

Socio-Cultural Perceptions and Resilience Abilities of Widows on Widowhood Rites in South-West Nigeria

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Abstract

Widowhood has made many women vulnerable in many areas of their lives due to the cultural and traditional practices surrounding widowhood in Nigeria. While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international conventions have addressed women's rights, widows remain vulnerable to discrimination and violence. This research investigated socio-cultural perceptions and resilience abilities of widows on widowhood rites in South-West Nigeria.

A cross-sectional survey design was employed for the study, with data collected from 419 registered widows in South-West Nigeria. Three research instruments were used for data collection. The data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The results show that widowhood rites were associated with socio-cultural perceptions and resilience abilities.

Additionally, socio-cultural perceptions and resilience abilities were found to play crucial roles in shaping widows' experiences with widowhood rites. The negative perceptions of these rites, coupled with resilience, underscore the need for interventions that address harmful cultural practices while supporting the empowerment and well-being of widows.

Keywords: Nigeria, Perception, Resilience, Socio-cultural, Widowhood

Introduction

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has classified widowed adults as vulnerable, with significant impacts on quality of life due to loss of emotional and economic support from a spouse (Zhuet al., 2024). Being widowed has particularly left many women vulnerable in various aspects of their lives. Globally, the majority of widows experience physical and sexual abuse, discrimination and stigma, and denial of inheritance rights. Widows' negative experiences rob them of their freedom and dignity in society; it is possible to view these as violations of women's rights (Anuforo et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2024). Policies and legal frameworks about women's rights have been established to guarantee the implementation of the principle of promoting gender equality between men and women. Nigeria has implemented the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, but still has lots of widows experiencing hardship and violence.

Even though the majority of societies forbid violence against women, the truth is that abuses of women's rights are frequently excused by cultural customs or beliefs that are misconstrued (Ayodele, 2014). Furthermore, when abuse occurs within the home, as is frequently the case, it is effectively excused by the state and the law enforcement apparatus's silent complacency. Worse yet, widows are not exempted from this obscene trend.

Therefore, understanding widowhood and widowhood rites in Nigeria would require consideration of the cultural and traditional practices within a particular community or ethnic group. It is essential to approach this

issue with sensitivity, recognising the diversity and uniqueness of South-West Nigeria's cultural landscape. It is against this background that this research examined the socio-cultural perceptions and resilience abilities of widows on widowhood rites in South-West Nigeria.

Literature Review

A woman enters widowhood when her spouse passes away, and she has not remarried (Amoo et al., 2022; Brown, 2016). During this phase of life, a woman who lost her husband must overcome several challenges, including discrimination. A widow experiences emotional trauma, sadness, agony, perplexity, and dejection when her husband passes away (Oreh, 2018). What is still a universal truth, though, is that the widow must succumb to the whims of a culture over which she has no influence, in addition to her loss and the consequences that follow. In Nigeria, the woman must perform specific rituals as part of widowhood customs, and these customs and ceremonies vary from culture to culture (Okafor et al., 2025). For example, among the Yorubas of the South West and the Igbo people of the South East, there are a few discernible distinctions, such as how long a widow is expected to grieve and what she should do when her husband passes away. In addition, they might encounter various types of prejudice stemming from an amalgamation of elements like sex, age, financial standing, and cultural heritage (Saif-Ur-Rahman et al., 2021).

According to Sibani and Kii (2025), Africans believed that without the ritual of mourning, the dead would never lie quietly in the grave, but would constantly be interfering in the affairs of the living, jealous of every new adjustment, such as the remarriage of their widow. The death of a spouse marks a new stage of life for the partner left behind that demands separating rites aimed at terminating the relationship with the deceased. Across sub-Saharan Africa, widows are subjected to harmful widowhood rites as part of the widowhood process (Oyedele & Ajala, 2024; Shoko & Danke, 2024; Ude & Njoku, 2017). Obi-Anike et al. (2026) stated in their review

that gender discrimination against women and patriarchal rule are widespread in Nigeria due to the country's strong patriarchal values. This patriarchal character seems to uphold male dominance through several cultural customs that assign women to submissive tasks. According to Arinze-Umobi (2018), widows are forced to endure the agony of losing their husbands as well as occasionally go through painful traditional rituals to demonstrate their innocence in their husbands' deaths.

In the words of Olukayode (2015), common widowhood customs in Nigeria include "shaving one's hair, dressing in black or white, drinking the leftover bath water used to wash one's husband's corpse, mourning for approximately a year and a half, being denied the right to inherit, not being permitted to take a bath, cleaning their surroundings during mourning periods, or, in rare instances, taking one bath per week". These practices are somewhat cultural in nature because they are carried out in accordance with the customs and traditions of society. But other rites like those that involve violence and may be physically inappropriate and dangerous for the widow's survival may be forced upon her (Amoo et al., 2022; Iloka, 2022).

In South-West Nigeria, widowhood has made many women vulnerable in many areas of their lives. Most widows endure physical and sexual abuse, humiliation and prejudice, and denial of inheritance rights. Other rites that have affected women include societal stigma, property dispossession, forced eviction, denial of child custody, accusations of causing the husband's death, and wife cleansing (Fasanmi&Ayivor, 2019; Ude & Njoku, 2017). This negative experience that widows have is an infringement of women's rights because it deprives them of their independence and dignity in society (Nwadiolor&Agunwa, 2021).

It is estimated that there are 258 million widows worldwide. According to the World Bank (2018), ten per cent of African women over the age of 14 are widowed. Based on data collected in 2022, 10.2% of Nigerians are widowed

(Statista, 2023). Despite being overrepresented in the population, widows frequently experience trauma and marginalization (Witting et al., 2020). In most of Africa, a woman's only legal basis for obtaining social and economic rights is marriage; these rights are forfeited after divorce or widowhood (World Bank, 2018). Widows' mistreatment exacerbates societal inequalities and stigma (Odhiambo et al., 2025). As part of efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 5, which aims to end all forms of violence and harmful behaviours against women and girls, addressing issues faced by widows, particularly in African communities, will be a right step in the right direction.

The negative cultural experiences of widows have mostly been a center of focus in most literature, where in fact, many widows have shown resilience and have been able to develop coping mechanisms to overcome the challenges arising from widowhood. Recent research in developed countries has shown an increased level of resilience among widows than normally expected (Chami & Pooley, 2023; Deepak & Annalakshmi, 2021; Hahn et al., 2011).

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Theory

Feminist theory analyzes widowhood as a gendered experience, highlighting the unique challenges and injustices faced by women who lose their husbands (Ayodele et al., 2021; Motsoeneng & Modise, 2022; Ugwu et al., 2020). It examines how patriarchal structures and cultural norms often exacerbate the negative consequences of widowhood for women, including social stigma, economic hardship, and violence. Feminist perspectives emphasize the need to challenge these harmful practices and advocate for the rights and well-being of widows.

Feminist theory views widowhood as a site of patriarchal control, where women's lives are often dictated by male relatives and societal expectations, as well as making women economically vulnerable (Weyler, 2012). Additionally, many cultures impose specific rituals and customs on widows, often involving

restrictions on their behavior, dress, and social interactions. These practices can be physically and psychologically damaging.

Feminist perspectives advocate empowering widows by promoting their access to education, economic independence, legal rights, and social support, while exposing the challenging, harmful widowhood practices and advocating for their abolition or reform (Duhaney, 2021). However, feminist groups have worked to raise public awareness about the challenges faced by widows and to advocate for greater social understanding and support.

Feminist theory provides a crucial framework for understanding the gendered dimensions of widowhood and for advocating for the rights and well-being of widows. By highlighting the social, economic, and cultural factors that contribute to the marginalization of widows, feminist perspectives offer valuable insights into the need for social change and the empowerment of women.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between socio-cultural perceptions, widows' resilience abilities and widowhood rites in South-West Nigeria?
2. To what extent would widows withstand the rigour and tension associated with widowhood rites in South-West Nigeria

Hypotheses

Two null hypotheses were formulated:

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between socio-cultural perceptions, widows' resilience abilities, and widowhood rites in South-West Nigeria.

Ho2: There is no significant composite contribution of socio-cultural perception, widows' resilience abilities and widowhood rites in South-West Nigeria

Methodology

Research Design

This work adopted a cross-sectional design. This design was chosen to ensure the researchers observed and described the extent of the contributions of already existing independent variables to the dependent variable.

Population

The population for the study consisted of all registered widows in South-West Nigeria. They are Lagos (n=16,490), Ogun (n=11,689), Oyo (n=17,430), Osun (n=10,987), Ondo (n=11,116), and Ekiti (no record) States, but of different categories, religious affiliations, educational backgrounds, occupations, and widowhood experiences. There are 45,609 registered widows in the selected zone of Nigeria (Ministry of Women Affairs, 2023).

Sample and Sampling Technique

For this study, the sampling covers the widows in five (5) selected states with widows' records (Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo States). The sample size for this study was determined by applying the Cochran (1997) formula at 0.05 confidence level, as it is the standard method of randomization and is also suitable for identifying the limits of errors considered as the most essential items in the survey. A sample of four hundred and nineteen (419) widows was selected using a proportional stratified random sampling technique. The South-West part of Nigeria was stratified along the existing five states with an existing widow's records (Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, and Ondo).

Table 1: *Sampled Population and Sample Size of Study*

S/N	States	Population	Sample Proportion	Sample Size
1	Lagos State	16,490	= 24.4%	=102
2	Ogun State	11,689	= 17.3%	= 72
3	Oyo State	17430	= 25.7%	=108
4	Osun State	10,987	= 16.2%	= 68
5	Ondo State	11, 116	= 16.4%	= 69
Total	Total	45609		419

Research Instruments

Three instruments were used for this study:

Resilience Scale (RS)

The RS-14 is a shortened version of the RS-25, comprising 14 items selected from the original RS, was developed by Wagnild (2009). The respondents were asked to state the degree to which they agree or disagree with each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Examples of the items are: "When I'm in a difficult situation, I

can usually find my way out of it," and, "My belief in myself gets me through hard times". All items are positively scored. The possible total scores of the RS-14 range from 14 to 98 and have been scored (Wagnild, 2009) as follows: 14-56 = Very low, 57-64 = Low, 65-73 = On the low end, 74-81 = Moderate, 82-90 = Moderately high and 91-98 = High. The scale reported a test-retest reliability of 0.93 and a validity coefficient index of 0.81.

Socio-Cultural Perception Scale

The 11-item scale was carefully designed to address respondents' perception of socio-cultural factors influencing widowhood rites. The scale was designed based on information in the literature (Okafor et al., 2025; Shoko & Danke, 2024) to delve into perception of widowhood rites practices, including mourning rituals, inheritance rights, and the widow's role within her environment and community. This was done to achieve content validity. Additionally, the response rate of the instrument ranged from 1 being the highest to 0 being the lowest on a 2-point scale. The response pattern includes: 1 = Yes, and 0 = No. Items include "Re-marrying to one of the in-laws after the demise of husband," and "Isolation". Content validity was ascertained and approved by a panel of five experts in psychometrics, test and measurement, education, and Counseling psychology. According to the experts' opinion, relevance, accuracy, comprehensiveness, application of the tools, and modification were done. A pilot study was conducted by administering it to twenty-one respondents with characteristics similar to those of the main subjects of the study, but not included in the final survey. This served as a pre-test to evaluate the scale's suitability, dependability, clarity, and comprehensibility. Reliability was estimated statistically by the Cronbach's alpha test, which yielded 0.77.

Widowhood Rites Scale

It is a self-developed scale that elicited information on the widowhood rites from the respondents. The scale was designed based on information in the literature (Anuforo et al., 2024). The items were measured on a 4-point continuum scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Items included: "Compelled to mourn for a period of one year after the death of my husband," and "The widow is not allowed to go to the market or attend any ceremony". The content validity was ascertained and approved by a panel of five experts in psychometrics, test and measurement, education, and Counselling psychology. According to the experts' opinion, relevance,

accuracy, comprehensiveness, application of the tools, and modification were done. A pilot study was conducted by administering it to twenty-one respondents with characteristics similar to those of the main subjects of the study, but not included in the final survey. This served as a pre-test to evaluate the scale's suitability, dependability, clarity, and comprehensibility. Reliability was estimated statistically by the Cronbach's alpha test, which yielded 0.98

Procedure for Data Collection

All items on the closed-end questionnaire were scored based on their Likert Scale point. Each questionnaire was administered with an introductory letter, participant information sheet, and informed consent form. This aligns with ethical considerations and the need to provide participants with insights into the study's objectives. The participants were recruited through the State Ministry of Women Affairs Directory. The registered widows were recruited by phone calls through convenience sampling until the desired sample size was reached. Venues and meeting times were fixed for each state based on participants' majority opinions. Data collection was done physically at an agreed location through a self-administered scale. The authors were fully involved in the data collection process and translated the instrument into the local dialect for easy comprehension for some of the participants. To ensure consistency in the content of each item after translation, a back-translation method was used.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from an institutional ethical committee in Nigeria.

Methods of Data Analysis

All 419 questionnaires were distributed, while only three hundred and ninety-seven (397) were adequately filled and used in the analysis. Thus, 97.7% questionnaire retrieval success was recorded. The data collected for the study through the questionnaire were coded and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. It should be noted that four hundred and nineteen (419)

respondents were estimated to participate in this study. Descriptive statistics involved the use of frequency counts, mean, standard deviation, and percentages for the classification, analysis, and interpretation of bio-data of the respondents, as well as answering the research questions. The inferential statistics employed were Pearson

Moment Correlation Coefficient and multiple regression analysis, at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Table 2: *Widows' perceptions of widowhood rites in South-West Nigeria*

Category	Criteria	Frequency	%	Remark
7-11	Positive	86	21.7	Respondents with positive perceptions of widows on widowhood rites
1-6	Negative	311	78.3	Respondents with negative perceptions of widows on widowhood rites

Table 2 provides a summary of widows' perceptions of widowhood rites in South-West Nigeria. Their perception was categorized as positive when an individual has between 7 and 11, and negative when the score was between 1 and 6. The majority 311 (78.3%) of the respondents had negative perceptions of widowhood rites and the

remaining 86 (21.7%) had positive perceptions of widowhood rites. Therefore, it could be said that the perceptions of widows on widowhood rites in South-West Nigeria are negative.

Table 3: *Resilience abilities of widows on widowhood rites*

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev
Resilience abilities	397	14.00	56.00	29.803	8.190

Table 3 reveals the resilience abilities of widows on widowhood rites in South-West Nigeria. The results yielded a mean score of 29.803, and when translated into percentage based on the maximum score obtained, it was 53.2%. It could then be deduced that the resilience abilities of widows on widowhood rites is low, which shows the widowhood rites being

experienced by the widows are not good. This study observed that the widows in South-West Nigeria cannot endure or withstand the rigour and tension associated with widowhood rites.

Table 4: *Pearson correlation showing the relationship among socio-cultural perception, widows' resilience abilities and widowhood rites in South-West Nigeria*

		Socio-cultural factors	Resilience	Widowhood rites
1	Socio-cultural perception (SCP)	1		
2	Resilience (R)	.486**	1	
3	Widowhood rites (WR)	.871**	.509*	1

Table 4 shows the relationship among socio-cultural perc, widows' resilience abilities and widowhood rites in South-West Nigeria. Widowhood rites (WR) were found to be associated with socio-cultural perceptions ($r = .871$; $p = .000 < 0.05$) and widows' resilience abilities ($r = .509$; $p = .000 < 0.05$). Thus, these results revealed a significant positive relationship among socio-cultural perception, widows' resilience abilities, and widowhood rites. By implication, all the three variables (perception, resilience and rites) change together in the same direction. That is, when one element strengthens

or becomes more pronounced, the others do too. For instance, if rites are perceived as supportive, they boost resilience; if rites are perceived as severe, high resilience is required to survive them. Thus, the null hypothesis that stated "There is no significant relationship between socio-cultural perceptions, widows' resilience abilities and widowhood rites in South-West Nigeria" cannot be sustained.

Table 5: *Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis of the composite contribution of socio-cultural factors and widows' resilience abilities on widowhood rites in South-West Nigeria*

Source of variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F-Ratio	P
Regression	1113.782	2	556.891	27.109	.000 ^b
Residual	8093.942	394	20.543		
Total	9207.724	396			
R = .789, R Square = .623, Adjusted R Square = .606, Std. Error = 3.524					

The widowhood rites in South-West Nigeria yielded a coefficient of multiple regression (R) of 0.789 and a multiple regression square of 0.623. This shows that 62.3% of the total variance in the impact of widowhood rites on widows is accounted for by socio-cultural perception and widows' resilience abilities. The table also indicated that the analysis of variance of the multiple regression data produced an F-ratio value of 27.109, significant at 0.000 level ($F_{(2,396)} = 27.109$; $P = .000$). Thus, the null hypothesis, which stated "There is no significant composite contribution of socio-cultural perception, widows' resilience abilities and widowhood rites in South-West Nigeria" was rejected. Therefore, socio-cultural perception and widows' resilience abilities have a significant combined influence on the impact of widowhood rites on widows.

Discussions

The outcome of this study revealed that widows' perceptions of widowhood rites in South-West Nigeria were negative. This implies

that they view these traditional rituals as harmful, discriminatory, and a violation of their human rights rather than as supportive cultural steps for mourning. This finding is in tandem with the findings of Matlabe-Danke (2024), Okoro and Nkama (2018), and Ude and Njoku (2017) that widows hold negative perceptions of rites subjecting them to various forms of abuse, deprivation, and powerlessness, causing them psychological, emotional, social, and mental ill-health.

Additionally, this study lends credence to the findings of Anuforo et al. (2024) and Olukayode (2015) that widows hold negative perceptions of rites like forced confinement, compulsory head shaving, wearing black/dull clothes, or proving innocence against accusations of killing their husbands; it carries severe socio-cultural, psychological, and legal implications. This could explain why the perception of widowhood rites among participants in this study was negative. Also, according to Fasanmi and Ayivor (2019), using the critical feminist theory, it was argued

that widowhood rites and experiences by widows are sometimes unpleasant, harmful, and very painful, which are mostly driven by culture and religion and sometimes violate the rights of the widows.

The findings of this research also corroborate the study by Azeez et al., (2023) in India, where it was reported that during widowhood, women faced economic deprivation, stigmatization/isolation, as well as deprivation. It is therefore obvious that the cultural practices exposed to widows during widowhood rites have psychosocial and physiological health implications which require urgent intervention. Some of these practices can increase their stress level and exacerbate their existing health conditions.

This study observed that the widows in South-West Nigeria cannot endure or withstand the rigour and tension associated with widowhood rites. Therefore, their resilience to widowhood rites is low. This implies that low resilience leaves widows highly vulnerable to being overwhelmed and exploited by traditional practices. This vulnerability shows that widows lack the psychological strength, financial autonomy, and social resources needed to withstand or resist oppressive widowhood rites. The quality of life is greatly impacted by widowhood, since widowed people typically have a lower quality of life than married people. This corroborates the findings of Zhu et al. (2024) that being a widow is a stressful occurrence that causes the body to experience physiological stress reactions. These reactions impair a widow's ability to adjust to later life and contribute to health problems. Also, losing a spouse weakens a person's resistance, which leads to an unavoidable reduction in the individual's quality of life (Ayodele, K.O. et al., 2021). Spouses play essential responsibilities as companions and caregivers in later life, depending on one another for support and encouraging interdependence (Lushi et al., 2021).

These results revealed a significant positive relationship among socio-cultural perception, widows' resilience abilities, and widowhood rites. That is, when one element strengthens or becomes more pronounced, the others do too. For instance, if rites are perceived as supportive, they boost resilience; if rites are perceived as severe, high resilience is required to survive them. It could be deduced that socio-cultural perception, widows' resilience abilities, and widowhood rites strengthen one another. For instance, if widowhood rites are perceived as supportive, they boost resilience; if rites are perceived as severe, high resilience is required to survive them, which positively predicted adjustment to widowhood. This finding is in line with the findings of Oyedele and Ajala (2024), who studied the perceived influence of resilience and social support on adjustment to widowhood among educated Yoruba widows in the South-Western part of Nigeria. They found that resilience accounted for 27% variance on adjustment to widowhood. Additionally, this finding is also supported by the findings of the study conducted by Martins (2018), wherein the researcher viewed that opportunities for reciprocal emotional and instrumental support are associated with lower levels of depression, greater satisfaction with life, and better coping.

Conclusion

This study highlights the profound influence of socio-cultural perception, widows' resilience abilities, and widowhood rites on one another. This study shows that widows have a negative perception of widowhood rites while their resilience ability was low, which suggests the need for strong psychosocial support for widows during the loss of a spouse. It is concluded that socio-cultural perceptions and resilience abilities play crucial roles in shaping widows' experiences with widowhood rites. Furthermore, certain culturally accepted customs have the potential to harm, especially when they limit women's liberty, expose them to exploitation, or diminish their dignity.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interest

None

Funding Statement

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Ethical Approval

Institutional ethical approval was obtained from Babcock University Health Research Ethics Committee with the number BUHREC 803/24. All participants provided written informed consent after reading the participant information sheet detailing the objectives of the study and what their participation in the study entails.

Data Availability Statement

Data is available upon request.

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