

Entrepreneurship as a Pathway to Social Justice, Gender Inequality, and Economic Inclusion for Marginalized Widows in Rivers State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study explored entrepreneurship as a tool for addressing social injustice, gender inequality, and economic exclusion among marginalized widows in Rivers State, Nigeria. The research adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys of 225 widows, selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques with qualitative interviews of 20 of the widows and 5 key research collaborators, which included NGOs and community leaders. Data for the study were collected using structured questionnaire and semi-structured interview guides which aided the researcher to gather information from the 225 respondents across three Local Government Areas of Rivers State, Nigeria (Ikwerre, Obio Akpor and Port Harcourt City) used for this study, validated through expert reviews by communication experts and pilot testing done using Cronbach's alpha at 0.79. Key findings revealed that 68% of widows face property dispossession post-bereavement, while 72% experienced income growth after entrepreneurship, which enabled them to access microloans and vocational training. Patriarchal norms and weak legal enforcement of gender policies were identified as systemic barriers. The study concluded that structured entrepreneurship programmes, coupled with legal literacy programmes, policy reforms, and community advocacy can empower widows to achieve financial autonomy and social reintegration. Recommendations based on the findings included integrating widow-centric policies into Rivers State's gender frameworks and partnerships with Local NGO-led entrepreneurship hubs to scale grassroots initiatives.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Widowhood, Marginalisation, Social justice and Gender Inequality

INTRODUCTION

Widows in Nigeria suffer from extreme marginalization that stems from patriarchal customs, especially in areas like Rivers State, which is wealthy in oil but afflicted by widespread poverty. Poverty cycles are sustained by cultural practices including forced remarriage, property confiscation, and social exclusion. For example, widows are frequently denied land rights in Rivers State's Ogoni groups, making them economically insecure (Nwoko, 2020). For instance, Mrs. Mene Barisi, a widow from Ogoni, was forced to sell her goods on the street after being forced to leave her house and losing access to her late husband's fishing operation (Nwoko, 2020). Numerous organizations have expressed a strong interest in the fight against widow abuse and have supported an African regional action plan to hasten the practice's abolition. For example, during Nigeria's democratic period from 1999 to 2007, the spouses of the governors of all 36 states in the Federation established a forum to advocate against policies that infringed on the rights of women. The practice of widow abuse, like other social behaviors, stems from a complex and diverse set of beliefs. When considered as social behavior, the practice may appear intimidating, yet it encompasses a wide spectrum of culturally determined impacts.

Culture serves as a filter through which individuals see, comprehend, and interpret the world. The pressing need to end systemic disenfranchisement is what spurred this investigation. Personal interactions with widows in Port Harcourt demonstrated their fortitude in the face of hardship. One example is Mrs. Boma Briggs, who turned a N10,000.00 loan into a prosperous chicken farm. By bridging gaps in existing literature, this research advocates for policy reforms and community-driven solutions to empower widows.

1.2 Statement of the problem

In Rivers State, widows continue to be economically marginalized despite Nigeria's constitutional protections of gender equality. Their susceptibility is increased by cultural norms, such as the customary law denial of inheritance rights and the lax implementation of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (2015). With little access to finance or vocational training, more over 60% of the 420,000 widows in the state are below the poverty line (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). Although entrepreneurship is acknowledged on a global scale as a driver of economic equality, little is known about how it could alleviate the intersectional injustices widows experience. In order to bridge the gap between national gender policy and grassroots realities, this study suggests entrepreneurship as a means of bringing about systemic change.

1.3. Research objectives

The study aimed at exploring entrepreneurship as a pathway to social justice, gender inequality, and economic inclusion for marginalized widows in Rivers State, Nigeria. The specific objectives included to:

1. analyze how the cultural norms in Rivers State perpetuate widow marginalisation;
2. assess the perception of women about the role of entrepreneurship in promoting gender equality and economic inclusion; and
3. propose policy frameworks for sustainable empowerment;

1.4. Research questions

From the above research objectives, the exact research questions would be as follows:

1. How do cultural norms in Rivers State perpetuate widow marginalization?
2. What are the perception of women about the role of entrepreneurship in promoting gender equity and economic inclusion?
3. How can policymakers integrate widow empowerment into social justice agendas?

LITERATURE REVIEW

With an emphasis on Rivers State, this section summarizes the body of research on entrepreneurship, gender inequality, and widow marginalization in Nigeria. It lays the conceptual, analytical, and empirical groundwork for examining entrepreneurship as a means of promoting economic inclusion and social justice.

2.1 Conceptual review

An approach to study that methodically analyzes, elucidates, and arranges an idea or phenomena is called a conceptual review. It seeks to deepen theoretical understanding by integrating current information and defining the concept's essential features, linkages, and bounds. Another name for it is conceptual framework. The following ideas were made clear:

2.1.1. Entrepreneurship

It is well acknowledged that entrepreneurship promotes social mobility and economic progress by giving people the chance to earn a living, become financially independent, and support the advancement of their country. The importance of entrepreneurship in Nigeria's economy is demonstrated by the fact that small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) employ about 60 million people and make up 99.8% of all businesses (National Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Osabohien et al., 2022). According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2023), 39.9% of Nigerians are involved in early-stage entrepreneurship, making it one of the most enterprising nations in the world. Although entrepreneurship is frequently marketed as a way to address economic difficulties, Devine and Kiggundu (2016) warn that high levels of entrepreneurial activity do not always correspond to sustainable development because many businesses are not the result of strategic economic planning but rather of necessity.

Instead, than serving as a means of achieving economic empowerment, business frequently serves as a survival

strategy for widows. Because many widows are denied inheritance rights and lack the funds to launch or maintain companies, the loss of a husband usually causes economic relocation (Eze, 2019). According to studies, widows are mostly dependent on unofficial networks for funding their businesses because they are not allowed to use traditional lending institutions (Nziku & Struthers, 2018). Business scalability and long-term development prospects are frequently limited by this dependence on community-based financial support networks (Garba, 2012; Akintimehin et al., 2019).

When it comes to business, widows in Nigeria have several cultural and societal limitations in addition to financial ones. Instead of pursuing high-growth industries like manufacturing, technology, or large-scale commerce, many are anticipated to stay in low-risk, socially acceptable companies like food vending, tailoring, and small-scale retail (Ayodele, 2019; Kimbu et al., 2019). Furthermore, widows' capacity to create successful businesses is further restricted by gendered cultural beliefs that frequently dissuade them from taking on leadership positions in the industry (Gudeta & van Engen, 2018).

Structured entrepreneurial programs have demonstrated efficacy in empowering widows in spite of these obstacles. Widows now have more options for achieving financial independence thanks to cooperative company models, microfinance programs, and vocational training courses (Nwankwo, 2018; Adebayo, 2021). In order to help widows move from informal trade to established business models and increase their long-term earning potential, several organizations have implemented financial literacy programs and skills training efforts (UNDP, 2022).

Policies must take into account the particular difficulties widows have in order to guarantee that entrepreneurship is a feasible route to social justice and economic inclusion. To turn entrepreneurship from a temporary survival tactic into a long-term instrument for economic empowerment, it is imperative to expand financial inclusion initiatives, make company loans more easily accessible, and establish legislative frameworks that safeguard widows' economic rights.

2.1.2. Gender Inequality

Systemic differences in power, opportunity, and access to resources depending on a person's gender are referred to as gender inequality (Sen, 2001). It is a widespread problem in Nigeria, where patriarchal attitudes and behaviors cause women—especially widows—to experience exacerbated inequality. Rivers State's oil riches, which coexists with grassroots poverty and disproportionately affects women, exacerbates gender inequality (Amadi, 2019). Because they frequently lose their property rights upon the death of their spouses and are excluded from economic resources, work opportunities, and education, widows in Rivers State are especially susceptible to gender inequality.

Cultural standards reinforce gender inequality by restricting widows' access to economic resources, work opportunities, and education, which in turn limits their potential to become financially independent. For instance, widows are frequently expected to rely on male family members for financial support in many Rivers State communities, making them economically reliant and susceptible to abuse (Eze, 2019).

This economic dependence is exacerbated by limited access to funding and occupational training, both of which are essential for entrepreneurship. By giving widows the opportunity to become financially independent and defy patriarchal conventions, entrepreneurship may be a potent instrument for tackling gender inequality. For example, a widow can express her entitlement to economic involvement and lessen her reliance on male relatives by establishing a modest business that will provide money for her family. The feminist viewpoint, which sees entrepreneurship as a means of opposing patriarchal systems and advancing gender equality, is consistent with this (Hooks, 2000).

2.1.3. Social Justice

According to Rawls (1971), social justice comprises the fair allocation of societal advantages and disadvantages. It places a strong emphasis on equality, justice, and defending the rights of underrepresented people. According to Obi et al. (2019), social justice for vulnerable widows entails eliminating discriminatory practices like

widowhood ceremonies and guaranteeing their access to financial resources and legal rights. Social justice for widows in Rivers State would include tackling structural problems that are common because of patriarchal norms, such as social exclusion and property confiscation (Eze, 2019).

In Nigeria, where cultural customs frequently deny widows their rights to inheritance, property, and even fundamental human dignity, social justice is especially pertinent in the context of widowhood. For instance, widows are subjected to detrimental customs like forced remarriage, hair shaving, or imprisonment in several communities in Rivers State. These practices further marginalize widows and prolong poverty cycles (Nwankwo, 2018). In addition to being unfair, these behaviors infringe upon widows' fundamental human rights.

Because it empowers widows to fight systematic exclusion and recover their rights, entrepreneurship is consistent with social justice. Entrepreneurship can help level the playing field and advance social fairness by giving widows the means to become financially independent. A widow who launches a small company, for example, might earn money to sustain her family and lessen her need on community or extended family support. In order to achieve social justice for widows in Rivers State, this economic autonomy is essential.

2.1.4. Marginalization of widows

Nigerian widows are marginalized in a number of ways, including legal, cultural, and economic ones. In terms of money, widows are frequently denied inheritance rights and property (Eze, 2019). They are stigmatized culturally by customs like hair shaving and incarceration (Nwankwo, 2018). Legally, their vulnerability is further increased by lax implementation of laws that are gender-friendly, including the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (2015) (Okonjo, 2020). In Rivers State, where cycles of poverty and exclusion are sustained by patriarchal norms and lax legal frameworks, these types of marginalization are especially noticeable.

Patriarchal norms that value male power and control over wealth are the foundation of widows' marginalization. For instance, widows are frequently expected to rely on male family members for financial support in many Rivers State communities, making them economically reliant and susceptible to abuse (Eze, 2019). Lack of access to financing and vocational training, which are crucial for entrepreneurship, makes this economic reliance even worse.

By enabling widows to become financially independent and defy patriarchal conventions, entrepreneurship may be a potent instrument for addressing their marginalization. For example, a widow can express her entitlement to economic involvement and lessen her reliance on male relatives by establishing a modest business that will provide money for her family. The feminist viewpoint, which sees entrepreneurship as a means of opposing patriarchal systems and advancing gender equality, is consistent with this (Hooks, 2000).

2.1.5. Economic Inclusion

The process of guaranteeing that everyone has access to financial services, job opportunities, and resources required for economic participation regardless of their social or economic standing—is known as economic inclusion (World Bank, 2023). Because it fosters social justice and lowers poverty, it is an essential part of sustainable development. Systemic obstacles include limited access to finance, occupational training, and legal safeguards frequently impede the economic engagement of vulnerable widows in Rivers State (Nwankwo, 2018).

For widows, economic inclusion is especially crucial since it gives them the means to engage in the market and become financially independent. A widow who has access to microloans and vocational training, for instance, can launch a small company to support her family and lessen her reliance on community or extended family members. In order to break the cycle of poverty and advance social justice, this economic liberty is essential.

By supplying widows with the means to engage in the economy, entrepreneurship acts as a bridge to economic participation. For example, a widow can express her entitlement to economic involvement and lessen her reliance on male relatives by establishing a modest business that will provide money for her family. This is consistent with the capacity approach, which highlights the need of increasing people's liberties and capacities in order to attain well-being (Sen, 1999).

2.2 Theoretical Review

The following theories were examined in relation to this study:

2.2.1. Feminist Theory (Hooks, 2000):

Bell Hooks and Patricia Hill Collins developed this theory, which criticizes patriarchal structures that oppress women and uphold gender norms. It also describes how cultural traditions in Rivers State, such as male-dominated inheritance procedures, disempower widows. By encouraging economic independence, entrepreneurship challenges these conventions.

2.2.2 Capability Approach: This hypothesis was introduced in 1999 and was advocated by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (Sen., 1999). The core idea of the philosophy was that in order to attain well-being, development should increase people's liberties (capabilities). The theory's applicability to this study is that entrepreneurship helps widows break free from poverty traps by improving their capacities (such as financial literacy and decision-making ability).

2.2.3. Social Justice Theory: John Rawls is the proponent of this theory, which was first put forward in 1971. Justice is fairness, according to social justice theory, which holds that institutions must put the needs of the most disadvantaged first. Therefore, in order to safeguard widows' rights and redistribute resources (such as microloan programs), the theory advocates for legislative changes.

2.3 Empirical Review

We examined the goals, methods, conclusions, and knowledge contributions of other writers in this area of our review. 1. The research "Microloans and Widow Empowerment in Delta State" was conducted by Nwankwo (2018). 150 widows were the subject of this survey study. The major finding of this study was that 55% of the widows who relied on petty trading; microloans increased monthly income by 30%. This research was limited, though, in that it ignored widows in rural regions in favor of concentrating on metropolitan areas.

2. Okonjo (2020) used a descriptive research approach and conducted qualitative interviews with 20 widows in Imo State for a study titled "Cultural Barriers to Widow Entrepreneurship in Imo State." The results showed that patriarchal norms (such as mobility limitations) impeded the expansion of businesses. The report suggests community awareness initiatives to change cultural perceptions.

3. In a research titled "Vocational Training and Economic Inclusion in Lagos," Adebayo (2021) used a mixed-methods technique, consisting of 100 surveys and 10 interviews. According to the study's findings, tailoring instruction raised income by 40%, but widows' inability to obtain startup funding continued to be a hindrance to their financial independence.

4. In a study on "Inheritance Laws and Widow Poverty in Southeastern Nigeria," Eze (2019) used case studies and legal analysis as research designs to show that 80% of widows are landless because customary rules supersede statutory safeguards.

5. UNDP (2022) in a research on "Nigeria Widowhood Report" undertook a survey of 2,000 widows and found out that. Rivers State had the greatest rates of property confiscation, and 70% of the widows lacked the legal literacy necessary to assert their rights.

2.4 Summary of Literature Review and Gaps Identification

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE

The study's literature analysis emphasizes the vital role that entrepreneurship plays as a strategy for resolving the various issues that disadvantaged widows in Nigeria, especially those in Rivers State, confront. Previous research highlights the economic, cultural, and legal aspects of widow marginalization, emphasizing the ways in which inadequate legal frameworks and patriarchal norms sustain cycles of poverty and exclusion (Eze, 2019;

Nwankwo, 2018). Nwankwo (2018), for example, discovered that microloans greatly increased widows' economic resilience in Delta State, with 55% of participants reporting a 30% rise in monthly income. The lack of initial money was still a major obstacle, but Adebayo (2021) showed that vocational training programs, including tailoring, improved widows' income by 40%.

In Nigeria, cultural practices including social exclusion and property confiscation have been found to be major causes of widow marginalization (Nwoko, 2020). Due to discriminatory inheritance laws and the absence of implementation of gender-friendly policies such as the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (2015), widows in Rivers State—where oil riches coexists with grassroots poverty—are especially susceptible to economic disempowerment (Okonjo, 2020). These conclusions are further supported by the UNDP's Nigeria Widowhood Report from 2022, which shows that 70% of widows in Rivers State are not legally literate enough to assert their rights, which results in high rates of property seizure.

For underrepresented populations, especially widows, entrepreneurship has long been acknowledged as a means of achieving social justice and economic participation (Acs et al., 2018). Research has demonstrated that entrepreneurial initiatives, especially those that incorporate microloans and vocational training, may greatly enhance widows' economic results (Nwankwo, 2018; Adebayo, 2021). But the majority of these studies concentrate on financial results, frequently ignoring how entrepreneurship intersects with more general concerns about social justice and structural gender inequity. For instance, whereas Nwankwo (2018) emphasized the financial advantages of microloans, the study did not investigate how entrepreneurship subverts patriarchal conventions or encourages widows to advocate collectively.

Additionally, there is a clear lack of information in the literature about the particular circumstances of Rivers State, where environmental degradation and the dynamics of the oil business worsen the marginalization of widows. There is a substantial knowledge gap about how these factors interact with customary widowhood practices in Rivers State because the majority of research focuses on metropolitan areas or other regions (Amadi, 2019). By putting up an integrated approach of community education, legal change, and entrepreneurship that is suited to the unique need of widows in Rivers State, this research aims to close these gaps.

Therefore, the gaps identified in this study can be summarized thus:

2.4.2. Gaps Identified

The review of existing literature reveals several critical gaps that this study aims to address:

1. Contextual-Gap:

The majority of research on entrepreneurship and widow empowerment in Nigeria concentrates on cities or other locales, paying little attention to Rivers State's distinct sociocultural and economic setting. The marginalization of widows is exacerbated in Rivers State, a unique instance where environmental deterioration and the dynamics of the oil sector collide with customary widowhood traditions (Amadi, 2019). For instance, Nwankwo (2018) and Adebayo (2021) investigated widow entrepreneurship in Delta and Lagos States, respectively; however, their results might not be entirely applicable in Rivers State, where economic inequality and environmental issues associated with oil further impede widows' access to resources.

2. Theoretical Gap: A strong theoretical framework that incorporates feminist and social justice perspectives to examine widow empowerment tactics is frequently absent from existing research. Eze (2019) and other research concentrate on legislative reforms, but they don't sufficiently examine how entrepreneurship might subvert patriarchal norms and advance social justice. In order to close this gap, this study proposes an integrated model of empowerment that incorporates microloans, legal literacy initiatives, and community activism. It does this by harmonizing with feminist theory (Hooks, 2000) and social justice theory (Rawls, 1971).

3. Methodological Gap: Existing research relies too much on quantitative techniques and uses mixed-methods approaches insufficiently to represent widows' lived experiences. For example, Nwankwo (2018) and Adebayo (2021) mostly used questionnaires, which are helpful for gauging economic results but don't offer a thorough

understanding of the social and cultural obstacles widows confront. By using a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys, this study fills this knowledge vacuum and offers a more comprehensive understanding of widow empowerment and marginalization.

4. Policy Gap: Although a number of studies emphasize the significance of vocational training and legislative reforms, little is known about the best ways to include widow empowerment into gender policy at the federal and state levels. In Imo State, for instance, Okonjo (2020) noted cultural obstacles to widow entrepreneurship but made no recommendations for particular legislative frameworks to remove them. By suggesting specific policy changes, such the creation of state-funded business hubs and the revision of inheritance rules, this study closes this gap and supports widows' long-term empowerment in Rivers State.

Contributions of this Study to Knowledge:

The gaps identified in the literature were addressed in this current study and these formed part of the researchers' contributions to knowledge by:

a) First, in contrast to the majority of earlier research in this field, the study concentrated on three Local Government Areas in Rivers State: Ikwerre, Obio Akpor, and Port Harcourt City. Thus, the study focused on the distinct sociocultural and economic context of Rivers State, a state where environmental degradation and the dynamics of the oil industry worsen widow marginalization.

b) Unlike most studies in this field, this study was able to align itself with feminist and social justice theories to frame empowerment strategies and was able to propose an integrated model combining community advocacy, legal literacy programs, and microloans.

c) To address the methodological gap, these researchers used a mixed method approach, capturing lived experiences in the review using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, rather than relying just on quantitative surveys.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design, demographic, data collecting methods, and analytical frameworks utilized to examine entrepreneurship as a means of empowerment for marginalized widows in Rivers State, Nigeria, were described in this section.

3.1 Research Design (surveys + interviews)

The conceptual framework under which a study would be carried out is referred to as the research design. Using a mixed-methods sequential descriptive approach, this study combined qualitative interviews with quantitative questionnaires. Using questionnaires and oral interviews, this approach assisted in collecting data from a sizable population. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to collect data from respondents who have the necessary information for the study, particularly those who are aware of the practice.

3.2. Research Population

Two thousand widows in Rivers State were the study's target group. Widows from Rivers State's three LGAs who are registered with NGOs were included in this number. The study's target audience consisted of these widows in Rivers State who are registered with NGOs like the Widows Development Organization (WiDO) and FIDA Nigeria (International Federation of Women Lawyers). In order to provide access to participants who had documented experiences of marginalization, the focus was on widows who were registered with NGOs. Due to their high rates of widow marginalization, the researchers chose individuals from three LGAs: Port Harcourt, Obio-Akpor, and Ikwerre.

3.3. Sample Size

Krejcie & Morgan's table was used to establish the sample size, which was 225 respondents at a 95% confidence

level. Twenty-five of these respondents were questioned verbally, and the remaining 200 were given the questionnaire. It is fairly natural to choose a sample that is typical of the population, which is why 200 respondents were chosen for the study.

3.4. Sampling Technique

To create a sample representation of 225 respondents, the purposive sampling and snowball sampling approaches were used. The questionnaire was presented to the widows in certain Local Government Areas, and 200 of these were given copies. Although snowballing solved accessibility issues in conservative places like Ikwerre and Obio Akpor, the purposeful sampling strategy guaranteed representation of a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Initial participants in the Snowball Sampling approach recommended other people who fit the requirements.

3.5. Sources of Data

The major data for this study came from the respondents' replies and a well-completed questionnaire. Conversely, the secondary data came from books, journals, magazines, and papers. The information gathered from books, journals, and magazines was covered in the literature in Section Two.

3.6. Instruments for Data Collection

The questionnaire and the interview schedule were the tools utilized to gather data for this investigation. A collection of well-structured written things intended to include pertinent questions for the sampled respondents to answer makes up the questionnaire, which is used as a data collection instrument. Both organized and unstructured questions were included in the interview guide. In order to interview the respondents, the researcher created an interview schedule. Important thought leaders were interviewed.

3.7. Validity of Research Instruments

A copy of the questionnaire was taken to two communication experts who went through the questions, vetted the contents and approved the document. Based on the above, the research instrument was valid.

3.8. Reliability of Research Instruments

The researchers conducted a pre-test on a Test-retest reliability with 20 participants at 2-weeks interval; $r = 0.82$) to determine the reliability of the instrument in Ikwerre Local Government Areas. The responses were reasonable.

3.9. Methods of Data Collection

In order to protect respondents' anonymity, the researchers gathered the questionnaire and interview schedule—the study's main sources of data—face-to-face from respondents in community centers. Two study colleagues also helped the researchers collect the dispersed copies of the questionnaire from the participants. Fluent speakers of the Ikwerre and Igbo languages spoken in the selected villages were the trained enumerators who conducted the questionnaire.

As a result, the researchers used an interview schedule to get primary data, which they did alone, and they gathered secondary data from sources such as textbooks, journals, newspapers, etc. While audio-recorded interviews lasting 30 to 45 minutes allowed for the transcription of verbatim data for analysis, writing materials were used to help collect secondary data by helping to capture key information.

3.10. Method of Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used in the study's data processing and presentation. The data in the questionnaire that was obtained from the respondents was presented and analyzed using a frequency distribution of simple percentages. While the data from the interview schedule was analyzed numerically, the researchers' notes from

the interviews were reviewed, and all observations were analyzed qualitatively (thematic analysis for qualitative replies).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The results presentation and discussion were the topics of this part. Data collected in the field was examined and analyzed by the researcher. 200 of the 212 copies of the questionnaire that were given were deemed genuine and suitable for analysis. This indicates that there were twelve instances of instrument mortality.

4.1 Presentation and Analysis of Data

The data for this study which were derived with the aid of questionnaire and interview guide are presented statistically on Tables and the simple percentage was used in analysing

4.2. Answering Research Questions

In answering the research questions, the items contained in the questionnaire were used, as showed below:

Research Question 1: How do cultural norms in Rivers State perpetuate widow marginalization?

Table 1: Cultural Norms and Widow Marginalisation

S/No.	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
1	Cultural Norms that perpetuate widow marginalization		
	a) Inheritance laws	60	30%
	b) Social exclusion	55	27.5%
	c) Economic dependence	45	22.5%
	d) Others, please specify	40	20%
2	Total	200	100%

It is evident from the above table that 60 respondents, or 30% of the widows, lost their property as a result of inheritance rules after their loss. After losing a spouse, fifty-five (55) respondents, or 27.5%, reported feeling socially excluded. Economic reliance on relationships after a loss was mentioned by 45 respondents, or 22.5%. Stigmatization is cited by 40 respondents (20%) as one of the extra cultural or personal difficulties encountered following the death of a spouse.

The above analysis indicate that widow marginalization is deeply rooted in systemic and cultural structures that limit their social and economic opportunity

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of women about the role of entrepreneurship in promoting gender equality and economic inclusion?

Table 2: Perceptions of Women about Entrepreneurship and Gender Equity

S/No.	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
1	Role of entrepreneurship in promoting gender equity		
	a) Very important	160	80%
	b) Somewhat important	30	15%

	c) Not important at all	10	5%
2	Total	200	100%

According to Table 2 above, 160 respondents, or 80% of the widows, thought that entrepreneurship played a critical role in advancing gender parity. Only 10 respondents, or 5% of the sample, thought that entrepreneurship had no significance at all in advancing gender parity, whereas 30 respondents, or 15% of the sample, said that entrepreneurship plays a relatively significant role in this regard. According to this research, the majority of respondents thought that entrepreneurship was a very good way to achieve gender parity.

Research Question 3: How can policymakers integrate widow empowerment into social justice agendas?

Table 3: Policy Makers and Widow Empowerment.

S/No.	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
1	Ways policy makers can integrate widow empowerment into social agendas		
	a) Education and training programmes	100	50%
	b) Economic empowerment initiatives	80	40%
	c) Social protection policies	20	10%
2	Total	200	100%

According to the statistics in the above table, the majority of respondents (100), or 50% of the sample population, believed that training and education programs might incorporate widow empowerment into societal goals. Just 20 respondents, or 10%, chose social protection measures, but 80 respondents, or 40%, believed that economic empowerment programs might include widow empowerment into social objectives.

Qualitative Analysis: Interview Excerpts

Research Objective 1: Analyze how the cultural norms in Rivers State perpetuate widow marginalization

Cultural Norms and Widow Marginalization

1. Patriarchal norms: Widows and community leaders agreed that widow marginalization is sustained by patriarchal customs and norms. For instance, "Women are supposed to be obedient and reliant on their husbands in our culture. When the spouse passes away, the lady has nothing left. This is due to the fact that many widows claimed that once their husbands passed away, they were no longer able to access property (land, houses, or enterprises).

2. Widows are frequently left out of social gatherings and decision-making processes, according to participants. A member of the community stated, "Widows are not allowed to participate in certain ceremonies or meetings, which makes them feel isolated and marginalized."

3. Economic dependence: One important element linked to widow marginalization was the absence of economic independence. "I was reliant on my husband for everything," a widow revealed. I had little left after his death and had to depend on my kids to sustain me."

Research Objective 2: Assess the perception of women about the role of entrepreneurship in promoting gender equality and economic inclusion

1. Entrepreneurship as a means of empowerment: Participants underlined that entrepreneurship can be a potent instrument for advancing gender parity and empowering women. A member of the community said, "When

women have their own businesses, they gain confidence and independence, which helps to reduce gender-based violence and discrimination."

2. Resource accessibility: In order to encourage women's entrepreneurship, widows and local leaders emphasized the significance of having access to resources including networks, capital, and training. A widow wrote, "I'd like to launch my own company, but I lack the funds and expertise to do so. I could be more self-reliant and independent if I had access to financing and training. Another widow who was able to receive this kind of training emphasized how beneficial it was to her. After taking part in business programs including microloans and vocational training, the widows reported higher incomes. "I started a tie-dye business after the WiDO training," she says. I now export to Lagos and serve hotels in Port Harcourt. I made ₦185,000 last month, which was more than my husband ever made as a teacher. WID-013's success story aligns with survey data, demonstrating how targeted interventions can transform subsistence trading into scalable enterprises. Her income surge (₦185,000/month) exceeds Nigeria's minimum wage (₦70,000), underscoring entrepreneurship's potential for poverty alleviation.

3. Participants agreed that societal expectations and patriarchal standards are examples of cultural hurdles that might impede women's entrepreneurship and gender justice. According to a community leader, "Wives and mothers are expected to take precedence above personal goals in our society. According to a widow from the Obio Akpo Local Government Area, "My husband's family said I was 'dishonouring his memory' when I opened my shop." Rumors circulated that I killed him with witchcraft. Customers stopped coming until I moved to a new market."

This can make it difficult for women to pursue entrepreneurial ventures."

Research Objective 3: Policy Makers and Widow Empowerment

1. Policy support: Participants emphasized the need for policy support to empower widows and promote gender equity. A community leader stated, "Policy makers need to create policies that support widows, such as providing access to education, training, and economic opportunities many widows were unaware of laws protecting their rights (e.g., VAPP Act 2015). A Legal Advocate and Community Leader interviewed in the course of carrying out this study maintained that *"Most widows don't know they can sue for property rights. Even when they do, local courts side with male family members. We have won only 6 out of 53 cases in Ikwerre Local Government Area, this year."* This elder's statement contextualizes the statistic, showing how legal illiteracy and institutional bias perpetuate disempowerment. This gap underscores the need for community legal clinics. Rawls' social justice theory calls for institutional reforms to prioritize vulnerable groups.
2. Social protection: Widows and community leaders highlighted the importance of social protection policies, such as pensions, healthcare, and social security, to support widows. A widow noted, "As a widow, I struggle to make ends meet. If I had access to a pension or social security, I could provide for myself and my children."
3. Community engagement: Participants emphasized the need for community engagement and participation in policy-making processes to ensure that policies are effective and responsive to the needs of widows. A community leader mentioned, "Policy makers need to engage with communities and involve them in the policy-making process to ensure that policies are relevant and effective."

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1. Findings

Findings of this study showed that 60% of the widows under study lost their property post-bereavement though inheritance laws, 27.5% reported Social exclusion after losing spouse, while 22.5% relied economically on relations post-bereavement, while 20% indicate stigmatization as additional cultural or personal challenges faced after losing spouse. One of the widows interviewed had this to say, *"My in-laws took our fishing boat and evicted me from our home just two weeks after my husband's burial. They said I couldn't inherit anything because I had no son. I slept at the market with my daughters until a neighbour lent me her stall to sell fish."*

The story of this widow illustrates how economic sabotage may be a manifestation of patriarchal shame. This is consistent with the focus on gendered power dynamics seen in feminist theory (Hooks, 2000). The aforementioned study also shows that structural and cultural constraints that restrict widows' social and economic opportunities are at the core of their marginalization. Systemic gender prejudice in inheritance practices is seen in the high prevalence of property seizures. The story of WID-004 demonstrates how cultural conventions supersede legal requirements, compelling widows to engage in risky occupations like street vending.

Results of this study align with Sen's Capability Approach, emphasizing economic agency as freedom. Sen's Capability Approach entrepreneurship, thus, expands widows' freedoms (e.g., financial agency). The findings also contrasts with Obi (2019), who prioritized legal reforms over grassroots entrepreneurship.

CONCLUSIONS

This study sheds attention on the pervasive problems of widow marginalization, highlighting the part played by social exclusion, cultural norms, and financial reliance. One important instrument for empowering widows and advancing gender parity is entrepreneurship. Policymakers could enact social safety programs like healthcare and pensions, encourage widow entrepreneurship through education and training, and amend inheritance rules in order to solve these issues. Building a more inclusive society requires a comprehensive strategy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strengthen enforcement of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (2015) to protect widows' rights.
2. Establish state-funded entrepreneurship hubs with microloan access.
3. Integrate widow empowerment into Rivers State's gender policy frameworks.
4. Investment in girl child and women education/Legal literacy and women inheritance programs.
5. Mentorship, and capacity building and postioning young women /widows for tomorrow's business leadership.

5. 4. Suggestions for Further Study

For future research, scholars or researchers can access, interrogate, explore, investigate or examine the following topics or areas of research:

1. **Comparative Studies:** Examine widow empowerment strategies across diverse Nigeria regions (e.g. Muslim majority northern states)
2. **Intersectional Analysis:** Demographic barriers, an intersect with widow marginization?
3. **Integration of Innovation and Technology:** Digital entreprenurships (e.g.,e-commerce) as a tool for widows' empowerment in urban and rural areas.
4. **Impact of Oil :** Corperate social responsibility (CSR) iniatives by oil companies as a pathway for host community widow empowerment.
5. **Financial Access :** Ensuring widows entrepreneurs have the right instruments to scale, innovate, and lead.
6. **Global Networks:** Using international strengthening systems, policy frameworks, and strategic partnerships as widow's enterprenurship tool.

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