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# Assessing Widowhood and Widowerhood from the perspective of Annang Ethnic Nationality of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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## Abstract
Widowhood is the transition from being married to either being a widow or widower. A widow is a woman who has lost her spouse or partner by death and usually has not remarried, while a widower is a man who has lost his wife, and in the like vein, has not remarried. This study explored specifically, the effects of the barbaric/anachronistic rites of passage performed on widows, on their health, the implications and its effects on the individual and the society at large. Literature was reviewed and liberal feminist theory was used. The study adopted a descriptive research design, and responses from the three villages; Ikot Idem Udo, Ntong Uno and Ikot Ukpong, in Obot Akara Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria were used to describe/generalize the entire study population of Annang Community. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The sample size consisted of 280 respondents. Findings from the study revealed that widowhood rites have adverse effects on the health of these widows and society as a whole. The study recommended laws should be constituted against these practices and severe penalties attached to defaulters, and that spouses should always draw up their last will, while alive.

**Keywords**: Widowhood, widowerhood, Annang ethnic nationality, customs and tradition.

## Introduction
A widow, often referred to as, *Ebeakpa* in the Annang community, is a woman whose husband has died, so far as she remains unmarried. She ceases to be addressed as such, once she marries again. This is only true, only when the woman chooses not to remarry and remains single for the rest of her life. The dictionary definition of a widow is simply, a woman whose husband is deceased, but the biblical definition sees a widow as a woman, who deserves honour and extra care. The word in the Biblical context sheds light on both her personal experience and social plight. Weeping (Job 27:15; Psalm 78:64), mourning (2 Sam. 14:2), and desolation (Lam. 1:1) describe her personal experience after the loss of her spouse. Widows, or wives who were so attached and fond of their spouses, while living together in

marriage, often face depression and may die soon after the death of their husbands, because of the attachment/affection they had for each other, and loneliness, the vacuum has created thereafter. The period a woman loses her husband and stays single is known as widowhood. Widowhood is a state of being widowed. This widowhood effect increases the probability of the woman, if care is not taken, dying soon after the husband's death, because of heartbreak and torture received by in-laws during or before the spouse's funeral.

Although widows constitute a small fraction of the adult female population in the Annang community, this minute group has provoked thoughts/concern and cross-cultural research, as a result of the the inhuman treatment meted out by some family members to this pitiable group. To some, widowhood is associated with emotions, sadness, pity, poverty, shame, etc; but to others, they are being regarded or tagged as husband killers

"MmeAwotEbe", and as such, they must be dealt with. On the above grounds, therefore, widowhood can either be pleasant/pitiable or painful/contemptible. Widows, the world over, face a lot of unimaginable situations. The stigma, separation rites, and trauma posed on them; by family members, friends, and the society at large, present a double-burdened condition for them.

**Statement of the Problem**

The patriarchal community of the Annang tribe observes a mourning period of six weeks; in which the widow's hair is shaved up to the pubic region. In most cases, a fowl is killed for incantations. The widow has to wear the same black cloth, without a bath, throughout her mourning period. The shaving of the pubic hair and cutting of nails which are buried near the spouse's grave with strict incantations/enchantments to cut off/severe or separate the woman, spiritually from the dead husband, and his spirit, is done after the burial; only when the victim (widow) has been proved not to be responsible for the husband's death. In most cases, especially if the widow had not been of good behaviour when the husband was alive; she is made to face numerous ordeals and ill-treatments. During widowhood, life comes with varied challenges; a reality which led the UN, United Nations to set aside a day every (23rd June), to look at the rights of widows and the issues that affect them.

However, in patriarchal societies like Nigeria (Akpan & Ayinmoro, 2024), and the Annang community in particular, descent is traced through the males with a system controlled and dominated by men. In such societies, women play subordinate and subservient roles. They are not allowed in decision-making; the men play dominant roles and are seen as being supreme in decision-making and other social, cultural traditional, and leadership roles. On that note, widowhood complicates the predicament of these poor women, becoming a widow often compounds the disadvantages. This minute group is marginalized, relegated, suppressed, downgraded, and dehumanized. They are subjected to incessant and diabolic rituals, incantations/ enchantments by brother-in-laws and elders of the late husband's family. These women are doubly tutored, traumatized, and exposed to very unruly treatments which compound their conditions and predispose them to an early grave. However, this study tries to explore some of these ill-treatments meted out to these poor widows in Annang land, their consequences on the health of these women and the society at large, and how they could be minimized or curbed/way forward.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework adopted for the study is the Liberal Feminist Theory. This theory originates from the belief that women are not subordinate to men or only valuable in relationship to men. The feminist theory contends with the traditional belief of the supremacy of the male/patriarchal order with equality, justice, and fairness. The theory sees women's oppression/subordinating as rooted in social, political, and loyal constraints. The theory posits that women's oppression, segregation, relegation, and suppression are rooted in social, political, and legal restraints and repressionWomen exploitation, disempowerment, and subjugation, are caused by men who benefit from low empowerment or disempowered status of women,(Haralambos*et al.* 2008; Akpan &Ayinmoro, 2024). The major proponents of the liberal feminist theory are; Mary Wollstonecraft (1759 – 1797) John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and Harriet Fayliar Mill (1807-1858) Mukherjee & Ramaswary (2007) liberal feminist theory emphasizes, warns, and counter the supremacy of the men folk and captures that, nobody would benefit from existing gender differences, because, both male and female are important and relevant for the development of the society and such, should not be treated differently.

Liberal feminists have focused their attention on "equality of opportunity" between males and females. The theory analyses that their equal rights, privileges, and liberties should be accruable to both sexes sexual differences/variations should be downplayed, and that both sexes should be treated alike. The relevance of this theory to the study lies in the fact that the

liberal feminist theory explains/explores and at the same time, tries to bridge the gap between male and female folk based on the existence of cultural and traditional beliefs of women occupying a less valuable position in the society. This theory accentuates, that women should be accorded the same treatment in society as their male counterparts and that archaic/anachronistic beliefs of women's inferiority should be abolished.

## Review of Related Literature

### Annang Perspective of Widowhood

In some communities in Annang land, especially unenlightened localities, the woman is made to suffer varied rites; ranging from shaving of hair, (even up to the pubic hair) wearing of sackcloth, (black garment), and fasting for about one week, not attend social functions, cannot attend other burials, cannot go to work, church etc., to drinking water used in washing the dead husband's body, *mmongakpoowo*. In this case, the woman is seen as the prime suspect; perhaps according to them the man is being killed because of the well-known "*EkpoNkaOwo*"; which means, the woman has committed adultery which is why, the "gods" of the land/adultery either strikes the husband or one of the children to death. Most families, in Annang land, shun and shame the widow. They are ostracized from the family, driven out from the husband's house and most times, especially when the children are still not up to adulthood, inheritance left for them by their spouses is forcefully taken from them by family members.

Window, in Annang land, is stigmatized and often seen as killing the husband so that she could gain the freedom of flirting with men. The husband's kindred put her through numerous rites/punishments, even when she is innocent. She is stigmatized and continues to remain accused, irrespective of the circumstances/conditions surrounding the spouse's demise. In some parts of Annang land, the wife is made to drink the concoction of the "bath water" otherwise known as *mmongakpoowo*, in most cases, some incantations/rituals accompany the processes, which often, kill the wife, signifying her guilt; it is thereafter, that she could be exonerated from the fact that, she is not responsible for the death of the spouse; and if after a short period, she dies, she is being buried face down in a certain forest. Widowhood rites in Annang land are dehumanizing, demeaning, designative, derogating, and disdainful.

According to Asuquo and Ekanem (2023), to better support the development of human capacity including the windows, achieving higher levels of transparency and accountability is fundamental. As observed by Esara, Asuquo & Samuel (2024), Communal and family conflicts have become a common phenomenon in Akwa Ibom State, these conflicts are mostly ethnic and some are a result of the struggle for land and other properties left behind by the deceased. Esara, Asuquo, and Udoh (2024) suggest that the fight against this crime (suppressing widows and widowers) should not be left to the government alone, rather it should be a collective fight. The general public should provide useful information to the police and relevant authorities through their call lines.

As noted by Esara, Mfon, and Walter (2024), the desire by many to have more power, influence, and control has led to the rise of different crises in families. Esara, Asuquo, and Ekanem (2024), argued that the use of traditional Secret Cults as instruments of social control was a common practice in pre-colonial days in the old Calabar province of which the present Akwa Ibom State was part until 1987 when Akwa Ibom State was created. And this helped in checking the subjugation of widows and widowers. To Udonwa, Effiong, Asuquo & Samuel (2022), it is common knowledge that children of affluent homes have easy access to gainful employment as their parents provide the needed links. Children from poor backgrounds especially orphans are left in the dark in pursuit of a decent job.

Widowhood is often seen as a payback time by the husband's relatives for the perceived insults/wrongs committed by the wife while the husband was still alive. In most

cases, where the husband was the only person earning income for the welfare of the entire family; the wife would be deprived of access to funds as these monies are being considered as their brother's wealth/income *Akukayenekaami* she denied access to the traditional saving system (popularly known as, "*Etibe"* among the Annangs (Mboho, Akpan, Daniel & Ekoriko, 2024). The husband's phone is seized, dissected to see all that had transpired when he was alive, the cheque books retrieved and the whole house ransacked to spot all the important documents. The height of it is always when the woman is locked out of the husband's house to stay with the eldest brother-in-law for widowhood rites and transition to be completed. At this point, the woman's status automatically changes.

In most cases, brothers who were not even on talking terms when the brother was alive, would from nowhere emerge to victimize the poor woman, who suffered with the spouse, while alive. The rise in the level of victimization, especially when there is no written will by the deceased has brought great concern/worry to most. Annang citizens, government, and entire concerned citizens; thank God for the recent introduction of the law of inheritance. In a recent judgment, a high court sitting in Etinan Local Government Area nullified the practice of excluding female children from family inheritance.

Justice Pius Idiong, Judge of the State High Court, while delivering judgment in the suit marked; HET/3A/2019 said the practice of female disinheritance is unconstitutional and "anachronistic, primitive, and unconscionable", adding that it should not exist in 21st century society. Also, in 2014, in a case between OnyiborAnekwe& Anor V. Mrs Maria Nweke, with suit number Sc. 129/2013, the Supreme Court passed judgment in favour of the respondent (Maria) who was asked to vacate her house by her late husband's father because she bore no male child. The appellants had argued that it was customary law in Awka, Anambra State, for the eldest son to inherit the properties of his late father, and in a situation where there is no male child; the property goes to the deceased's father and eldest brother. The Supreme Court held that "a custom of this nature in the 21st century societal setting will only tend to depict the absence of the realities of human civilization". The court ruled that "it is punitive, uncivilized and only intended to protect the selfish perpetration of male dominance which is aimed at suppressing the right of the womenfolk in a given society" The judge, ruled, "one would expect that the days of such obvious differential discrimination are over. Any culture that disinherits a daughter from her husband's property because of God-instituted gender differential should be punitively and decisively dealt with. The court stated that, for a widow to be thrown out from her late husband's house she lived and suffered with, just because she has no male child, is quite barbaric and unheard of.

**Description of the Study Area**

The Annang territory lies between latitude 4.25 and 7 North and longitude 7.15 and 9.30 East (Enang, 1979). They are the second largest ethnic group in Akwa Ibom State of Southeast Nigeria, occupying eight out of the thirty-one Local Government Areas; which include, Ikot Ekpene, Obot Akara, Essien Udim, Abak, Etim Ekpo, Oruk Anam, Ika and Ukanafun. The most often said Adage "AgwoAnangadeagwo Uko depicts that, "they are fearless and fight their enemies as a team. The Annang people have two main seasons; the dry season and the wet season. The wet season starts from April to October, but sometimes extends to November, while the dry season takes from November to March, and may extend in some years to April. The Annang people experience what is called "August break; a period of rain cessation, they also experience what is termed "Ekarika", harmattan.

According to Ekong (1983), vegetatively, the area lies within the rich forest zone which aids the growth of palm trees and other crops. The Annang people speak the Annang Language which can be differentiated by various dialects and tones, accents and inflections. Such as Ika, Abak, Ukanafun, Abak, obotAkara etc. Their belief in deities and gods gives rise to "*AwasiOnyong*" (god of the sky) and "AwasiIsong" (god of the land). The belief in the

Supreme Being termed "Awasi Ibom" is indisputable. The Annang people are bound by the Igbos, which makes them fight several wars against the Igbos to preserve their territorial farmlands (Udo 1983). The Annang believe in (Ifot) witches and wizards, *ndem*, (gods of the river) [ekpoNkaOwo] gods of adultery, (*AboboboEkpo*) Masquerades, etc. They occupy a distinctive area in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria As stated by Udom, Ukommi and Ekanm (2022), the majority of retirees do not feel the impacts of social security, because, their pension and gratuity are being mismanaged or embezzled, and such, most of these retirees end up suffering after 35 [thirty-five] years of active and dedicative services, which of-course if sick, might die of minor curable ailments like malaria or typhoid because of lack of resources. In the the Annang community of Akwa Ibom State, most of these deaths, especially if the victim is a male [husband] are attributed to the woman's [wife] act of infidelity; thus, the wife would be forced to undergo widowhood rites.

Also, a study by Udom, Ekanem and Frank (2023) acknowledged that the outbreak of an infectious disease called Covid 19 had psychological effects on the individual, causing emotional distress, social disorder and death, during and after the lockdown; in that case, most fatalities recorded between 2020 and 2021 was as a result of this outbreak, in contrast, some remote places in Annang land and other places, some people attributed it to witchcrafts and punishments by the gods, 'EkpoNkaOwo'.

The effect of widowhood on the health and mortality rate of widows has been observed to be on the increase, as this sudden demise of their spouses creates a depressive impact on them. Over the years, researchers have examined and confirmed this relationship with so many of them focusing specifically on the negative effects of widowhood on people/women who have lost their spouses. For instance, Claytan (1974) and Levans 2001 and Stimpson et al. (2007) have confirmed this. According to Samuel, Asuquo, Thompson and Nya (2023), the culture of exclusion of women especially widows, in decision-making in a patriarchal society, is posing a great barrier to the pace at which sustainable development through the execution of community development programmes should be achieved. Similarly, Asuquo and Ekanem (2023), argued that government at the Federal, State and Local Governments have prime duties of providing security and welfare to the people as well as widows, but unfortunately, the government on this constitutional responsibility has failed to provide a secure and safe environment for these widows. As analyzed by Ekanem (2023), one of the challenges being faced by a girl child is, child marriage; a condition in which a girl child is given out in marriage at a very tender age, probably, un-educated and very unexposed/ inexperienced to be able to fight back in times of crises/challenges, such as, during rigorous ill-treatment of widowhood rites.

According to Stroebe (2001), the death of a loved one is widely recognized as one of life's most potent stressors, due in part to the associated disruption of social support, life routine, and financial status. According to Ekanem, Asuquo, Ogar and Ofuka (2023), aside from cultural norms and patriarchal arrangements, there are several reasons why the women folk are subjugated, especially widows, these reasons include lack of government intervention, poor level of female education, lower level of female employment, low level of female income, archaic cultural norms and practices, lack of effective laws and policies, lack of access to good information and lots more. Hughes and Waite (2009) demonstrated a greater risk/link between the deaths of a spouse with a widow; though a few studies report no significant effect and the magnitude of the effect also varies substantially. This variability is at least partly associated with individual factors that include; age Johnson et al; 2000, gender, Smith and Zick 1996, regency of widowhood Kaprio, Koskevuo and Rita 1987, and geographical region, Rahman, Foster and Menken 1992. Manzoli et al (2001) reported that widowed persons had an 11% higher risk of mortality when compared to married persons. This is because this group, besides the demise of their spouses, the trauma, fortune, and depression received, afterwards tackle life/physical problems independently without any

immediate source of support and encouragement as before. In times of sickness, they are left alone in the hands of sometimes their little children, who cannot at that age make the right decisions.

Ekanem, Udom, Ukommi and Usoro (2022), found out that, African society being patriarchal relegates women to the background. However, in most households, women also experience double workloads, which hinder their career advancements, making them rely on the fortunes/assets of their husbands, this is because a good environment creates opportunities for empowerment, creativity, initiative, participation, career growth and development (Iheriohanma et al, 2014; Essien & Ekoriko 2020).Peradventure one of the spouses especially the man is dead, given the practice of widowhood rites in Annang land, most women are deprived of the right to inherit the spouse's assets. Mineau, Smith and Beam (2002) found that the mortality risk of widowed men relative to married men, when compared to the same measure among women was 45% higher at age 35-44 but only 12% higher at ages 75 and above; also, Smith and Zick (1996) found that the men's relative risk was 373% higher at ages 25-64 but 22% lower among those 65 and older.

In the like manner, Van Poppel and Joung (2001) found increases in relative risks of 43% among men and 87% among women in the Netherlands between 1850-1859 and the 1960-1969 records. Unexplained increases, ranging from 6% to 40%, have also been found among Finnish men and women between the 1976-1980 and 1996-2000 records. On the whole, separation between spouses due to death renders the other person, susceptible to numerous health hazards and physical problems, which in turn increases the mortality rate of these widowed. As examined by Akpan, Ekoriko, Ekanem and Otong (2024), sexual harassment has pervasive effects on women and the society at large; girls who are raped grow up to be not just women, but mothers, caregivers and national leaders, who however lives with that lasting self-image earlier formed, and may want to retaliate/ revenge on the man when married, either through infidelity or other forms of ill-treatment. Be that as it may, if this happens, and the man [husband] dies, widowhood rituals would be performed on the wife.

As posited by Esara, Asuquo, Ekanem and Etim (2023), a person who is accused of committing a crime ought to be charged accordingly, and if found wanting, he or she is to be punished under the law; but this is never the case in Annang land, with regards to carrying out of widowhood rites, where the victim, most especially, the female, is only assumed/alleged to be responsible for the death of the husband, because of what is called '' EkpoNkaOwo'', and thus, the victim is punished and made to undergo some rituals.

## Methodology

This study adopted the survey research design because data obtained from a small group was used to describe and generalize the entire population of the Annang tribe. The purposive sampling method was adopted to select respondents from the study population. The snowball sampling method was also adopted to ease access to the study population. The population consists of males and females from the Annang community, and the Taro Yamane was used in determining the sample size of 280. The study adopted the descriptive method (simple percentage analysis) as a method of data analysis.

## Results and Discussion

### Socio-Demographic Information of Respondents

As shown in Table I, the majority of the respondents, 180, that is 64.3% were females and 100, that is, 35.7% were males. Analyzing their age, while a few of them 28.5% were between 40-49, the greater number of the respondent, 130, that is, 46.6% were between 50-59 and only 21.4% were between 60-69, while 3.5% were over 70 years. The marital status of the respondents reflects that 120, that is 42.8% the majority were widows, 21.4% were

married 3.5% were singles 7.3% were divorced and 28.5% were separated. In their educational qualifications; 35.7% had their FSLC, 21.4% had their SSCE, 17.8% were holders of teacher's Grade II, 17.8% had NCE and only 7.3% had their first degrees.

**Table I: Socio-Demographic Information of Respondents**

| Variables | Frequency | Percentage % |
|---|---|---|
| Male | 180 | (64.3%) |
| Female | 100 | (35.7%) |
| Total | 280 | (100%) |
| AGE; 40 – 49 | 80 | (28.5%) |
| 50 – 59 | 130 | (46.6%) |
| 60 – 69 | 60 | (21.4%) |
| 70 – above | 10 | (3.5%) |
| Total | 280 | (100%) |
| **Marital status** | | |
| Widows | 120 | (42.8%) |
| Divorced | 20 | (7.3%) |
| Married | 60 | (21.4%) |
| Separated | 80 | (28.5) |
| | | |
| Total | 280 | (100%) |
| **Educational qualification** | | |
| FSLC | 100 | 25.7% |
| SSCE | 60 | 21.4% |
| TGII | 50 | 17.8% |
| NCE | 50 | 17.8% |
| BSc/Bed | 20 | 17.8% |
| TOTAL | 280 | 7.3% |

**Table II: Responses on the impacts of widowhood rites/rituals on the health of the widows and the society at large**

| Variables | Yes | No |
|---|---|---|
| Widowhood rites of passage are detrimental to the health and shorten the lifespan of widows in the Annang Community | 180 (64.3%) | 100 (35.7%) |
| | | |
| Performance of the rite of passage of widowhood has been minimized in the 21st century | 90 (32.4%) | 190 (17.18%) |
| | | |
| Most widows die soon after their husband's death and subsequent performance of the rite of widowhood | 200 (71.5%) | 80 (28.5%) |
| | | |
| Rites of passage to widowhood are also performed to a man when he loses his life | 60 (21.4%) | 220 (78.6%) |

Table II shows that the majority, 180, (64.3%) attested to the fact that widowhood rites are detrimental to health, and shorten the life span of widows in the Annang community, while only 35.7% disagreed with the fact. Analyzing question 2, whether the performance of the rite of passage to widowhood has been minimized at the onset of 21st century; it was realized that, the majority, that is, 190 respondents, 67.8% disagreed, while 32.2% agreed to that assertion. Furthermore, in trying to find out whether the majority of widows die after the widowhood rite of passage, it was realized that the majority of the respondents, 71.5% affirmed this, while only 28.5% disagreed. More so, trying to analyze whether the rite of passage to widowhood is also performed on a man if he loses his wife, it was deduced that, the rite is only applicable to women as the majority 78.6% disagreed.

**Findings**

The study revealed that widowhood in Annang land comes with a lot of ill-treatments, humiliation, subjugation, suppression, oppression, enchantments, rituals, incantation, and pouring of libation to gods and deities. The study further revealed that this rite of passage to widowhood has a lot of negative impacts/implications on the health of the victims and subjects/exposes the widow to torture by evil spirits which in the long run, coupled with the depression of loss, eliminates/kills the victim soon after the spouse's death. The analyzed data revealed that the majority of the respondents that is 64.3% agreed with the assertion that, widowhood rites are detrimental to health and more so, shorten the lifespan of the victims, while only 35.7% disagreed with this fact.

The analysed data also revealed that the performance of the rite of passage to widowhood has not been minimized at the onset of 21st century as 67.8% disagreed with it. Furthermore, it also revealed that most widows die soon after their husband's demise and subsequent performance of widowhood rites/rituals as 71.5% agreed to it. More so, inquiring whether widowhood rites are performed on a man if he loses the partner, it was deduced that this is only applicable to the female folk, as the majority, 220 respondents said no to it.

**Widowhood Rites of Passage in Annang Community**

1. Wearing of black cloth (Sackcloth)
2. No bath for 6 weeks
3. Shaving of hair up to pubic hair
4. Seclusion/separation of the victim
5. Killing of foul and sprinkling of the blood on the victim
6. Pouring of libation, enchantment and incantation
7. Made to drink the "bath water" of the dead husband
8. Shaving of public hair and cutting of nails to bury beside the husband's grave as a sign of spiritual separation.

**Conclusion**

Analysis from the study demonstrates inherent consequences of these anachronistic rites of passage on the health of the women and consequently, its effect on the society at large. The deprivation of these poor women of their spouses' inheritance and subjection to undue torturing and traditional rites, coupled with the depression and trauma of this great loss, predisposes victims to raised blood pressure and other health hazards which in no good time could be responsible for their untimely demise. Findings from this study have also revealed that, despite societies and governments' laws against such practices and coupled with the biblical warnings against the ill-treatment of widows and orphans, and punishment by God attached to it, our society still, in this modernized era, is bent on practising these rites. The worst scenario is when the woman is thrown out of the house she suffered to build with her late husband, probably after being forced to swear and drink "bath water" of the late spouse's

body and some other concoctions, which will definitely/consequently result in her death in no time. In that sense, the study concludes that extant laws/regulations with appropriate penalties attached should be made/constituted to save these poor women from their wicked treatment.

**Recommendations**

Given the findings of the aforementioned, these are some of the ways to curtail or minimize their barbaric practices:

1 Laws should be constituted or enacted against these practices and severe penalties attached to violators of such laws.

2 Both spouses should be able to draw up their testament of will while alive because in most cases, these rituals are performed to find the woman's fault and possibly deprive her of the spouse's inheritance.

3 Men should stop playing "gods'' and do away with this notion of the dominance/supremacy of the male folk, and so maintain equality of sex and not rely on traditional/cultural heritage based on male folk preponderancy.

4 The health and life of these poor women should not be toyed with, but they should realize that this is contrary to the practice of Christianity, we all profess. The health effects of these dehumanizing practices should be considered, and they do not only affect the victim (widow) but the children and the society at large.

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