

# Eliminating Gender-Based Violence: Learning from the Widowhood Practices Elimination Initiative of a Women Organisation in Ozubulu, Anambra State of Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence has received increased international focus since after the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo 1994 and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. This paper reports the activities and outcome of a Christian women group initiative to eliminate dehumanising widowhood practices, a prevalent type of gender-based violence among the Igbos in Eastern Nigeria. Through in-depth interviews, group discussions, participant observations and membership records, information was elicited on the processes and outcome of the women group initiative. Evaluation was done using the community action cycle framework model for community mobilisation. The women group was able to identify and eliminate major dehumanising widowhood practices. Though women were the victims of violence, they were surprisingly also the perpetrators and astute enforcers of the practice, as well as those who vehemently opposed any form of change. Superstitious beliefs and associated fears were major reasons for opposition to change. Women can play key and effective roles in eliminating gender-based violence and in initiating and implementing programmes that guarantee their reproductive and human rights. They should, therefore, be strengthened and encouraged to champion issues that affect their well-being. (Afr J Reprod Health 2005; 9[2]: 65-75)

## RÉSUMÉ

La violence basée sur les sexes a attiré une attention internationale particulière depuis la Conférence Internationale sur la Population et le Développement qui a eu lieu au Caire en 1994 et depuis la Quatrième Conférence Mondiale sur la femme à Beijing en 1995. Cet article présente un compte rendu des activités et les résultats de l'initiative d'un groupe de femmes chrétiennes qui visent l'élimination des pratiques déshumanisantes du veuvage, un type de violence basée sur les sexes qui est commune chez les Igbo du Nigéria de l'est. A travers des interviews en profondeur, des discussions en groupe, des observations participantes et l'information concernant l'adhésion, on a pu relever des renseignements sur les processus et les résultats de l'initiative du groupe de femmes. L'évaluation a été faite à l'aide du modèle du cadre du cycle d'action pour la mobilisation de la communauté. Le groupe de femmes a pu identifier et éliminer les principales pratiques déshumanisantes. Quoique les femmes soient les victimes de la violence, elles étaient étonnamment aussi les auteurs et celles qui font obéir les pratiques et celles qui sont contre toutes formes de réforme. Les croyances superstitieuses et les craintes liées à ces superstitions ont constituées les raisons principales contre les réformes. Les femmes peuvent jouer les rôles clé et efficaces quant à l'élimination de la violence basée sur les sexes et en ce qui concerne l'initiation et la mise en application des programmes qui assurent leurs droits de l'homme et de reproduction. Il faut donc les renforcer et les encourager pour qu'elles puissent se faire les championnes des causes qui touchent à leur bien-être. (Rev Afr Santé Reprod 2005; 9[2]: 65-75)

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KEY WORDS: Widow, practices, violence, women, mobilisation

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## Introduction

Gender-based violence continues to be a serious prevailing public health problem among the Igbos in south-east Nigeria and in some developing countries.<sup>1-4</sup> Gender-based violence or violence against women refers to many types of harmful behaviour directed at women and girls because of their sex.<sup>5</sup>

In 1995 the United Nations offered the first official definition of such violence when the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. According to Article 1 of the Declaration, violence against women includes any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or private life.<sup>6</sup> It affects the physical, social, reproductive and mental wellbeing of victims.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the time the victims of violence are women and the perpetrators are men. One of such violence is dehumanising widowhood rites and practices. Dehumanising widowhood rites and practices are prevalent gender-based violence practices extensively perpetrated against widows, among the Igbos in Eastern Nigeria.<sup>7,8</sup>

Because of cultural and religious norms, superstition, fear and traditional resistance to cultural changes, the victims, who are women, condone such violence and seem to be complacent. Secondly, women do not only condone such gender-based violence but also perpetrate and perpetuate them by enforcing traditional laws and customs that infringe on the human and reproductive rights of widows and other women.<sup>8</sup>

Organised women groups, civil societies and even the churches and religious leaders also seem to lack the courage or initiative to tackle the problem because of anticipated or imagined obstacles, conflicts, recriminations or reprisals often associated with breaking through such age-

long and deep-rooted cultural structures. The case of widowhood rites is further complicated and shrouded by its association with death, burial, myths and superstitious beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

Women groups have been known, however, to be important contributors and catalysts to development and health improvement. Their contribution to poverty alleviation, health care, water and sanitation, and community development had been reported in many countries.<sup>9</sup> In Igbo land, women mobilisation movement efforts to demand and enforce their rights have been recorded.<sup>10,11</sup> The Aba women riot of 1929, where Igbo women confronted the British colonial government in protest against rumoured plan of per capita taxation of women, and Bishop Shanahan's record of women's protest against the men of a particular Igbo village for letting loose their pigs to destroy women's cocoyam crops, are examples of Igbo women's collective power and initiative to fight for their rights even before independence in 1960.<sup>10,11</sup>

Unfortunately, however, most of the activities of the women groups in health and development in developing countries are scantily published in scientific journals to avail other readers and workers the opportunity to learn from their experiences.<sup>9</sup> At best they are kept in the records of sponsoring agencies.<sup>9</sup>

Women's rights and gender issues are very sensitive issues that have received renewed international focus and interest since the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994, ICPD+5 and the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing in 1995.<sup>12</sup>

At the Fourth World Conference on Women, violence against women was one of the twelve critical areas of concern identified to be tackled in order to improve the well being of women.<sup>12</sup> Government and civil society organisations were called upon to focus action on those areas. Successful programmes and activities initiated by civil societies, especially in developing countries,

which are able to meet the challenges will be useful information especially when they are initiated and implemented by women groups, and more so in areas where difficulties are anticipated because of cultural resistance.

The growing body of evidence in the international development field repeatedly demonstrates that communities can make deep and lasting contributions to their own health and well being and through example and imitation to the health and well being of other communities.<sup>13</sup> This is even more spectacular and encouraging when such contributions are made by women in developing countries to better their lives in a cultural environment of perceived male superiority, female subordination, and gender inequities and inequality.

The objective of this study was to ascertain and evaluate the processes and outcome of the Christian women organisations' community mobilisation initiative to eliminate dehumanising widowhood practices, a prevalent form of gender-based violence in Anambra State of Nigeria.

## Study Background

The study area is Ozubulu, the headquarters of Ekwusigo Local Government Area of Anambra State in Nigeria. It is a rural community in the heart of Igbo tribe, and most of their cultural practices are typical of the Igbo tribe in south-east Nigeria. Ozubulu town has a population of 36,000 inhabitants.<sup>14</sup> Most of the inhabitants of the area are Christians of the Catholic and Anglican denominations, with the Catholics forming 75% of the population.<sup>15</sup>

In spite of the 90 years of contact with western education and Christian religion, widowhood rites and practices considered to be dehumanising are prevalent in the area.<sup>7,16</sup> In recent times, there have been conflicts between families, traditional and religious groups when some of the rites and practices are being enforced, especially when working class or fundamental Pentecostal groups are involved. Such conflicts sometimes re-

sult to open verbal and physical violence even at the places of burial, resulting in disruption of social activities, ostracisation and sanctions among disagreeing groups. Apart from affecting community life, the widow is the centre of the crisis, a situation that worsens her physical and mental state.

Ozubulu town is in Nnewi Diocese in both the Catholic and Anglican churches. Ozubulu is also the headquarters of Ozubulu deanery of the Catholic Diocese. The Catholic Church has four statutory organizations: the Catholic Men Organisation (CMO), the Catholic Women Organisation (CWO), Catholic Boys Organisation (CBO) and the Catholic Girls Organisation (CGO). The four statutory bodies coordinate the activities of men, women, boys and girls respectively and membership into an appropriate group is mandatory for all Catholic laymen.

The Catholic Women Organisation (CWO) is structured hierarchically such that there is an apex executive committee at the Ozubulu Parish level, and the zones at the village levels. Each zone sends delegates or officers to the apex or central executive during their quarterly meetings. A general meeting of all the women holds every year in August – the popular "August meeting". All Catholic women of Ozubulu living in towns outside Ozubulu form zones wherever they live and attend meetings as in the home zones. They are classified as CWO Abroad. This organisational structure ensures grassroot membership and participation.

Between January and June 2000, four major conflicts and events precipitated the CWO interest in and action on widowhood practices. On one occasion, a widow was alleged to have maltreated her husband and had not taken good care of him when he was on his sick bed. The *umu ada* (the daughters union) accused her of being responsible for her husband's death, and ruled that if the woman was contesting, then she should prove her innocence by drinking the washings of her husband's corpse. Where she refused to drink, she would be ostracised and dragged along the streets to her father's house. This is an ac-

cepted traditional practice (igu mmiri ozu). Another option was for her to crawl over her husband's corpse (ige ukwu ozu). The women relations of the widow and some CWO members at the funeral resisted this and conflict ensued.

Another case involved a young widow working in a bank in Lagos. She was required to restrict her movement and not go for work for six months. She was to be in the village, confined to the compound in mourning dress. The widow explained that she would lose her job and disrupt her children's schooling in Lagos. The community sanctioned her for breaking the traditional norm of not mourning her husband for the customary duration (ilu uju). The umu ada fined her the sum of ₦10,000.00 and compelled her to stay at her father's house for one month as a punishment.

In the third event, the umu ada refused to shave the head of the widow because they alleged that she did not show enough sorrow that her husband died. They alleged that she was conversing freely and even smiled with sympathisers. It was a taboo for a widow to laugh or look cheerful when her husband has not been buried. She was appropriately fined for the misdemeanour. Not shaving one's hair for the husband is a sign of not mourning him and is feared to attract the dead husband's wrath on the widow and other members of the family.

The fourth event was that of a widow who died six months after her husband's death. The Christian community gathered for her burial and funeral, but other members of her village resisted and insisted that the woman should be thrown into the evil forest without mourning for her since she committed an abomination by dying before the end of the traditional mourning period.

## Materials and Method

The study was carried out from January to December 2001. In-depth interviews, group dis-

cussions, participant observation and records from meetings were used to elicit needed information. One of the authors serves as the chairman of the parish council and a member of the town union executive, a position that got him involved in the dynamics of advocacy employed by the women. The second author is an active member and executive member of the CWO and was one of the core actors in the programme. Minutes of the discussions in ten meetings of the CWO with regard to widowhood practices were recorded. Thirty in-depth interviews of the officers of the CWO at various levels, twenty five in-depth interviews of widows and ten in-depth interviews of women elders were conducted. Fifteen informal group discussions were also recorded. These were recorded on tapes and hand notes and later transcribed and compiled. Notes on the minutes of the meeting of the CWO were kindly made accessible by the secretary. The researchers attended burials and some of the meetings where most of the events occurred and took notes.

## Evaluation

The activities of the women were evaluated as a social and health mobilisation activity using the community action cycle process framework developed by Health Communications Partnership, and the John Hopkins Population Information Programme<sup>13</sup> (Figure 1). The community action cycle process is drawn from theories and concepts of social science systems approach, which has been defined as a process of public and private dialogue through which people define who they are, what they want and how they can get it.<sup>13</sup> The success and sustenance of the programme were also evaluated one year after the inception using the monitoring and evaluation reports of the women groups and personal observations of the researchers, who lived in the community.

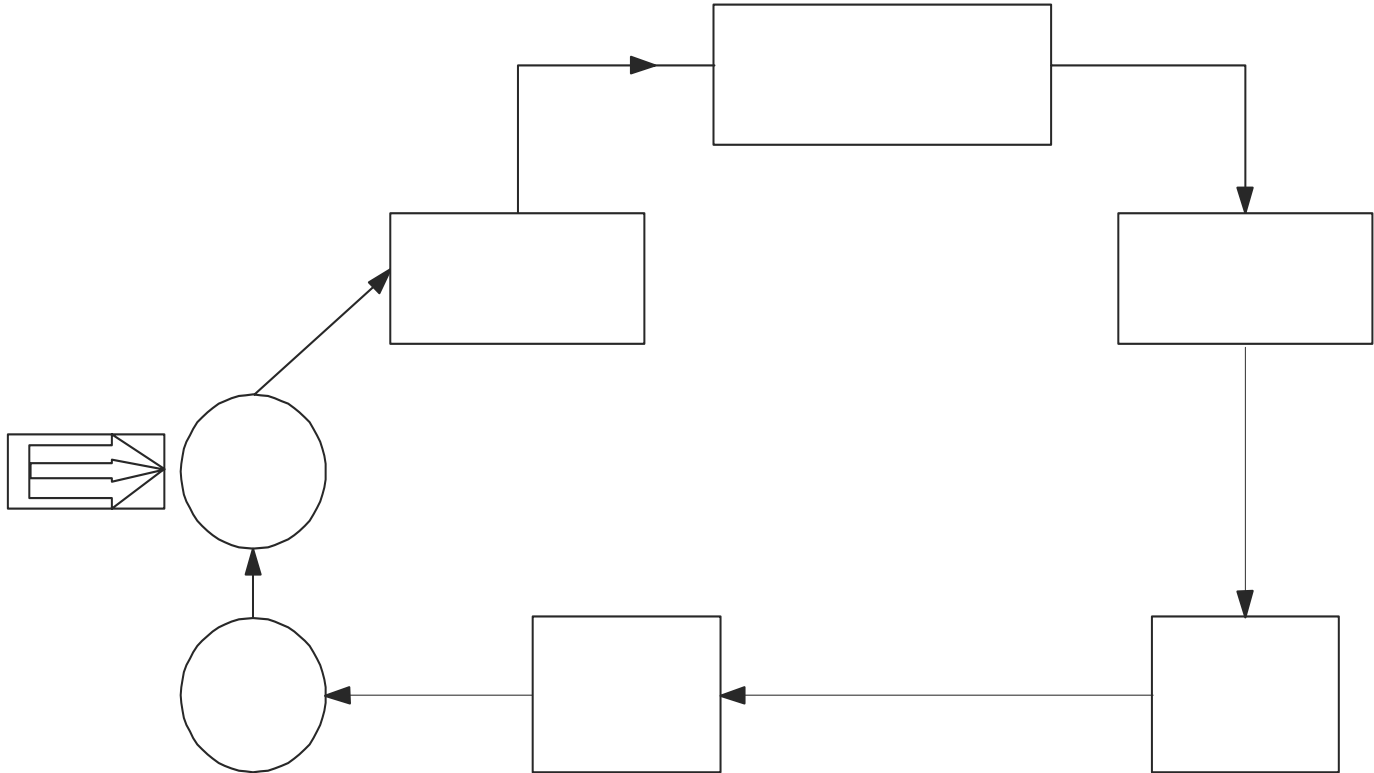


Figure 1 Community action cycle for community mobilisation

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## Results

### Preparation to Mobilise and Organising the Community for Action

The central executives of the CWO held six meetings between July and December 2000 to deliberate on widowhood practices in the area. Eighty to one hundred members were present in each meeting and were made up of representatives or delegates from the zones within and outside the community. They had brainstorming sessions where they relived and narrated experiences of widowhood. They agreed that it affected their physical and mental health and infringed their human and reproductive rights. They identified the principal dehumanising widowhood rites and practices to include the following:

1. Drinking washings from husband's corpse to exonerate wife from accusations of killing her husband.
2. Crawling over husband's corpse (ige fe ukwu ozu) for the same purpose of exoneration.
3. A widow not having a bath until after eight market days (one month) when she would be led to the river by twelve midnight to bathe (iwu ahu).
4. A widow having to sit on bare floor during the period of mourning.
5. A widow having to cry aloud to the hearing of the villagers almost all nights to demonstrate grief and that she misses her husband throughout the first month of mourning.
6. Restriction of the woman's movement to market, church, social events for the one year period of mourning.
7. Loss of right of inheritance, if she has no male child.
8. Compulsory fasting on the day of her husband's burial.
9. Punitive refusal to shave the widow's hair by the umuada.
10. Long mourning and restriction period.

11. Wife inheritance or forced marriage by close relatives at the end of the mourning period.
12. Stigmatising a widow who died within the mourning period and refusing her corpse burial rites.

The women also observed that women are the victims, perpetrators and enforcers of the sanctions. The patrilineal daughters (umuada) are the key perpetrators and enforcers who most of the time are prejudiced against their dead relations' wives for past disagreements or misunderstandings. They see the widowhood period as a time for vendetta. The women reasoned that umuada are not faceless people but members of the women group, and an umuada in her father's village could one day be a widow in another village. It is therefore women fighting women and, therefore, they must collectively stop the practice for the benefit of every woman.

The women identified fear and superstition as another obstacle to eliminating widowhood practices. There are beliefs that the spirit of the dead husband hovers around and would want to continue to associate with the wife. The spirits might be malevolent if the widow does not subscribe to widowhood rights. The women resolved to tackle this issue through prayers and by keeping widows company to strengthen and encourage them and by educating them that most often all the beliefs are superstitious.

### Planning Together

The executive body wanted all the identified practices, except loss of right of inheritance and wife inheritance, to be eliminated. They reasoned that taking up these two issues would jeopardize their chances of achieving others, since they are core cultural practices that touch on customary law. They agreed that these two issues could be tackled later if they succeeded with the first initiative. In their conclusive meeting, they resolved as follows:

1. To reduce the mourning period to six months.
2. To reduce confinement to home to one month.
3. Widows should have the option of wearing black or white as mourning dress for not more than six months. Widows should however not wear necklace, earrings or coloured dress.
4. Laws stipulating not bathing and ritual bathing should be abolished.
5. On no account should widows drink washings from the dead husband's corpse.
6. Widows who die within the customary mourning period should be accorded full burial rights.
7. Christian women of every zone should shave the widow as soon as her husband is buried, and should not allow the umuada to do the shaving so as not to give the opportunity to victimise or prescribe fines.
8. Widows should comport themselves and avoid sexual activities that could make them pregnant while mourning their husbands.
9. Zones that go against these recommendations should be penalised.

### Acting Together/Implementation Advocacy

#### Advocacy with religious leaders

Having taken these decisions, the next line of action was advocacy. The women group proceeded to meet the parish priests and parish councils, who are the governing bodies in the churches, to solicit their support and encouragement.

#### Advocacy with town union and traditional leaders

The town union also has a women wing. Most of her members are also actors in the CWO programme. They collaborated with CWO delegates to win the support of town union leaders. The support of the Obi-in-Council, comprising the town warrant chief and his cabinet, was also solicited.

### Networking with other women groups

The CWO met with other women groups in other religious denominations, namely, the Anglican Guild and the Mothers Union, and the women wing of the Ozubulu Development Union (ODU). These groups simultaneously initiated widowhood practice reforms. The idea that widowhood practices is tantamount to women punishing women was well assimilated and used as a strategy to overcome resistance from the umuada and other women.

### Handling opposition

In anticipation of opposition from the men and some influential community leaders, some of the outspoken ones were conferred with titles of patrons of the CWO. Through this induction they won them over as advocates and supporters even before the resolution was made public. This strategy was the foremost in forestalling resistance to change especially from the men folk. There were however few oppositions from elderly women who insisted that they would mourn their husbands for not less than one year, and did not support the wearing of white clothing for mourning. The CWO considered this a generation gap issue, which will fizzle away and granted them a silent concession.

There were also some minor opposition from the old elderly men who objected to wearing white clothes instead of black for mourning. They felt that it is still an abomination for a widow to die or to get pregnant while still mourning her husband. Such dead woman should not be accorded burial rites, while the pregnant one must go through traditional cleansing rites. The women group adjudged that although these issues are rare occurrences they are unacceptable, as they are fundamentally discriminatory, since husbands who die while still mourning their wives are accorded full burial rites. The women however agreed that it is morally wrong both traditionally and in the Christian religion for a widow to get pregnant outside marriage. It is also a health risk for the

woman. The women decided to scale up health and moral education of such women to help them navigate through sexual and reproductive problems especially during widowhood.

During the January 2001 meeting, the general assembly of the CWO accepted the reformed widowhood practices and it became operational. The town union also formally endorsed the women's recommendations during their annual general meeting.

### Monitoring and Evaluating Together

The women set a task force at all zonal levels to monitor activities and enforce sanctions if need arises. From the evaluation report within the first one year (December 2001), there was a hundred per cent compliance in all the areas. The women groups were also able to contain oppositions.

### Researcher's Observation and Evaluation

All the 58 cases of women whose husbands died within the one year across the CWO zones complied with the CWO resolution on widowhood rites. Even old women who wanted a longer mourning period were persuaded by their children to keep to the rules. An old widow expressed:

My daughters insisted that we should go for the *iyi pu akwa uju* (unclothing) ceremony, which marks the end of mourning in six months. I agreed since they also felt satisfied that six months was enough to mourn their father.

### Discussion

The successful role played by the Catholic Women Organisation in modifying widowhood practices and eliminating dehumanising practices demonstrates that women groups can be effective instruments in eliminating gender-based violence and protecting the human and reproductive rights

of women. This is very significant because reproductive rights and gender-based issues are often considered sensitive and culture specific.<sup>17</sup> They are therefore a difficult terrain forbidden for women to navigate. Women activists and feminists who champion women reproductive rights are often branded as too civilised, wild, confrontational and culture hostile.

Igbo women have in the past organised and fought for their social rights as in the historical *Aba women riot of 1929*, where they protested against alleged imposition of capitation tax on women by the ruling British colonial government.<sup>11</sup> They also organised uprising against the men who defiantly and carelessly let their pigs destroy the women's *cocoyam* farms.<sup>10</sup> However, as noted earlier, such actions were against issues that mainly affected their economic well being. The idea of challenging issues that adversely affect their reproductive and sexual health as well is, therefore, a welcome and salutary development.

One of the important characteristics of this programme was that the women identified their needs by themselves, were totally responsible for the planning, implementation, evaluation and sustenance of the programme. This resulted in their owning the programme, a motivation that ensured participation of all members in obeying and enforcing the agreed practices. This is a best practice in community mobilisation and participation and contains all the essential elements of community actions cycle for community mobilisation. This is a very encouraging development in women development programmes. One of the reasons for failure or non-sustainability of most programmes is that when they are initiated and funded by NGOs or governments, once the funding body withdraws or the government changes, the programme collapses. Anyika has observed that the fierce women riot of 1929 brought into focus the latent surprising powers of initiative and dynamism in the Igbo women and called for positive measures of developing these qualities in a very constructive manner.<sup>11</sup>



In Nigeria, many programmes started by the wives of the governors aimed at improving the welfare of women fizzled away when they left the seat of power because they were conceived and funded by government without community participation.

The ability of the women group in socializing and advocacy is also demonstrated in this study. In Igbo leadership dynamics, and especially in gender sensitive issues, men detest challenge by women.<sup>18</sup> The strategic plan of appointing influential men as patrons and using them to contain or pre-empt opposition reflects their mastery of the culture antics and politics. To achieve their aim, direct confrontation with the men leaders would have resulted in failure. This also suggests that men could be supportive of programmes that improve women's lives even if culturally gender biased, provided the men are involved from its conception.

Ability to penetrate the hitherto perceived impermeable traditional and religious structures that nurture dehumanising widowhood practices and gender inequity will certainly raise the morale and status of the women. It will also motivate and empower them to tackle other gender rights and development issues, especially the non-inheritance of land and property by women. It may also be a promising entry point to tackling issues surrounding intimate partner violence, which is a prevalent gender-based violence in the area and which to a large extent is considered culture-sensitive and specific and, therefore, must be solved within accepted cultural norms. These norms are of course biased in favour of males.

Education of and awareness creation among women leaders imparted on their members to believe that enforcing widowhood practices is women dehumanising women. It was a strong and sharp strategy that achieved the desired goals in limiting women opposition and gaining support.

It is remarkable but not surprising that in spite of the education and awareness creation there were still some pockets of opposition to change from the women. The older women and some

uneducated women saw the changes as cultural radicalism and confrontation, and a challenge to the gods. They could not understand, for instance, how they can mourn their husbands whom they lived with for many years for only six months. This is not surprising because in the culture of the area, death and burial rites are often shrouded in mystery and fear. Not mourning one's husband could result in the spirit of the dead husband striking the woman. It is this superstition that fuels the practice and especially that of not according burial rites to a widow who dies before the end of the mourning period. Since this fear might be one of the reasons for the opposition and could affect the mental health of the widows, there is need for education to allay their fears. After all if men mourning their wives could go about unfettered and the gods and their dead wives do not strike, it will be discriminatory, unfair, unjust and inequitable for widows to be treated differently by the same gods and society.

Handling of opposition with silent concession and biding for opportune time by the women is a commendable conflict resolution tactic. Resistance to change is a common problem in health systems reform. Skills in managing resistance to change, as demonstrated by the women group, are important for navigating conflict-prone cultural terrain. However, it is important for the women to understand and claim all their fundamental human rights under the provisions of the Nigerian constitution and international treaties and agreements to which Nigeria is a signatory. Chapter IV, sections 34 and 35 of the Nigerian constitution<sup>19</sup> specifically provide for right to dignity of human person and right to personal liberty. In particular, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), signed on 23rd April 1984 and ratified by Nigeria without reservation on 13th June 1985 have provisions for protection of specific rights of women.<sup>20</sup> It is noteworthy that to address these issues the Nigerian government has established a

Ministry of Women Affairs. There is need, however, for the ministry to scale up activities to integrate and involve women groups at grassroot level so that community and local perspectives and peculiarities could be captured and addressed. Christian women groups, as demonstrated in this study, could be good entry points for such women mobilisation.

The co-operation and encouragement of religious leaders is worthy of note and commendation. It illustrates that religious bodies and groups can play tremendous positive roles in the affairs of women.

## Conclusion

Women groups can play effective role in eliminating gender-based violence and in initiating and implementing programmes that will ensure their reproductive and human rights. Women groups should therefore be mobilised, strengthened and encouraged to champion issues that affect their well being. There is need for education and enlightenment to allay the fears of some widows and women about superstitious beliefs that suggest supernatural recriminations for those who do not obey or enforce the dehumanising rites.

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