

Widowhood Rites and Rituals in Some Communities of the North West Region of Cameroon: Psychological, Financial, and Physical Health Impacts on Widows and Consequences for Children's Education

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Abstract:

The main purpose of this study was to examine the psychological, financial, and physical health impacts of widowhood rites and rituals on widows in some selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon and consequences for their children's education. The mixed research method was adopted for this study and data was collected with the use of three instruments; questionnaire, interview guide and observation guide. The sample comprised of 160 widows who have undergone widowhood rites and rituals, and 10 elderly women responsible for carrying out and supervising widowhood rites and rituals, who were interviewed. The researcher personally observed some widowhood rites and rituals as they were being performed. The purposive and the snowball sampling techniques were used. Quantitative data was analyzed with the use of Means and Standard Deviations, while qualitative data was analyzed using the Thematic Approach. The findings revealed that many of the widowhood rites and rituals practiced in the area under study impose significant psychological distress, financial hardship, and physical health challenges on widows, which limit their ability to adequately support the education of their children, thereby increasing vulnerability to poor educational outcome. The study then concludes with recommendations that will go a long way to reform practices that undermine dignity, health, economic well-being, and educational welfare of widows' children.

Keywords: Widowhood, widowhood rites, widowhood rituals, psychological impact, financial impact, physical impact, education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Widowhood is a global social phenomenon affecting women across all regions of the world. According to the Loomba Foundation [1], there were an estimated 258.481.056 widows worldwide, responsible for the care of approximately 584.574.358 children. In Cameroon, the Loomba Foundation estimated that there were approximately 632.543 widows in 2015, representing about 8.3% of women of marital age. In 2016, an armed conflict broke out in the two Anglophone regions of Cameroon, one of which is the North West Region. This conflict has killed over 6.000 people and displaced over 750.000, according to the International Crisis Group. Cameroon's Minister of Women Empowerment and the Family pointed out that this armed conflict has contributed to significant rise in the number of widows in Cameroon from an estimated 600.000 in 2018 to 1.500.000 in 2023 [2] Superstition plays a great role in plunging the women into such practices done in the name of "maintaining the African culture". These challenges have been further compounded by the ongoing socio-political crisis which has disrupted livelihoods, weakened social support systems, and limited access to education and healthcare. Consequently, the effects of widowhood may extend beyond the widow herself, affecting the welfare and educational opportunities of her children. Although previous studies have examined widowhood practices and widows' rights in Africa, limited empirical research has investigated the combined psychological, financial, and health impacts of widowhood rites and rituals alongside their consequences for children's education. This study therefore investigates the psychological, financial and health impacts of widowhood rites and rituals on widows in selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon and examines the consequences of these practices for their children's education.

Widowhood remains a significant social and public health concern in many African societies where traditional widowhood rites and rituals continue to shape the experiences of widows. While these practices are often justified as mechanisms for preserving cultural identity, family cohesion, and respect for the deceased, evidence suggests some of the rites and rituals may expose widows to psychological distress, economic deprivation, health risks and social exclusion. These challenges may also extend to their children by disrupting access to education through increased household poverty, emotional instability, and reduced educational support. Although previous studies have examined widowhood rites, widow dispossession, and widows' wellbeing in Africa and Cameroon, most have focused on legal, cultural or human rights dimensions. Very few have simultaneously examined the psychological, financial, and health impacts of widowhood rites, while also investigating their consequences for children's education. This research seeks to address this gap by providing integrated evidence on how widowhood rites and rituals influence widows' wellbeing and the education of their children.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this research were:

- To identify the widowhood rites and rituals practiced in selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon.
- To examine the psychological impacts of widowhood rites and rituals in selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon.
- To assess the financial impacts of widowhood rites and rituals on widows in selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon.
- To investigate the physical health impacts of widowhood rites and rituals on widows of selected

communities of the North West Region of Cameroon.

- To determine the consequences of widowhood rites and rituals for the education of widows' children in selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon.

Research Questions

This research was guided by the following questions:

- What widowhood rites and rituals are practiced in selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon?
- What are the psychological impacts of widowhood rites and rituals in selected communities of the North West and West Region of Cameroon?
- What are the financial impacts of widowhood rites and rituals on widows in selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon?
- What are the physical health impacts of widowhood rites and rituals on widows of selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon?
- What are the consequences of widowhood rites and rituals for the education of widows' children in selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon?

Significance of the Study

- This study is significant in that it contributes to the growing body of knowledge on widowhood, by proving empirical evidence on the psychological, financial and health impacts of widowhood rites and rituals as well as their consequences for children's education in selected communities in the North West Region of Cameroon. By examining these interrelated dimensions within a conflict-affected socio-cultural context, the study addresses an important gap in the existing literature.
- The findings will be valuable to policymakers by providing evidence to guide the formulation and implementation of policies that protect widows' rights while respecting positive cultural values.
- This study will benefit non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations, social workers, and human rights advocates by identifying the specific psychosocial, economic, and health needs of widows. This evidence can inform the design of intervention programs aimed at economic empowerment, psychosocial support, healthcare access, and legal protection.
- The findings will also provide educators, school administrators, and child welfare agencies with a better understanding of how widowhood-related challenges affect children's educational access, participation, and academic progress. Such evidence may support interventions that help vulnerable children remain in school.
- Finally, the study will serve as a useful reference for researchers and scholars interested in widowhood, gender, culture, education, public health, and social policy. It may stimulate further research on widowhood practices and their broader social and developmental implications in Cameroon and other African contexts.

Conceptual Review

Widowhood rites and rituals are a set of cultural practices prescribed to the surviving partner after the death of the spouse, to help the widow or widower cope with their painful transition, to honor them, and to facilitate their reintegration into society. However, in the contemporary context these practices have increasingly been criticized due to their seemingly degrading and humiliating nature perpetuated especially on women who are subjected to a longer and more restrictive ritual process than men. This gender disparity is partly attributed to the patriarchal structure of most African societies to which the North West Region of Cameroon belongs.

The Trauma of Widowhood

The loss of a spouse marks the beginning of doom to the one who is still alive. It is a very traumatic life event as it comes with a myriad of economic, social and psychological problems. Widows around the world face loss, trauma, discrimination, and stigma by their peers, families, communities and societies. In addition to these, they have to sustain themselves financially and the burden may double in case they have children to take care of. According to UN Women [3], widowhood practices are not universal, but rather differ by country, culture and religion. In several countries, widows face social exclusion, alienation, stigma and economic deprivation.

The plight of widows in Africa is exacerbated by the patriarchal nature of African societies. Human Rights Watch observed that in many customary settings, a widow's in-laws often take possession of her deceased husband's property shortly after his death. This practice frequently results in the widow's eviction from the matrimonial home, loss of land and other assets, and increased economic vulnerability. These practices are common in the North West Region of Cameroon. This is because many communities of the North West Region of Cameroon are characterized by patriarchal economic and political relationships, most of these communities are poor, and the women are less educated and less empowered economically. Their position is therefore dependent on their husbands' status and achievement. For this reason, the loss of a husband marks the beginning of doom to his wife as it usually opens the flood gates to a multiplicity of psychological, social, financial and cultural traumas, whose consequences are extended to their children's education. According to Nwosu [4] the traumatic experiences that come with the loss of a spouse tend to be greater on women than on men.

Widowhood Rites and Rituals in some parts of the North West Region of Cameroon as an Act of Exoneration and Deterrence.

John Mbiti observed that man has since accepted death as part of the natural rhythm of life, but paradoxically, every human death is believed to have external causes [5] The North West Region of Cameroon is patriarchal in nature, and when a man dies his wife is immediately looked upon as a perpetrator of the husband's death. This is because of the conception held by many that women have very strong mystical powers, and that they will easily kill their husbands in order to own their property. Because of this belief that women have strong mystical powers, there is therefore the need for such powers to be controlled through widowhood rites and practices given those women are generally emotional and can easily be deceived by other men into killing their husbands using their mystical powers or even poison. It has therefore been argued that after the death of their husbands, widows are supposed to undergo some traditional practices and widowhood rites in order to prove that they are not responsible for orchestrating their husbands' death. In the North West Region of Cameroon, it is generally believed that the ancestors thought it wise that if women are subjected to rigorous widowhood rituals and practices, this will deter other women killing or even harboring the thought of killing their husbands [6].

Widowhood Rites and Practices, a Form of "False Consciousness"

Ngambouk observed that patriarchal socio-cultural expectations have imposed widowhood rites and practices on women as a mark of love for deceased husbands and as a way of ensuring their personal and social identity. Through these rites, rituals and practices, widows have been socialized to project themselves as good and innocent wives. Meanwhile, elderly widows as ritual experts are the ones simultaneously charged with socializing younger widows and administering widowhood rites and practices on them. The concept of 'false consciousness' is therefore useful in the explanation of the exercise of the ritual power by elderly women over younger women through the stringent widowhood rites and practices. They further noted that the ritual power seen to be possessed by the elderly widows does not directly improve their material living conditions as ritual experts. Rather, it only helps demean fellow women. In a typical patriarchal setting, these elderly widowhood ritual experts, though their actions are endorsed by the patriarchal order, the operations and organizational structure of the rite is entirely filled by women. Although this monopoly of knowledge of widowhood rituals by women seem

to weaken the claim of gender discrimination since practitioners and male village elders see it as a form of gendered social capital, Ngambouk rather understand this situation in terms of ‘false consciousness’. This is because the women think they are in control but in actual fact they are not. This is what MacKinnon [7] terms “Pawns in a particular setting” MacKinnon argues that oppression is at times disguised as a feature of the natural world (false consciousness) leading to the misconstruction of its inherently oppressive character.

Empirical Review

A Cameroon-based study by Yamat & Socpa [8] argues that widowhood rites were traditionally intended to facilitate mourning and reintegration into society, but have increasingly become degrading and restrictive for many women. In a study that compared widowhood dispossession in Francophone and Anglophone Cameroon, Roxana found out that widows in Anglophone communities were more likely to experience property dispossession and insecure inheritance rights, largely as a result of customary practices and weak enforcement of legal protection.

On the impact of widowhood rites and rituals on the widows, recent African studies indicate that widows frequently experience psychological effects such as depression and prolonged grief, anxiety and emotional trauma, social isolation, stigma and discrimination, loss of self-esteem, fear and coercion [9] These authors have pointed out that these psychological effects have become an important public mental health issue in Africa. Concerning the financial impact of widowhood rites and rituals on widows, Willis [10] has noted that widows are vulnerable to property grabbing, inheritance denial, land dispossession, unemployment, declining household income, and chronic poverty. When these financial shocks occur, widows often face a serious challenge of providing food, healthcare and education for their children. Recent studies indicate that widowhood rites and rituals may adversely affect the physical health of widows. Harmful mourning practices have been associated with physiological health problems, exhaustion, poor nutrition, exposure to unsafe traditional practices and reduced access to healthcare [11] Research in South Africa further suggests that some widows experience bodily suffering and physical scars as a consequence of restrictive widowhood practices [12].

4. METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out in four villages in Santa Sub Division, North West Region of Cameroon. They were Awing, Baligham, Pinyin and Baba 2. It was a mixed research which employed both the ethnographic and descriptive survey categories. The mixed research approach was used so that conclusions should not be drawn from one approach, but rather so that results from both methods should complement each another. Quantitative data was collected with the use of questionnaires administered to 160 widows drawn from the four selected villages, who have gone through widowhood rites and rituals. Qualitative data was collected with the use of Observation Guide and an Interview Guide. The researcher observed some widowhood rites and rituals in some of the villages and interviewed 10 elderly women who are responsible for carrying out the rites and leading the rituals on widows. Two sampling techniques were used, the purposive and the snowball sampling methods. Quantitative data was analyzed using Means and Standard Deviations, while qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis.

5. RESULTS

After interviewing some elderly women who are responsible for carrying out the widowhood rites and rituals on widows in the selected research areas, after observing some of the rites and rituals, and administering questionnaires to widows who have undergone these widowhood rites and rituals, the following results were obtained.

Results from Interviews

Question “Why are Widowhood Rites and Rituals performed on Widows After their Husbands’ Death?”

Responses.

To think of widowhood rites and rituals as degrading, dehumanizing or as something negative is to miss the point. Such practices are not degrading; neither are they rites of wickedness. Rather they are rites carried out to free the widow from the spirit of the jealous husband who may still be in love with her. As Africans, we believe that death is not necessarily the end of someone’s existence. After a man’s death his spirit continues to wander about. He may still visit the wife and may even make love to her in the night. The only way for her to stop this is to undergo the necessary rituals to cut the links between the living and the dead.

In addition, after his death the man has to be admitted into the realm of the ancestors. The widowhood rites are therefore performed for the deceased’s peaceful transition into the land of the ancestors. (Some of the interviewees attested that their late husbands appeared to them in dreams lamenting that their spirits were restless and would not be admitted into the land of the living-dead unless the widowhood rites were performed.)

Another reason is that after the loss of her husband, the widow is considered dangerous to whoever may come in contact with her. It is therefore a taboo to touch her except after she has been ‘cleansed’. Widowhood rites are therefore cleansing rituals to free her from curses that have been placed on her as a result of the loss of the husband. Such curses bring ill luck on the widow and must be broken through the rites and rituals she is subjected to. If such rituals are not performed, the widow may go mad, she may die or her children may suffer the consequences. The rituals performed on the widow after the loss of her husband are nothing but a sign of love, an indication that the widow truly loved the late husband when he was alive. Consequently, refusal to succumb to such rituals would mean disrespect and hatred, not only for the late husband but to his entire family.

Widowhood rites are also performed on the widow to exonerate her. Women as those who bring forth life through birth, also have a lot of powers by which they can as well bring about death. After a man’s death, his wife is then seen as the principal cause of his death until proven to be innocent. Widowhood rites are therefore performed either to prove her guilty or not. If found guilty, she may go mad or may die.

Question “Which widowhood Rites and Rituals Are Performed before the day of Burial, on the Day of Burial and After Burial?”

Responses

Rites Before the Day of Burial.

Once a man dies, elderly women notably widows are dispatched to the dead man’s compound to go and prepare the widow for the widowhood rites and rituals. When they arrive the compound, the widow is taken into the house, preferably her kitchen where she is confined. She does not sit on a chair or bed. Rather she sits on dry plantain leaves which are spread at a corner of the house, which will also serve as her bed for some days, even weeks. She is dressed half naked as she is not permitted to wear anything from her waist upwards. She is not permitted to speak or shake hands with anybody except with other widows who surround her. She is not supposed to bathe or change her dresses. She does not eat from any dish or plate; neither is she allowed to use a spoon or fork but rather her bare hands. Widows also undergo some dietary restrictions.

Rites and Rituals on the Day of Burial

In some communities, on the day of burial of the late husband, the widow may be allowed to clean only certain parts of her body, while in other communities she is completely restricted from cleaning any part of her body. Prior to the burial, the widow is supposed to cry as much as possible. In some communities, she is to move round the compound crawling with her buttocks on the ground. She is to

cry with her hands raised up towards the sky, an indication that she has completely surrendered to death. She is given either a white or a black cloth to wear. This cloth is worn for one year until the day of sad cloth removal. In some communities the widow is expected to prove her innocence by drinking the water with which the corpse of her husband is washed. It is believed that if she is guilty of orchestrating the death of the husband she will either go mad or will also die immediately after drinking the water.

Rites and Rituals After Burial.

Immediately after the burial of the husband, the widow still half naked as her breasts are completely exposed, is led in a solemn procession round the compound by other elderly widows, as they sing a series of dirges and engage in loud wailing. After that the women recess with the widow to the room where she has been confined. The widow may be expected to perform a dance for her husband (called 'alla' in one of the local languages). After the dance, the elderly widows take the new widow to an unknown place where her clothes are removed and all hair on her body is cleaned using crude shaving instruments. She is then bathed with a specially prepared substance and salt is poured on her as a sign of cleansing. She is given a white or black cloth which she will put on for one year. After the rituals the widow is prohibited from going to the market or sleeping on a bed for three days.

In another village it was observed that, three days after the burial of the late husband the widow is led by other elderly widows in a solemn procession to the stream where she is given a 'spiritual' bath. In the stream all hair on her body is cleaned and a specially prepared substance is used in bathing her. After that the procession continues back to the compound with the widow almost still half naked with her breasts still completely exposed. On their way back home, none of the women is supposed to look back as it is believed any defaulter will see the dead man's spirit, a sign of ill-luck. When the women get back to the compound, the widow is taken into the house where for the first time after the death of the husband, she is fully clothed in black, a dress she would put on for one year.

In all the four villages where this research was carried out levirate marriage is practiced. So after mourning the late husband for one year which ends on the day of sad cloth removal, the widow can be remarried by any of the late husband's brothers or close relatives. The consent of the widow is not sought and any refusal to be inherited or remarried by the late husband's relative may lead to her expulsion from the family compound or husband's house.

Results from Questionnaire

Table 1: Demographic Data

	Items	Modalities	Frequency	%
1	Have you undergone widowhood rites and rituals?	No	00	00
		Yes	160	100
2	Age	Below 30	10	6.25
		30-39	23	14.38
		40-49	35	21.87
		50-59	40	25
		60 years and above	<u>52</u>	<u>32.5</u>
		Total	160	100
3	Highest Educational Qualification	No formal Education	84	52.5
		Primary Education	24	15
		Secondary Education	22	13.75
		Teacher Education	9	5.63
		Bachelor's Degree	15	9.37
		Post Graduate	<u>6</u>	<u>3.75</u>
		Total	160	100

4	Occupation	Farming	82	51.25
		Business/trading	20	12.50
		Civil servant	15	9.38
		Self-employed	30	18.75
		Unemployed	<u>13</u>	<u>8.25</u>
		Total	160	100
5	Number of children	No child	5	3.12
		1-2	20	12.5
		3-4	51	31.88
		5-6	44	27.5
		More than 6	<u>40</u>	<u>25</u>
		Total	160	100
6	How many of your children are currently attending school?	None	21	13.12
		1-2	30	18.75
		3-4	52	32.5
		5 or more	<u>57</u>	<u>35.63</u>
		Total	160	100
7	Who is currently responsible for financing your children's education?	Self	72	45
		Extended Family	42	26.25
		Government	15	9.37
		NGO/charity	10	6.25
		Children sponsor themselves	<u>21</u>	<u>13.13</u>
		Total	160	100

Table 1 above shows respondents' demographic information. All the respondents agreed to have undergone widowhood rites and rituals. Out of 160 respondents, 10 were below 30 years old, 23 were between 30 and 39 years old, 35 were between 40 and 49 years, 40 were between 50 to 59 years old and 52 were 60 years old or more. From these statistics, we realize that 92 respondents were 50 years old or more.

From the demographic information, we realize that almost half of the respondents, that is 84 (52.5%) had not acquired any formal education. 24 of the respondents had acquired primary education, 22 acquired secondary education, 9 acquired Teacher Training, 15 had Bachelor's Degrees and only 6 had acquired Post Graduate education.

Almost half of the respondents were engaged in farming as an occupation. Given their low level of education, almost half of them, that is 82 (51.25%) were engaged in subsistence farming. 20 respondents (12.5%) were into business/trading, only 15 (9.38%) respondents were civil servants, 30 (18.75%) were self-employed and 13 (8.12%) were unemployed.

Only 5 respondents had no children, 20 respondents had 1 or 2 children, 51 respondents had 3 or 4 children, 44 had 5 or 6 children, and 40 respondents had more than 6 children. From these, we see that a vast majority of the respondents had many children to care for. Consequently, widowhood practices would further add the burden of taking care of the many children, especially providing their educational needs. Closely linked to this point is the question concerning who is presently responsible for financing the education of their children, 72 of them indicated that they were responsible for financing their children's education, 42 said their children were being sponsored by extended family members. Only 10 respondents said NGOs or charities were currently responsible for financing their children's education, while 21 said their children sponsored themselves. Given that less than half of the respondents, that is, 72 (45%) were personally responsible for financing their children's education.

Table 2: Psychological Impact of Widowhood Rites and Rituals on Widows (N=160)

	Item	Mean	Std. Dev	Decision
1	Emotional distress	4.50	0.66	S.A
2	Prolonged sadness	4.75	0.42	S.A
3	Anxiety	4.84	0.36	S.A
4	Social isolation	4.75	0.43	S.A
5	Shame/stigma	4.85	0.36	S.A
6	Difficulty recovering emotionally	4.91	0.29	S.A
7	Reduced self-esteem	4.94	0.24	S.A
8	Overall psychological well-being affected	4.97	0.24	S.A
	Grand Mean/Average Standard Deviation	4.81	0.17	S.A

The Grand Mean of 4.81 indicates that respondents strongly agreed that widowhood rites and rituals have profound psychological impacts on widows in the selected communities of the North West region of Cameroon. The highest rated item was that widowhood rites and rituals negatively affected respondents' overall well-being, (Mean=4.97, Standard Deviation=0.17), while emotional distress received the lowest Mean (M=4.50, Std Dev.=0.66), though it still fell within the "Strongly Agree" range. The relatively low Standard Deviations suggests a high level of disagreement among respondents

Table 3: Financial Impacts of Widowhood Rites and Rituals on Widows (N=160)

	ITEM/STATEMENT	Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision
1	Widowhood rites and rituals limited your ability to engage in income-generating activities	5.00	0.00	S.A
2	You experienced financial hardship as a result of widowhood practices	5.00	0.00	S.A
3	You were denied access to your late husband's property as a result of widowhood practices	3.56	1.88	Agree
4	Your household income declined after your husband's death	5.00	0.00	S.A
5	Widowhood rites increased your financial dependence on relatives	4.69	0.99	S.A
6	Widowhood practices made it difficult to pay your children's school fees	5.00	0.00	S.A
7	You experienced economic discrimination after becoming a widow.	4.47	1.09	Agree
8	Widowhood rites negatively affected your overall financial well-being	5.00	0.00	S.A
	Grand Mean/Average Standard Deviation	4.71	0.49	S.A

The findings in table 3 reveal a Grand Mean of 4.71 and an average Standard Deviation of 4.71 and an Average Standard Deviation of 0.49 indicating that respondents strongly agreed that widowhood rites and rituals have significant financial impacts on widows in selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon. The results show unanimous agreement that widowhood rites and rituals limited widows' ability to engage in income-generating activities, caused financial hardship, reduced household income, made it difficult to pay children's school fees, and negatively affected widows' overall financial well-being (M=4.47, Std. Dev=1.88) The relatively higher standard deviation for property denial suggests that there is greater variation in respondents' experiences regarding inheritance and property rights.

Overall, the findings indicate that widowhood rites and rituals expose many widows to severe

economic hardship by limiting access to productive resources, reducing the educational expenses of their children.

Table 4: Physical Health Impacts of Widowhood Rites and Rituals on Widows (N=160)

	ITEM/STATEMENT	Mean	Std Dev.	Decision
1	You experienced sleep disturbances during the mourning period	4.80	0.58	S.A
2	You developed back-ache as a result sleeping on the bare floor during the mourning period	4.86	0.49	S.A
3	Your body developed skin rashes and other skin disease because of poor hygiene during the mourning period	4.03	1.31	Agree
4	You experienced persistent physical weakness during the mourning period	3.92	1.40	Agree
5	Widowhood rites delayed your access to healthcare when you needed it.	4.38	1.16	Agree
6	The physical demands of widowhood rites reduced your ability to carry out your daily activities	4.78	0.41	S.A
7	Widowhood rites negatively affected your overall well-being	5.00	0.00	S.A
	Grand Mean/Average Standard Deviation	4.54	0.76	S.A

The findings in table 4 indicate a Grand Mean of 4.54 and an Average Standard Deviation of 0.76, showing that respondents strongly agreed that widowhood rites and rituals have significant physical health impacts on widows in selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon.

The highest rated item revealed unanimous agreement that widowhood rites negatively affected widows' overall physical well-being (M=5.00, Std Dev=0.00) Respondents also strongly agreed that they developed backache from sleeping on the bare floor (M=4.86, Std Dev.=0.49), experienced sleep disturbances during the mourning period (M=4.80, Std. Dev.=0.58), and that the physical demands of widowhood rites reduced their ability to perform daily activities (M=4.78, Std Dev.=0.41). Furthermore, respondents agreed that widowhood rites delayed access to health care (M=4.38, Std Dev.=1.16), contributed to skin rashes and other skin diseases due to poor hygiene, (M=4.03, Std Dev=1.31), and caused persistent physical weakness during the mourning period (M=3.92, Std Dev=1.40) the relatively higher Standard Deviations for these items suggest respondents' experiences varied, although the overall pattern indicates substantial physical health challenges.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that widowhood rites and rituals are associated with considerable physical health consequences for widows, affecting their comfort, mobility, access to healthcare and general physical well-being.

Table 5: Consequences of Widowhood Rites and Rituals for the Education of Widows' Children.

	ITEM/STATEMENT	Mean	Std Dev.	Decision
1	The psychological effects of widowhood reduced your ability to support your children's education	5.00	0.00	S.A
2	The emotional distress associated with widowhood affected your children's educational progress	4.51	1.01	S.A
3	Financial difficulties resulting from widowhood practices made it difficult to pay your children's fees	4.97	0.17	S.A
4	Widowhood-related financial hardship limited your ability to provide school uniforms, books and other learning materials for your children	4.94	0.24	S.A
5	The health problems you experienced during the mourning period reduced your ability to care for your children's educational	4.69	0.46	S.A

	needs.			
6	Widowhood-related challenges reduced your participation in your children's school activities	4.38	1.00	Agree
7	The challenges associated with widowhood contributed to poor academic performance among your children	4.53	0.93	S.A
8	Widowhood-related hardships increased the likelihood of your children dropping out of school	4.95	0.22	S.A
9	Some of your children had to engage in income-generating activities because of the financial consequences of widowhood	3.10	1.76	Neutral
10	Some of your girl children went into early marriages because of widowhood-related challenges	3.10	1.76	Neutral
11	Widowhood-related challenges affected your children's educational aspirations and future schooling opportunities.	4.94	0.24	S.A
Grand Mean/Average Standard Deviation		4.60	0.63	S.A

The findings in table 5 reveal a Grand Mean of 4.60 and an Average Standard Deviation of 0.63, indicating that respondents strongly agreed that widowhood rites and rituals have significant consequences for the education of widows' children in selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon.

The respondents unanimously agreed that the psychological effects of widowhood reduced their ability to support their children's education (M=5.00, Std Dev=0.00) They also strongly agreed that financial difficulties resulting from widowhood made it difficult to pay school fees, (M=4.97, Std Dev=0.17), increased the likelihood of school dropout, (M=4.95, Std Dev.=0.22), limited the provision of their children's school materials (M=4.94, Std Dev=0.24), and negatively affected their children's educational aspirations and future schooling opportunities (M=4.94, Std Dev=0.24)

Furthermore, respondents strongly agreed that health-related challenges reduced their ability to support their children's educational needs (M=4.69, Std Dev=0.46), emotional distress affected children's educational progress (M=4.51, Std Dev.=1.01), and some children were compelled to engage in income-generating activities because of the financial consequences of widowhood (M=4.53, Std Dev=0.86) They also agreed that widowhood-related challenges reduced their participation in school activities (M=4.38, Std Dev=1.00) However, respondents were neutral regarding the statement that widowhood-related challenges led some girl children into marriage (M=3.10, Std Dev=1.76) suggesting mixed experiences on this issue.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the psychological, financial, and physical health impacts of widowhood rites and rituals have substantial adverse consequences for children's educational access, participation, and future educational opportunities.

6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The finding of this research revealed that widows in the selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon undergo a series of widowhood rites and rituals before the burial, on the day of burial, and after the burial of their deceased husbands. The findings revealed that because of these rites and rituals, widows suffer psychological, financial, and physical health impacts, which have significant consequences for the education of their children. These findings are consistent with Willis who observed that the economic deprivation experienced by widows in Cameroon, often limits their capacity to meet the educational needs of their children.

Research Objective 1: To identify the Widowhood Rites and Rituals Practiced in Selected Communities of the North West Region of Cameroon.

Results of the findings revealed that various widowhood rites and rituals are performed before the day

of burial, on the day of burial and after burial of the deceased husband. Before the day of burial, the widow is confined in a firewood kitchen and prevented from interacting with people. Dressed naked, she is prevented from sleeping on a bed and from eating with modern utensils. On the day of burial, she may be allowed to clean only some parts of her body. She is expected to cry as much as possible with her hands raised up towards the sky. She moves round the compound crawling with her buttocks on the ground. In some cases, she is given the water with which her husband's corpse was washed to drink, to prove her innocence, that she is not responsible for the husband's death. After the burial of the husband, the widow still dressed half naked with her breasts completely exposed, is led in a solemn procession round the compound. All hair on her body is shaved, and she is taken to the stream for a 'spiritual' bath. After performing the necessary rites and rituals, the widow may be remarried or inherited at any time by one of the late husband's brothers or close relatives, with or without her consent.

Research Objective 2: To Examine the Psychological Impacts of Widowhood Rites and Rituals Practiced in Selected Communities of the North West Region of Cameroon.

The findings of this research revealed that widowhood rites and rituals have significant psychological impacts on widows in selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon. Respondents strongly agreed that widowhood practices contribute to emotional distress, anxiety, prolonged sadness, social isolation, reduced self-esteem, and poor psychological well-being. These findings are consistent with Matlabe-Dante who observed that harmful widowhood practices are associated with depression, emotional trauma, and prolonged grief among widows. The findings also support the views of Anuforo who reported that restrictive widowhood practices expose widows to psychological distress and social isolation. Similarly, Pemunta and Alubafi [14] opined that certain widowhood practices in Cameroon undermine widows' dignity and emotional well-being.

Research Objective 3: To Assess the Financial Impacts of Widowhood Rites and Rituals on Widows of Selected Communities of the North West Region of Cameroon.

The findings revealed that widowhood rites and rituals have significant financial impacts on widows in selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon. Respondents strongly agreed that widowhood practices contribute to financial hardship by limiting income-generating activities, reducing household income, increasing financial dependence on relatives, restricting access to property, and making it difficult to pay children's school fees. These findings are in agreement with the findings of Willis who noted that many widows in Cameroon are deprived of inheritance rights and property ownership following the death of their husbands, thereby increasing their economic vulnerability. The findings also agree with those of Ankiambom [15] who found that widowhood practices in the Bamenda Grassfields are frequently associated with economic deprivation and livelihood opportunities for widows. From the perspective of the Social Ecological Model these financial challenges are reinforced by family, community, and cultural systems that influence widows' access to economic resources and opportunities.

Research Objective 4: To Investigate the Physical Health Impacts of Widowhood Rites and Rituals on Widows of Selected Communities of the North West Region of Cameroon.

The finds of this study revealed that widowhood rites and rituals have significant impacts on widows in the selected areas. Respondents strongly agreed that widowhood practices contribute to sleep disturbances, backache from sleeping on bare floors, delayed access to healthcare. Physical weakness, skin infections resulting from poor hygiene, and a general decline in physical well-being. These findings agree with those of Matlabe-Danke who reported that harmful widowhood practices expose widows to various physical health challenges including fatigue, poor health, and reduced physical well-being. The findings are also in line with those of Anuforo who observed that restrictive mourning practices adversely affect widows' physical health through prolonged stress, poor living conditions and limited access to healthcare services. In the same vein, Pemunta and Alubafi observed that certain widowhood practices in Cameroon compromise widows' dignity, health, and overall quality of life.

Research Objective 5: To Determine the Consequences of Widowhood Rites and Rituals for the Education of Widows' Children in Selected Communities of the North West Region of Cameroon

The findings of this study revealed that psychological, financial and physical health impacts of widowhood rites and rituals have significant consequences for the education of widows' children in selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon. Respondents strongly agreed that widowhood-related challenges reduce widows' ability to pay school fees, provide learning materials, participate in school activities, and adequately support their children's education, thereby increasing the risk of poor academic performance and school dropout. These findings are consistent with Willis who found out that the economic deprivation experienced by widows in Cameroon often limits their capacity to meet the educational needs of their children. Similarly, Pemunta and Alubafi argued that harmful widowhood practices contribute to household poverty and social vulnerability, with adverse effects on children's welfare and educational opportunities. Viewed through the Social Ecological Model of Bronfenbrenner the educational outcomes of widows' children are shaped by the interaction of individual family, community, and societal factors, highlighting the need for interventions that protect both widows and children's rights to quality education.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- Traditional leaders in the North West Region of Cameroon should review and modify harmful widowhood rites and rituals while preserving cultural practices that promote dignity, respect and social cohesion.
- Government agencies and human rights organizations should strengthen public awareness and enforcement of laws protecting widows from property grabbing, inheritance denial, and other forms of economic exploitation.
- Religious institutions, counsellors, and community-based organizations should provide psychological support, counseling and emotional care to widows to enhance their psychological well-being during bereavement.
- The Cameroon government and her development partners should promote economic empowerment programs including vocational training, access to microcredit and livelihood support, to improve widows' financial independence.
- Educational authorities and community stakeholders should establish scholarship schemes and other educational support programs for children of widows to reduce school dropout and ensure continued access to quality education.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the types of widowhood rites and rituals on widows in selected communities of the North West Region of Cameroon, their psychological, financial, and physical health impacts on widows as well as the consequences of these impacts for the education of their children. The findings revealed that although widowhood rites and rituals remain an important aspect of cultural heritage, some of the practices impose significant psychological distress, financial hardship and physical health challenges on widows. These adverse effects also limit widows' ability to adequately support the education of their children, thereby increasing their vulnerability to poor educational outcomes. The study therefore concludes that there is a need to preserve the positive cultural values associated with widowhood while reforming the practices that undermine the dignity, health, economic well-being, and educational welfare of widows' children.

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