerian widows comply with these inhuman practices
- discuss the various ways through which the librarian can help in eliminating these practices through information provision

### Literature Review

Effah-Chukwuma and Osarenren (2001) defined a widow as a woman married to man under the statute, customary law or Islamic law, who has the misfortune of losing her husband through death. In a similar vein, Abolarin (1997) sees widowhood as the state of mourning the loss of one's husband or wife through death. He noted that the stress of widowhood is as real as those of loneliness and divorce. Tei-Ahontu (2008) citing the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa defined harmful traditional practices as "all behaviors, attitudes and/or practices which negatively affects the fundamental rights of women and girls, such as their right to life, health, dignity, education and physical integrity."

In Nigeria, women and children are the groups usually affected by harmful traditional practices. The various geo-political zones have diverse widowhood practices though in the South-South zone of Nigeria tends to be on a low tone (Effah-Chukwuma, 2009). Olakitike (2009) avers that widowhood practices which vary from one community to the other is a violation of woman's human rights and women go through them without protesting because of their state of shock and grief. Oyeniyi (2010) quoting Talbot (1926) and Basden (1966) maintains that in several ethnic groups in Nigeria, widows wail several days both before and after the interment of their husbands and such wailings were even supervised by female members of their husbands patrilineage. Oyeniyi (2010) quoting Talbot (1926) still maintains that in Efik and Ibibio communities, masquerades administer beatings of such widows whose wailings were adjudged to be inadequate. Heroy (2009) observes that in some other areas in the country, the widow is confined to a particular room for at least one year, she is made to look unattractive by scrapping her hair which is the glory of the woman, she is also forced to wear black or white clothes, cry continuously, wash herself in the stream, she is also not free to exchange handshake for whatever reason with anybody not even her family members.

Yvonne and Browning (2002) expressed that widows experience a lot of grieves, mood changes, obsessive thoughts and disorientation. Onadeko et al. (2002) in their study on *Problems of Widowhood* found out that widows encounter various problems such as financial, poor housing, poor social interactions, etc. He noted that 69% of the widows in the South Western part of Nigeria experience financial and economic problems, 41% of them go through depression, 55% go through the problems relating to the absence of will from their husbands which always results in loss of properties, etc. Many of these widows go through financial problems since some are housewives who were dependent on their husbands for every need. In developing countries many bereaved women are not well educated and are therefore not gainfully employed, they engage in menial jobs. It is no news that widows in various developing countries and communities are regarded with disdain and ignominy; they are treated with little or no respect (Oniye, n.d.). This act could be accredited to the cultural beliefs that women are meant to be treated as lower citizens. Babangida (1988) maintains that sometimes these special set of women are regarded as the members of the wretched of the earth

Heroy (2009) also notes that widows are left with little or nothing to cater for themselves and their children and in the long run these women end up homeless and malnourished. Kantoyok (2000) observes that in the Northern part of Nigeria, widows are confined within the house since tradition sees them as defiled and unclean and their interacting with others capable of contaminating them. In some peculiar situations, the male members of the husband's family also meet to decide who will inherit her, and in most cases it is usually the eldest brother of her late husband. Widows go through series of gruesome rites all in the name of culture even though at this phase of their life they need love and care more than ever. Ironically, some of them are not even allowed to eat nourishing food like meat, fish, pounded yam etc.; and the men are not made to through these life threatening acts in situations when they lose their wives. (Effah- Chukwuma and Osarenren, 2001). This is obvious discrimination and inequality shown to the women.

Tei- Ahontu (2008) noted some justifications made for the widowhood rites being carried out. Some of the reasons are explained thus: proof of innocence, fear of sanctions, obedience of traditional practices, and attraction of blessings from the dead spouse. In a similar view, Oyeniyi (2010) observed that reasons given for widowhood practices includes the proof of the fact that such widows have no hand in their husbands' death but wonders why men do not undergo such practices also to prove innocence of the death of their wives.

The availability of information will however create awareness which will in turn help in eliminating these inhuman excesses meted to Nigerian widows. Fasoranti and Aruna (n.d) quoting Afigbo' (1986) posit that widows constitute a large

proportion of the adult female, yet systematic investigation about them is missing resulting in scanty pieces of information on widowhood. Fenner (2002) observes that while a librarian must be aware of content, knowing what it is and where to find it, his or her chief concern is with the presentation of content. The librarian thus has a duty to make available the information acquired on this issue to those expected to benefit from it. Provision of quantitative and qualitative information will help to inform as well as guide policy makers and planners. There is availability of more data in developed countries than for the less developed countries (Targets and indicators, 2000). There is therefore need for the librarian to use his skills in information generation and dissemination to fill the gap existing in information on widowhood practices since Owen (2000) identifies a lack of reliable hard data as one of the challenges which influence policies and programmes that address the situation of widows.

### **Types of Widowhood Practices in Nigeria**

- Eating without washing hands
- Early morning crying in the market
- Shaving of hair
- Deprivation of access to property and inheritance especially where the widow does not have a male child
- Shabby dressing

Other types of practices according to Effah-Chukwuma and Osarenren (2001) include

- sitting and sleeping with the corpse,
- sitting and sleeping on the floor,
- drinking of water used to bathe corpse
- jumping over the corpse,
- eating from a broken plate

### **Effects of Harmful Practices on Widows**

**Psychological Problems:** The various practices associated with widowhood have inherent effects on widows. These include depression, bitterness, stress and fear of the future. Yvonne and Browning (2002) maintained that these periods of mourning by the widows are characterized by feelings of depression, mood changes, disrupted sleep patterns, obsessive thoughts and disorientation. After going through these practices, the lives of widows are shattered and it takes them several years to pick up the pieces of their broken lives and continue with their future.

**Poverty:** In some communities, widows are deprived of their husband's property. Effah- Chukwuma (2001) noted that besides the physical maltreating of these widows, some of them are also deprived of the right and access to property and financial resources. This punishment is meted more on widows who do not have male children for their late husbands. In some cases, widows are evicted from their family houses. In such cases, widows and their children suffer untold hardships which often result in the children being withdrawn from school or engaging in hard labour in order to sustain their education. Only unique in-laws take care of the widows and their children.

**Health challenges:** Several of the practices undergone by widows are unhygienic and constitute hazards to health. Eating without washing hands, drinking water used in washing corpse, sleeping on the floor and being forced to marry their late husbands' relations who could be secret carriers of diseases all constitute emotional and physical health hazards. Ibekwe and Ibekwe (2010) observe that forcing widows to marry their husband's kinsmen is an unhealthy practice which could be associated with HIV/AIDS transmission.

**Death:** In extreme cases, harmful traditional practices meted on widows can result in sudden death. Widows pass through several kinds of trauma in the name of observing certain instructions from their husbands' relations. Such treatments as rolling on and sleeping on the floor can weaken the bones while drinking water used in washing corpse can result in diarrhea and infections of organs of the body. This can result in death. In such cases, the relations of the dead link the widows' death to the fact that they are responsible for their husbands' death. Nzewi (1981) observes that the death of a widow during the one year period of mourning was perceived as a clear evidence that she was responsible for her husband's death; but the death of the widow is most times as a result of the trauma she is made to go through.

### **Reasons for Compliance**

**Preservation of Age Long Tradition:** widows carry out these rites no matter how discomfoting it may be to them because they see it as part of the traditional practices which must be fulfilled. Traditional practices are held with high regard and no responsible citizen will want to default.

**Attraction of Love and Respect from In-laws:** another justification for carrying out some of these practices is the blessings and love that may come from the in-laws or the departed husband; it is viewed as a time to show the love and respect that she has for her late husband's family. Tei- Ahontu (2008) maintains that this sensitive

period is a time where friends, loved ones and family show love and respect to the departed soul and his family. Some of these widows comply with the practices so that they will in turn receive unquantifiable blessings from their departed ones and his family members.

**Self Justification:** widows are made to believe that if they do not carry out these practices they will be termed as being guilty of the death of their husbands. In some cases the reasons for the death of the husband is very obvious but if the widow desists from carrying out these rites, she will be held responsible for the death of her husband. Widows are therefore left with no option but to carry out the rites as a proof of innocence.

**Fear of Banishment:** Terrible sanctions become the lot of defaulting widows. Such include banishment, death and being ostracized. A lot of these bereaved widows are indirectly forced to carry out these harmful practices because they have deep love for their children and will not want their children to suffer the outcome of banishment or other punishments resulting from their resistance.

**Lack of Proper Information:** Information is power. Most Nigerian widows are ignorant of useful information about where they can lay their complaints when they are unjustly treated. They also lack information on the health implications of these practices and have no idea of their fundamental human rights hence even when these rights are being trampled on, they do not seem to know.

### **Librarian's Use of Information in Curtailing Harmful Widowhood Practices**

Information is a very vital resource in the world today and it could be utilized as a tool for harnessing and disseminating information relevant for curbing several traditional practices inherent in the Nigerian society. The librarian is privileged to have the skills required to acquire, process, preserve and disseminate information. Librarians can act as intermediaries between widows and organizations willing to contribute to widows' welfare. Indigenous communities have indigenous resources handed from one generation to another on these practices. Researchers engage in studies in these areas. Librarians should endeavor to acquire such materials for their libraries. Such information can be uploaded on the library's website. By extension; copies should be made available to organizations and agencies willing to engage in discussions concerning widows. Such information should form the basis for themes of papers for local and international conferences where the issues relating to widows are discussed

Most widows are ignorant of the existence of Non-Governmental Agencies interested in their well being. Lack of awareness of their rights as widows also

contributes to adherence to gruesome treatments meted to them. It therefore behooves the librarian to provide information capable of creating awareness and getting widows informed about the names and addresses of Agencies capable of intervening in issues concerning them. Anasi (2005) posits that the transformation of women folks from age-long state of servitude, impoverishment and marginalization cannot be conceived without harnessing available information sources. This can be done through the compilation of directories of such agencies. The directories can be deposited in the Agencies' liaison offices in the communities where they exist. The librarian should acquire information required to enlighten members of local communities who happen to be the perpetrators of this evil. They need to be informed of the effects of wicked practices on widows which include health challenges, poverty, death etc. It is also of a necessity that librarians acquire information resources on the rights of widows and make same available to the community leaders who should in turn communicate same to the members of their community. The librarian should be mindful of the fact that most members of the rural community are not educated. As a result, it is needful that relevant information meant for various communities are repackaged in form of handbills, cartoons, documentaries, talk shows, etc. This will enhance easy understanding of the information contained therein. The librarian should ensure that the language of the repackaged information is in their local dialect for proper understanding. Such will help inform community members that widows are human beings whose rights should not be trampled upon.

Through the provision of relevant information, capable of awakening and re-awakening thoughts, widows will become aware not only of their rights but of the need to create avenues where they can deliberate on issues concerning them. Widows could be prompted to form small groups through which they can voice out their problems by themselves, since he who wears a shoe knows where it pinches. United Nations (2001) observes that the richest source of information comes from the widows themselves, and a wealth of narratives materials exist within many traditional communities, gathered through small groups of widows. The librarian can then package information got from individual widows. Copies should also be kept in libraries for consultation by researchers. This will bring harsh practices peculiar to specific communities to a limelight.

The government is in charge of development of policies on different issues concerning its citizens. It has the duty therefore of developing policies for the protection of the various rights of widows. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights defined such Rights as "the rights inherent to all human beings, whatever our nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status". These rights as noted by the UN OHCHR should be universal, inalienable, interdependent and indivisible.

Tei-Ahontu (2008) noted that “human rights should be applicable to everyone without limitation, equally applicable cutting across every part of the world. The onus lies on librarians to acquire, process and disseminate relevant information to policy makers both in print and electronic formats. Such could be done through selective dissemination of information or by preserving such information in libraries and creating awareness services to the intended body of policy makers meant to be served by such resources. Ajibero (1993) concurs to this idea by maintaining that information is data of value in planning, decision making and evaluation of programmes

In Nigeria, these practices could also be curbed through the organization of seminars, workshops, conferences, etc. Participants should be drawn from different strata; widows, librarians, traditional rulers and representatives from various indigenous communities. The outcome of these regular conferences will provide enough information that will help reduce these harmful acts. Papers presented should be preserved in libraries while the communiqué be disseminated through various media for the consumption of all.

Traditional practices were handed over to members of the communities from one generation to another without provision for constant review. There should be a proper procedure for the review and amendment or complete eradication of these laid down traditions where need be. Human consciousness is needed for a change in practices that are dehumanizing especially, especially those against women. Librarians should be able to harness relevant information from various information sources available in the library for the modifications of traditional practices. They should also participate in activities geared towards sensitization and creating awareness on the need for abolishing wicked widowhood practices

Information awareness should be used as a strategy to encourage women to cry out against such practices since it could be their turn in future. The men should also speak against these practices, knowing that their wives and children will also be subjected to health and mental torture in the name of widowhood rites if the men die in future.

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Harmful widowhood practices are threats against humanity. All hands should be on deck to ensure that these practices are eliminated or at least reduced to the barest minimum. Apart from the vital place of information, the Ministry of Women Affairs stands in a good position to use its good office in reducing these practices to the barest minimum. This ministry should encourage the formation of



widows associations so as to create visibility for them. Through such associations, widows should be able to appeal for intervention and assistance. The government who is charged with the responsibility of protecting its citizens should also ensure that adequate sanctions are put in place to safeguard widows from wanton abuses in the name of traditional practices.

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