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Article *in* International Social Work · April 2017

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International Social Work
2017, Vol. 60(6) 1512–1522
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Widowhood practices and impacts on women in Sub-Saharan Africa: An empowerment perspective

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Abstract
Widowhood practices in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have been detrimental to women's general well-being and as such considered a serious social problem. Across different cultures and traditions in SSA, widows are subject to a wide range of plights and reprehensible oppression following the death of a spouse. Many widows face various forms of discrimination, stigmatization, oppression, and deprivation and thus suffer deplorable abuse and powerlessness. While widowhood issues in SSA have recently gained international attention in empirical research, there exists only a paucity of research from a theoretical perspective. This article examines widowhood practices in SSA and their impacts on widows' well-being, including their mental health, through the lens of empowerment theoretical perspective. The article concludes that empowerment theory has the capacity to lift widows out of the shadows and enable them to proactively take more control of their lives and situations.

Keywords
Discrimination, empowerment, mental health, oppression, stigmatization, Sub-Saharan Africa, widow, widowhood

Introduction

Widowhood in all societies in general and in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in particular has been considered a serious social problem that invites urgent attention. This article seeks to examine widowhood practices in SSA. The article is intended to make visible such widowhood practices and their deleterious impacts on widows and to rethink these practices through the lens of empowerment perspective. Across different cultures and traditions in SSA, widows are subject to a wide range of plights and reprehensible situations. Following the death of a spouse, it has been noted that many women face manifold forms of discrimination and deprivation in property and asset inheritance, and suffer deplorable abuse and exploitation at the hands of in-laws (Peterman, 2012). The patriarchal configurations of many societies in SSA conduce to the plights of widows. Since

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such structures tend to favor men, widowers do not have to suffer similar indignities to those widows have to contend with (Edemikpong, 2005). In SSA, widowhood practices seem to be one of the leading causes of widows' mental health issues, psychological depression, and lasting poverty (Edemikpong, 2005).

Widowhood in SSA is predominantly precipitated by the loss of a spouse through the menace of HIV/AIDS (although research has shown a decrease in the epidemic of HIV/AIDS in SSA), as well as armed conflict or other causes such as the Boko Haram violence (Amornkul et al., 2009; The Loomba Foundation, 2015). The percentage of total male deaths by age range in SSA is increasing. For example, between 2000 and 2010 the percentage of male AIDS-related deaths between the age of 20 and 64 had increased to 33.7 percent (The Loomba Foundation, 2015). As of 2015, the global AIDS-related death was 1.1 million, with 330,000 in SSA alone (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS [UNAIDS], 2016) and more men said to be infected with HIV than women (AVERT, 2016). These deaths, more often than not, lead to widows' poverty. Moreover, a widow may end up spending all her family and personal resources on caring for an infected dying spouse and on his eventual funeral after his demise. Consequently, she may be left with nothing to provide for her children's upkeep and education and her own health care (UNWomen2000, 2001).

In many SSA societies, customary rules and hermeneutics of traditional practices continue to take precedence over statutory laws that are in compliance with international treaties. Undoubtedly, some countries in SSA have recognized such international treaties. Such treaties include, inter alia, the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the 1993 International Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, as well as other economic charters on women's rights including rights over matrimonial property (Kafumbe, 2010). Yet, in many of these societies, there remains a yawning chasm between the statutory prohibitions of customs and traditions that are against the dignity and welfare of women and what actually still obtains in practice (Kafumbe, 2010). In other words, many of these societies are complacent in addressing a wide range of widowhood practices that continue to unleash violence and violate the dignity and welfare of widows.

Widowhood has recently gained empirical attention. Notwithstanding the attention that more research has given to the issue of widowhood today, there is still a gap in the literature – specifically, empirical research studies that address or highlight widowhood among women aged 18–50 and how it impacts their mental health. Additionally, this article is intended to examine widowhood from a theoretical perspective. This is in order to conceptualize how widows could be empowered to deal with the adversity and powerlessness that ensue from inhumane widowhood practices. Through consciousness raising, widows would be enlightened to know their rights and to refuse to let themselves be victims of dehumanizing widowhood practices. The empowerment intended here is expected to occur on both the personal and collective levels. This is to enable widows, both individually and collectively, to organize and adopt approaches to take control of their lives and protect their dignity and welfare. This introductory section of this article has silhouetted the contours of widowhood in SSA as a social problem. In the first section, the article examines the cultural background to some of the widowhood practices in SSA. The second section considers some of the negative impacts of widowhood practices on women. The third section explores and conceptualizes the theory of empowerment, and the fourth examines widowhood practices in SSA through the prism of empowerment perspective. Prior to concluding, the fifth section considers implications for future research.

Cultural context of widowhood practices in SSA

For the purpose of this article, a widow is to be understood as a woman who has lost her spouse through death. Depending on the particular culture, widowhood practices may commence from the

moment of the death of the husband in many parts of Africa. Korieh (1996) notes, however, that widowhood practices usually begin only in the wake of the burial of the husband. At any rate, it is the death of the husband that ushers in a period of agony and dehumanizing widowhood ritual practices that many women pray never to see in their lifetime. It is a dreadful time for many women in SSA, a shattering moment that radically alters the social status and lifestyle of African women. In order to fully appreciate widowhood practices in many SSA societies, it is pertinent to look at the worldview that underpins such rituals. This article draws examples from two cultural groups in SSA, precisely from Nigeria and Ghana. The reason for focusing on these two countries is that they are where the present authors could draw the most on the existing literature on the subject under consideration. In addition, the present authors have the vantage point of speaking more about the Nigerian situation since both of them hail from there. Although these two countries may not adequately represent the whole of SSA, they still share certain commonalities (particularly cultural) with many of the other countries in SSA.

One of the dominant cultural groups in Southeastern Nigeria is the Igbo. The Igbo ontology finds expression in the taxonomy of beings that populate the Igbo cosmo-religious universe and the pattern of relationships among them. This cosmology is organized around five components: (1) belief in God called *Chukwu* or *Chineke* – the Almighty or Creator God, (2) belief in divinities known as *Mmuo* – intermediaries (male or female) of God, (3) belief in spirit forces generically called *Alusi*, (4) belief in ancestral spirits known as the living dead, and finally, (5) belief in medicine (Mbiti, 2006; Metuh, 1987; Njoku, 2013). It is believed that this spirit world is intimately connected to the physical and human world. Although the invisible and the visible are distinct, they are inseparably intertwined. Actually, whatever happens in one has resonances on the other either positively or negatively. It is in this sense that the deceased, though physically dead, are now in the ancestral realm (as the living dead). The goal of funerary rites is to accord the deceased a befitting welcome and place in the ancestral world. Otherwise, it is believed that the spirit of the dead will remain restless and may punish the living family members in all sorts of ways until the necessary rituals are performed. This is the context in which to appreciate widowhood practices in the Igbo cultural milieu.

In the face of the death of the husband, the woman is expected to fulfill certain obligations toward him through participation in certain widowhood ritual practices – *Igbankpe*. While such rituals may be intended to bring comfort and respite to the dead, they end up oppressing, exploiting, and dehumanizing the widow. Amadiume (1998) has observed that women who related their experience of mourning rituals for their dead husbands spoke of it as going through hell-fire.

Among the Igbo, the widow's suffering begins as soon as the death of the husband is confirmed. In such a patriarchal and predominantly patrilineal society, women are often viewed as part of the property of the man. Within this cultural matrix, men and women are not viewed as equal partners in marriage, especially under the customary laws. Thus women married under customary law do not enjoy any right to inherit either land or any other property upon the death of their husbands (Arinze-Umobi and Ikpeze, 2011). Since a woman has access to land only functionally as a wife, the death of the man puts her in a state of tremendous insecurity. Hence, customary codes and oppressive traditional practices more often than not position widows for intense suffering.

Not too infrequently, upon the death of the husband the in-laws would immediately demand the widow under oath to furnish them with a list of the man's immovable and moveable property. Ultimately, as Chidili (2005) has noted, they covetously strip the widow of the dead man's possessions and sometimes deprive her of her home, especially if she has no male child. Exploited, stripped of basic assets, and denied rights of matrimonial inheritance, the widow is left to languish in degrading poverty (Edemikpong, 2005; Peterman, 2010). These abuses from in-laws as well as the customary codes that discriminate against women are in stark violation of provisions of the

1999 Nigerian Constitution granted under Section 42(1) on the right to freedom of every citizen from discrimination (Nigerian Constitution, 1999). They also violate the provisions of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (Arinze-Umobi and Ikpeze, 2011). Thus, this discrimination is not only repugnant and unjust and violates equity, but is also unconstitutional and antithetical to life in a civil society. However, due largely to ignorance of their basic rights and lack of economic self-sufficiency, widows are not able to challenge in court these abuses and discrimination that undermine their rights.

In a culture where the principle of cause and effect and where the intercourse between the spiritual and physical are privileged, nothing is taken for granted or taken to be simply natural; every effect must have a cause, including death. Thus understood, the widow is often odiously treated since the proximate guilt of her husband's death automatically hangs on her head until she proves her innocence. Hence, the patrilineal sisters – *Umuada* (i.e. patrilineal daughters of the community who are married outside their community but wield enormous influence back home) – of the deceased husband would subject the widow to agonizing ordeals to ensure that she did not kill their relative. Worst still, if the patrilineal sisters had knowledge of any ill treatment of their brother (relative) from the widow prior to his death, they would avenge such conduct on her during the mourning rituals (Edemikpong, 2005). For example, Korieh (1996) recounted how one widow was forced to undergo such a ritual ordeal. Accordingly, the woman was locked up in the same room with the corpse of her husband for 3 hours just to convince her in-laws that she had no hand in the death of her husband.

In some cultures, certain traditional practices condone widows' maltreatment, alienate them from social interaction, and restrict them from participating in social activities for certain months or up to a year (Dongotey-Padi, 2012). Among both the Igbo of Nigeria and the Akan of Ghana, it is believed that the spirit of the dead husband hovers around to possibly have coital relations with the widow. For this reason, a typical Igbo widow has to symbolically carry a kitchen knife all the time as a defense tool to ward off the spirit of the dead husband (Chidili, 2005; Korieh, 1996). Usually a widow would be compelled to perform obnoxious purification rituals as a way of severing coital relations with the spirit of her dead husband. During the period before and after the burial of the deceased husband, the widow is secluded from interaction with other people (Edemikpong, 2005). Typically, as noted by Edemikpong (2005), during the period of seclusion the widow does not take a bath, sits only on a mat on the ground, and has her hair shaved. After the burial, during the mourning period – *Igbankpe* – which typically lasts for a year or less depending on the region, the widow wears only black cloth. Akan widows in Ghana also believe that even after the burial, the spirit of the dead husband may return to have sexual relations with the widow. Hence, ritual purifications are performed to placate or ward off the spirit of the dead husband, or the widow may become barren for life. In Ghana, widows are also put in seclusion on the death of their husbands (Boateng, 2012; Sossou, 2002).

Widowhood practices and impacts on women

Widowhood has been considered to increase health risks (Aragaki et al., 2003; Bove et al., 2012; Campbell et al., 2001), especially the risk of HIV/AIDS for women (Amornkul et al., 2009; Floyd et al., 2008). A study conducted in Kenya investigated the prevalence of HIV and the associated risk factors among individuals aged 13–34. In the said study, Amornkul et al. (2009) found an association between risk of HIV infection and widowhood, especially among young adult widows. Among the 61 individuals sampled, there is 77.8 percent prevalence among widows (Amornkul et al., 2009). This high rate was pointed out to be either the result of widow inheritance (having remarried their spouse's brother) or from their husbands who died of AIDS (Amornkul et al.,

2009). Dissolution and household disruption ensue among women who are widowed, especially among those whose spouses died of HIV/AIDS (Bishai et al., 2004; Floyd et al., 2008).

Another study conducted by Adetunji (2001) revealed an increase in the number of young widows who are HIV seropositive in SSA countries with a high proportion of HIV positive than those with a low proportion of HIV positive. This may be attributed to young women's lack of autonomy to refuse sexual relationships that could be detrimental to their health. It may also be the result of women being sex workers for economic purposes so as to overcome financial insecurity and take care of the burden of raising their child/children and other family responsibilities (Lowe and McClement, 2010). Research conducted in Tanzania indicated that 25 percent of women surveyed are HIV positive, while men who are widowed are less likely to test HIV positive (United Republic of Tanzania, 2010). In other words, there is evidently a higher prevalence of HIV among women who are widowed than among men who are widowed (Floyd et al., 2008).

Widowhood has been found to have an association with women's mental and physical health issues (Campbell et al., 2001; Coleman et al., 2006; Lowe and McClement, 2010; Luoma and Pearson, 2002; Van De Walle, 2013). For example, it has been shown that a relationship exists between being a widow and mental health risk factors, especially among young women who lost their spouses in the early stages of marriage. Women who, in the wake of the demise of their spouses, are subjected to maltreatments and stigmatizations experience increased mental health issues. Such issues may include depression, stress, suicidal ideation (and eventual suicide), and sometimes posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – where the women will have nightmares through repressing the inhumane maltreatment they experienced during the funeral ceremony of their spouse.

It has been noted that widows also face long-term social and economic adversity (Kafumbe, 2010; Sevak et al., 2003). Widowhood is highlighted to be one of the risk factors in the transition to poverty. Some of the economic adversities experienced by widows may arise from the forfeiture of resources or property belonging to a deceased husband. Thus, this seems to be the major cause of transition to poverty. Sevak and colleagues found in their study conducted in the United States that, although there was a decline in the number of women who became poor after the death of their spouse, about 37 percent of widows transitioned to poverty after the death of their husbands (Sevak et al., 2003). But then, the attention given to the issue of widowhood in most developed countries seems to be different from that in developing countries (e.g. in Africa, Asia) because a widow can get support from the welfare system (e.g. social security, retirement entitlements). Yet widowhood is still highlighted as an important risk factor for low socioeconomic status in the United States (Sevak et al., 2003). Countries in SSA can learn from some of these ways of tackling the teething problems of widowhood.

Conceptualizing an empowerment theoretical framework

To consider widowhood practices in SSA through the lens of the theory of empowerment will be difficult without first conceptualizing the term 'empowerment'. The early definition of empowerment was formulated through the work of Barbara Bryant Solomon who coined the expression 'Black Empowerment' (Solomon, 1976). Solomon not only provided a general definition of empowerment, but also related it to the context of the social problems of the Black community, particularly the powerlessness, discrimination, and oppression experienced by the Black community, which was a specific issue that she wanted to address (Gutierrez, 1990).

In general, Solomon (1976) defined empowerment as 'a process whereby the social worker engages in a set of activities with the client or client system that aim to reduce the powerlessness that has been created by negative valuations based on membership in a stigmatized group' (p. 19),

leading to their systematic disadvantages. Powerlessness as defined by Solomon is the 'inability to manage emotions, skills, knowledge, and/or material resources in a way that effective performance of a valued social role will lead to personal gratification' (p. 16). Thus, empowerment as a process aims at the 'development of an effective support system for those who have been blocked from achieving individual or collective goals because of the severity or complexity of the discrimination they have suffered' (p. 22). The process is therefore geared toward empowering individuals, families, and group/community to take control of their lives and situations.

Furthermore, Solomon stated that for a social worker to assist clients in gaining power, the worker has to help clients recognize the power blocks preventing them from empowering themselves. In other words, their condition of powerlessness calls for consciousness raising (Solomon, 1976) with regard to social, cultural, political, and economic situations as they relate to being purveyors of oppression and discrimination. In other words, for empowerment to occur, the individual/client must develop a sense of self-efficacy, critical consciousness (consciousness raising), and effective action (Canda et al., 2012; Solomon, 1976). In this way they are able to enhance their strength, which will empower them to take action to ameliorate their oppression (Simon, 1994). In recognizing the group, organizations, institutions, and communities, the theory stresses the importance of collectiveness in fostering empowerment in individuals (Cox et al., 1998).

The main strength of empowerment theory is grounded in its heuristic power; that is, its strong focus on addressing issues related to sociocultural, economic, and political situations, specifically as they relate to oppressions and discrimination. Thus, empowerment theory aims at helping individuals and families gain new understanding of the dynamics of oppressions that are perpetrated by social and political institutions through consciousness raising. This provides the pathway for them to come to see the need to develop reflexive action (praxis). In so doing, empowerment theory helps in developing strategies to assist clients in cultivating resources and gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to influence change on both internal and external structures.

Examining widowhood practices in SSA through the lens of empowerment perspective

Having defined empowerment theory, the next step is to examine the issue of widowhood practices in SSA through the lens of empowerment perspective. In relation to widows, an empowerment framework would entail their ability to engage in actions that could help them reduce the powerlessness accruing from reprehensible and discriminatory social and cultural norms as well as oppressive economic policies. It also exposes political inconsistencies that exist in the implementation of laws and customs as they apply to women's rights to property and autonomy (Solomon, 1976). It has been highlighted that the experiences of widows after losing their spouses include, for example, poverty, health disparities, and alienation from social activities for a certain amount of time. In addition, stigmatization is one of the negative valuations visited on widows in many SSA cultures. For example, some widows are often stigmatized as being responsible for the death of their husbands even in the absence of factual evidence or proof. No doubt such negative valuations, in the thinking of Solomon (1976), assault and wound widows' self-esteem.

Within the logic of the empowerment concept construct, widowhood experiences would be considered oppressive and discriminatory. Thus, the empowerment perspective aims at activities and actions that would help the women ameliorate the negative impacts of widowhood. Empowerment entails helping these women to attain consciousness of their lack of power (powerlessness) and an awareness of the forces that perpetuate their powerlessness – power blocks (Solomon, 1976). This recognition of how oppression and discrimination are perpetuated can become an impetus to gaining access to power. The empowerment of widows signifies their

developing a capability to increase their personal, interpersonal, and political power that can allow them to improve and have control over their life situations.

From Solomon's perspective, SSA widows' experiences may be described as being those of powerlessness or power deficiency resulting from inequality in the distribution of power. This stems from lack of an adequate social solution to their situation, which is linked to a complex interrelationship between widows and their relatively hostile cultural practices and/or social environment. An empowerment framework would enable widows to critically understand the relationship between power, powerlessness, and the processes of human development (Solomon, 1976). Acquiring this ability for critical understanding would lead to 'personal, interpersonal, and culture-changing thoughts and actions that together bring about real increases in the personal and political power of women' (Cox et al., 1998: 35).

From the foregoing, it is clear that empowerment, as a construct, suggests that to achieve the goal of ameliorating widows' plight, it is not only individual action, but also participation with others, that is imperative. Other basic components of the construct include the ability to gain access to resources and critical awareness of the factors in the sociopolitical environment that engender powerlessness (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995). On this note, SSA widows need to be liberated from the thralls of illiteracy and ignorance in order to overcome the problems associated with cultural taboos and superstitions. Social education and community enlightenment on a massive scale is necessary to empower women both personally and collectively to be able to take charge of their lives and situations. While widows' and other women's groups should be promoted and encouraged to take positive actions in this regard, widows should be empowered in such a way that they can have access to resources in order to contribute economically and fulfill their social role in society (Owen, 1996).

As has been indicated previously, in the cultural context of widowhood practices in SSA, patriarchal ideology configures unequal power distribution by tilting the balance toward domination by men. On this note, in order to empower and improve the life of widows in SSA, there is urgent need to implement laws that guard against gender inequality and discrimination based on sex. One of the contributions of empowerment theory is its ability to expose unequal power distribution that leads to the powerlessness of minorities (in this case, widows). A number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been established today in many SSA countries. These NGOs provide support systems to oppressed and discriminated women, including widows. In Nigeria, for example, these NGOs have been fighting against any gender-related discrimination against women. Moreover, women's rights groups in Nigeria are fighting hard toward the elimination of gender-related violation of women's rights (Sossou, 2002). Other oppressive practices that inhibit the autonomy and advancement of women include widow inheritance customs, deprivation of matrimonial access to property, maltreatment by in-laws, and so on. All these have tremendous deleterious impacts on the mental health and economic status of widows. But all in all there is an urgent need to reform or abrogate customary laws that infringe on the rights and autonomy of widows. Empowerment of widows has to include the elimination of barriers to their ability to gain access to the courts and justice systems to challenge any abuse or violation of their rights (UNWomen2000, 2001).

From a religious or spiritual aspect, churches and other religious institutions should join hands to fight against these oppressive widowhood practices. One of the teachings of Christianity, for example, is the recognition of the equal dignity of all people created in the image of God; neither man nor woman is more equal than the other (Njoku, 2013). Christianity acknowledges the sacredness of all human life. Consequently, whatever diminishes that life or depreciates human dignity is considered an affront to the divine author. The church should continue to provide spiritual, social, and psychological support for widows.

It is germane to note that one of the challenges that professionals and practitioners will often meet is the uphill task of disabusing the minds of most women who might be afraid of repercussions

from the community. Moreover, the men in society at large might put up a resistance as they may view such professionals as attempting to undermine their cultural moorings in their efforts to empower widows.

Implications for social work practice and recommendations for action

Empowerment theory is known for one of its strengths, that is, its heuristic power. This signifies its capability to reveal the underlying forces (political, social, cultural, economic, etc.) that encourage and perpetuate powerlessness, oppression, and discrimination. In this sense, it helps to lead widows toward attaining new and critical ways of understanding and to proactively work toward overcoming their situations of power deficiency. It has been noted that this is mostly achievable through consciousness raising as well as through both individual and collective actions (Canda et al., 2012).

Theories of empowerment highlight three concepts: empowerment, consciousness raising, and self-efficacy. The concept of empowerment focuses on educating or training the oppressed, in this case, widows, so as to create awareness of social, political, cultural/religious, and economic factors that subjugate them to oppression and discrimination. Therefore, there is a need to provide education and training to widows, specifically young widows, who lack economic power and autonomy as a result of lack of education or lower educational attainments. Not having education, or having lower educational attainment, places enormous limitations on widows' capacity to gain access not only to meaningful employment but also to other economic resources. This lack of education or lower attainment of education equally hinders widows from conceptualizing what their rights are and how to go about fighting for their rights. In this light, there is a need to provide more education and training opportunities so as to increase their self-efficacy, which in turn would help them care for themselves and their families.

Education is vital in helping people understand their human rights and how to navigate available legal resources to assist them in fighting for those rights. Empowering the widows through education and training would also increase awareness of their human rights. Another aspect of the importance of educating widows is to equip them with the knowledge of their rights under the constitutions of their countries as well as according to the definition of human rights in the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Education would equip widows with the requisite knowledge and moral courage to stand up to those cultural practices and social norms that discriminate against, constrain, and disadvantage them (Van De Walle, 2013). Such education would help them to understand how certain cultural practices, other social norms, and even governmental institutions block them from having access to and control over household assets and community resources that they need in order to deal with their adversity. Hence, with this awareness they would be able to influence change on discriminatory customary laws, traditional norms, and government policies that currently prevent widows from taking control of their lives and situations.

It is important that traumatized widows, who literally go through hell due to inhumane widowhood practices to which they are subjected, be adequately rehabilitated and reintegrated into normal social life in the community. Since, on account of the reprehensible ordeal to which most widows are subject, they are at risk of mental health issues, there is a need to improve mental health intervention for widows as a specific target. Family and community are other important factors that perpetrate this barbaric widowhood practices. To effect change in this area, this calls for community programs that help in educating families and community policy political actors (such as the chiefs, elders, leaders, and traditional rulers) on human rights and on how widowhood practices violate the rights of widows and their children. We believe that involving their community actors would put a dent in widowhood practices that violate the rights of widows and their children.

There is also a need to educate professionals and researchers who make efforts in helping widows to deal with their plight. Educating these professionals and researchers who are foreign to the African cultural practices will help them become more aware of the personal dimension of oppression of the widows (mostly those living in rural communities), which may vary depending on ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, and personal experiences of victimization (Cox et al., 1998). In other words, it is about educating these professionals, researchers, and/or practitioners on the dynamics of traditional/cultural practices that subject women to oppression and discrimination when they lose their spouses. Such education would help them conceptualize the relationship between institutional power blocks and widows' adversity.

There is therefore a serious need for a collaborative and concerted effort on the part of all relevant federal and state government actors in developing, implementing, and monitoring policies and interventions that will restore the dignity of widows. Given the fact that in most cultures in SSA women's rights to assets and property are acquired through marriage, they remain contingent on the duration of the marriage. This implies that in the event of widowhood, such rights are typically unprotected and lost. There is a need for policies that ensure the legal protection of widows' rights. Countries in SSA can also learn from other nations, especially from the West where most countries have introduced state-mandated widows' pensions as well as social security (Van De Walle, 2013). The problems of corruption in law enforcement and judiciary ineptitude in many parts of SSA has made matters worse. It is important that existing criminal laws and specific provisions against discrimination based on sex be implemented. Proper dialogue between localized cultural norms and universal human rights should be addressed through public enlightenment campaigning and education.

Conclusion

The issue of widowhood practices in SSA remains a growing serious and odious social problem that requires increased attention from government, NGOs, international bodies, researchers, and academia. It has been the contention of this article that empowerment theory provides the required resources for equipping widows with the required awareness of the forces that perpetuate their situation of powerlessness. Empowerment as a process, therefore, enables widows to ameliorate their situation of powerlessness and deprivation, thereby helping them to gain more control over their lives and social environment. The theory is geared toward lifting widows out of the shadows of penury and alienation, especially as generated from deprivation, stigmatization, oppression, and discrimination. SSA widows, as highlighted here, have been subjected to these situations. Negative valuations have not only stunted the personal and interpersonal developmental processes of widows in SSA, but also limited their ability to perform social roles effectively. Empowerment perspective thus holds enormous potential for the advancement of widows in SSA, particularly because the majority of the widows in this region are predominantly young adults (aged 18–50) who still have a long future ahead of them.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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