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WIDOWHOOD RITUALS: A GENDER- BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST THE DIGNITY AND RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) remains one of the most serious threats to women, most especially the widows in Africa, particularly in Nigeria. Widows have often been faced with traumatic experiences in African communities at the instance of losing their husbands which is occasioned by death. In Africa, widows go through a lot of hardship that stems from the society, the husband's family and from tradition. The inhuman treatment meted on the widows are carried out as part of culture, and the rituals vary from one culture to the other. Most of the treatments are geared towards dehumanizing their victims which is always a painful and psychological experience that can affect the individual throughout her lifetime. It is an infringement on the rights of the widows as human beings created in the image and likeness of God. This paper, focusing on the plight of widows in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, establishes the fact that widowhood rituals is a form of gender-based violence against women which dehumanizes them, and perhaps one of the most prevalent violation of human rights experienced today. It looks at an array of harmful widowhood rites in Africa and how gender and its attendant problems hamper the

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woman's human rights. It also analyses the teaching of the Catholic Church on human rights. It is believed that if women are empowered through education aimed at improving their knowledge about their rights, there will be increasing opportunities to liberate themselves from the violence against them.

Keywords: Gender-based Violence, Human Rights, Tradition, Widowhood Rituals

Introduction

From the cultural perspective, gender-based violence is predominant in the world societies, especially in Nigeria. Gender-based violence is a universal phenomenon whose practice cuts across all societies irrespective of income, wealth, status, class, age or culture. The worst affected are women who live in extremely difficult conditions. Violence against women is perhaps the most prevalent violation of human rights experienced today. The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa describes violence against women as:

all acts perpetrated against women which cause or could cause them physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm, including the threat to take such acts; or to undertake the imposition of arbitrary restrictions on or deprivation of fundamental freedoms in private or public life in peace time and during situations of armed conflicts or of war.¹

The principal characteristic of gender-based violence is that it occurs against women precisely because of their gender and emphasizes that it is rooted in inequality between women and men. This inequality can be described as discrimination rooted in the socio-culturally ascribed notion of masculinity as superior to femininity.

In describing what constitutes GBV, many scholars limit its examples to cases of domestic violence, sexual exploitation, forced early marriage, rape and female genital mutilation. However, GBV can also be experienced in other traditional practices harmful to women among which widowhood rituals in many places in Africa is. Widowhood can be described as the state or period of mourning by a widow or widower. A man becomes a widower at the death of his wife, and the woman becomes a widow at the death of her husband. In most African communities, widows remain victims of harmful traditional rites, referred to as widowhood rites or rituals that are associated with the passing away of their beloved spouses. This is

¹The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa 1j www.achpr.org/instruments/women-protocol/ (accessed 24.1.2019).

regarded as GBV because, it is only applicable to women as part of culture. During the period of mourning, the widow is expected to undergo a series of rituals which range from those designed to express grave and adequate sorrow for the loss suffered to those designed to cleanse the woman from her non-involvement in her husband's death to those designed to remove the bond that links a spouse to the dead one.² Therefore, anyone who fails to fulfil the requirements of the rituals risks social exclusion and family or personal calamity.

Widowhood rites in Africa can be regarded as gender-based violence against women which inflict untold hardships on widows. They impact negatively on the life, health and wellbeing of women. Many scholars have described widowhood and widowhood rites in various ways. According to Aderinto, widows are no more than "Wives of the Graves."³ Odudoye describes widowhood period as a dreadful moment for African women.⁴ The rituals attached to this tradition have also been variously described as harmful⁵ odious⁶ as well as, inhuman to women.⁷ The widows undergo oppressive and humiliating practices that violate their human dignity and rights.

In Africa, according to the popular belief, deaths even in circumstances that the causes are natural and explicable are attributed to evil factors; no man dies from a natural cause, even at an old age. His death must necessarily be caused by someone and that person is likely to be his wife.⁸ On this Erinoshio points out that the ordeal of a widow begins with accusations and victimization by the next of kin of her spouse who hold the view that she (the widow) is responsible for the death. This is evident in the writings of Konda:

²Legal Research and Resources Development Center (LRRDC), *Women's Right as Human Rights the Nigeria Experience*, Lagos, 1995, 53.

³Adeyinka Aderinto, "Wives of the Graves: A Study of Widowhood Rites and Wife Inheritance in Ondo and Ekiti States," in *Rights and Widowhood Rites in Nigeria*, Ibadan: Polygraphics Venture Ltd, 2000, 86-112, at 92.

⁴Mercy Oduyoye, "Women and Ritual in Africa," in *the Will to Arise*, ed. Mercy Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, New York: Orbis Books, 1997, 157-172, at 159.

⁵Ify M. Chima, "Psychological Rehabilitation of Widows through Counseling and Use of Therapeutic Strategies," *NAWACS: Journal of Women Academics* 1, 1 (2006) 206 - 215, at 209.

⁶Ethel Idialu, "The Inhuman Treatment of Widows in African Communities," *Current Research Journal of Social Science* 4, 1 (2012) 6-11, at 8.

⁷Barthlomew Chidili, *Provocative Essays on the Practices of Religion and Culture in African Society*, Jos: Fab Anieh Nigeria Ltd 2005, 173.

⁸Nnamdi Ugweeze, *Cultural Practices against Women in Eastern Nigeria*, Port Harcourt: Winners Int. Enterprises, 1997, 53.

When a WIFE dies, society sympathizes with the widower. When a HUSBAND dies, the community starts questioning the circumstances surrounding the death of the man and examines 'invincible' motives that his wife must have killed him. Without any proof or trial, widows are accused of killing their husbands.⁹

According to Onyenuchie widowhood is a traumatic life experience and process that naturally should evoke sympathetic treatment. However, in Africa, the reverse is always the case. Through widowhood rituals, a woman who has just been bereaved of her husband is exposed to humiliating physical and psychological violence; often in the name of culture, usually by those who should console and support her in her time of bereavement.¹⁰ Widows are discriminated against and treated inhumanly. They experience economic hardship, emotional and social problems; so, they pass through a period of loneliness which manifests in so many ways. In all these, the widow's dignity and rights are violated.¹¹

Widowhood Practices in Africa

Widowhood is a universal problem; certainly, it is a reality for as long as people are born and people die and a problem wherever there is the institution of marriage. Bereavement is a social fact in any culture, but reactions and practices relating to this vary from culture to culture. These practices are considered culturally appropriate, however, they deprive the widow of her fundamental human rights. The cultural practices have made women beasts of burden in our society. Widows in Africa generally are subjected to a number of cultural taboos and practices which are overwhelmingly oppressive and dehumanizing. Okoye observes that in Cameroon, widowhood is a very painful experience. In the event of the death of a man, the wife is always the suspect and because of that, she is subjected to harmful and humiliating treatment. Her hair is scraped off and, in certain areas of Cameroon, her pubic region. This is accredited with some cleansing or purifying powers. The mourning period is usually for two years.¹²

⁹ Konda Delphine, "Widowhood Rites: The Silent Pain of a Widow," www.asafeworldforwomen.org/safe-world.../, (accessed 28/12/2018)

¹⁰Taiwo Onyenuchie, "Widowhood Rites and Wife Inheritance in Edo and Delta States," in *Rights and Widowhood Rites in Nigeria*, Ibadan: Polygraphics Ventures Ltd. 2007, 48.

¹¹Betty Potash, ed., *Widows in African Societies: Choices and Constraints*, California, Stanford University Press 1986, 144.

¹² Pat Okoye, *Widowhood: A National or Cultural Tragedy*, Enugu: Nucik Publisher 1998, 46.

In Ikot Ekpene, as examined by Ugweuze, the very moment the husband dies, his wife is immediately confined to a room where she is forced to sit on a floor as long as the dead is not buried. The widow is not to wear shoes, sandals or slippers nor is she allowed to cut her nails or change her dress as she would have wished. She is also not allowed to have her bath no matter how long she is under confinement until after the remains had been buried. When she is permitted to change her dress after the burial, the new dress must however be black. This is followed by shaving and cutting of her nails to show a complete separation with the dead. The worst of all is that husband will be chosen for her from within the confines of the extended family of the dead, hence, she becomes part of the properties of the dead man to be inherited.¹³

According to Onyenuchie in Edo State, women who lose their husbands, in most cases are accused of killing their husbands and as such subjected to all kinds of trials and ordeal. In Afemai land of Edo State, for instance, widows are treated as outcast. A widow is not allowed to have a bath, nor wash her hands after eating. She is not to change her clothes or underwear. She will have to sit and sleep on the bare floor during her period of confinement. Sometimes, widows have to go into the thick forest at night and recite some incantations for the purpose of "cleansing." They are also made to drink the water used to bathe the corpses of their deceased husbands; they are shaved and kept in seclusion for months while consultations are on as to the real cause of death of the man. The widow is not expected to receive condolence visits from sympathizers during the period of mourning, she is to be re-married by a relative of the late husband, she is to sit on the floor or be naked during any period of the husband's burial rite, weep and wail loudly at intervals and she must remain in confinement after the death of the husband for the given period dictated by tradition. In most cases, she must vacate the matrimonial home for the relatives of the man.¹⁴

Widows suffer a disproportionate form of ritual cleansing compared to widowers in Igbo culture. According to Nwezi, in Igbo land, the widow's ordeal starts immediately after the husband's death. The relatives demand documents pertaining to their husband's property, including land, investments and bank accounts. She also points out that the widows are regarded as ritually unclean at the demise of their husband and so they could not touch any object,

¹³Ugweuze, *Cultural Practices against Women in Eastern Nigeria*, 55.

¹⁴Onyenuchie, "Widowhood Rites and Wife Inheritance in Edo and Delta States," 76.

including them without defilement. So, sticks were given to them to scratch themselves to avoid defilement by touching their body.¹⁵

Ojigbo gave a list of the inhuman treatment meted on the widows in Igbo land as follow: scraping or cutting of hair (on the head and pubic area) with a blunt razor, crying loudly for long and sustained periods, lying down or sleeping next to the corpse of the dead spouse, forced to drink water which has been used to wash the dead spouse, stripped naked or made to bathe in public, jeered or pushed around if she fails to cry loud enough or long enough, made to sit on a hard floor while she cries, dressed in filthy clothes or rags as a sign of mourning, subjected to hurtful comments and possibly accused of causing the death of her spouse, prevented from washing or having a bath for a given period, forced to eat from unwashed bowls, requested to be in a period of mourning for one year.¹⁶

Among the Isiokpo people of Afe, Tasié reveals that there are elaborate widowhood rites whose twofold aims are severing the marital and conjugal ties between the deceased and his widow and preparing the widow for the arduous task of self-reliance. As soon as it is confirmed that a man has drawn his last breath, the normal life pattern of his wife is suspended and immediately replaced with innumerable restrictions. She is forbidden to attend to her farms or go to the stream to fetch water. For it is believed that the ghost spirit of her husband is lurking around to bring harm upon her. She is also prohibited to cook her food and those of her household.¹⁷ According to him, the Isiokpo believe that to cook is an expression of merriment and joy. More importantly, one of the cardinal duties of a wife to her husband is to prepare his meals. Now that he is no more, this important duty should be proscribed temporarily.

Tasié also reveals that the widow is made to wear a pad, like menstruating women do, and her entire body is painted with kaolin. Placed beside her or at the entrance of the room where she is confined is an old blunt and disused machete. Dressed in this fashion, the widow appears extremely unattractive and unpleasant. This mourning attire of the widow is a deliberate design to make her appear distasteful and repulsive to the ghost spirit of her deceased

¹⁵ Esther Nwezi, *Widowhood Practices: The Imo State Experience in Widowhood Practices in Imo State*, Owerri: Government Printer, 1989, 126.

¹⁶ Osai Ojigbo, "Culture and Human Rights: Challenging Cultural Excuses for Gender-Based Violence," www.daughtersofafrica.org accessed 28/12/2018)

¹⁷ George Tasié, "Between the Farm and the Market: A Study of the Impact of Belief System on Occupational Choice among the Isiokpo in Afe," *Journal of Minorities Studies* 7, 1 (2005) 38-47, at 42.

husband who, it is believed, would still want to perform his marital and conjugal duties to her. The pad which the widow wears at this stage of mourning is part of an attempt to prevent the ghost spirit of the deceased sexual access and to hood-wink him into believing that his widow is menstruating. The old blunt machete placed by the widow, or at the door, or inside the room where the widow is confined is aimed at scaring the ghost spirit away from the room where the widow is confined.¹⁸ He then concludes that in a way African widowhood rites are the products of the instinct of self-preservation which society has created to protect and safeguard the widow against the vengeful ghost spirit of her deceased husband.¹⁹ This is also evident in Osakwe that the tendency in contemporary Nigeria has been for men to claim that the mourning rites are to protect the widows from being “hunted by their late husbands’ spirit.”²⁰

In summary, an array of harmful widowhood rites in some communities in Africa include: Swearing on the dead body of husband, making her to eat kola-nut placed on the dead body of the deceased, making her to eat from a particular plate with her left hand for the period of mourning, forcing her to marry a relation of the deceased husband, making her to go into the distant bush alone in the dark during the mourning period, making the woman during the mourning period to expose her naked body outside house both morning/evening, making the woman to drink from the water used in washing the deceased husband’s body, making the woman to sleep with the dead body of the deceased husband, dispossessing them of property or disinheritance, prolonged mourning, the woman is forced out from matrimonial home, the woman is forced to shave her hair, deprivation of basic personal hygiene example not allowing her to take her bath for days, she is forced to wail incessantly to remorse and grief.²¹ In fact, the words of Izuora summarizes the plight of widows in Africa: “A man dies but it is the widow who lies in state!”²²

¹⁸George Tasié, “Between the Farm and the Market...,” 43.

¹⁹George Tasié, “African Widowhood Rites: A Bane or Boom for the African Woman,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3, 1 (2013) 10-18, at 13.

²⁰George Osakwe, “Voices: Findings of a Research into Reproduction Rights of Women in Nigeria,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Studies* 1, 2 (1995) 17-28 at 25.

²¹UNICEF, Center for Gender and Social Policy Studies, *National Baseline Survey of Positive and Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting Women and Girls in Nigeria*, Ile Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University, 1998.

²²Ozioma Izuora, quoted in Anthony E. Onyeocha, *The Cry of the African Widow*, Owerri: Opanto Publication, 2014.

Widowhood Practices: A Gender-Based Violence against the Dignity and Rights of Women

The principal characteristic of gender-based violence is that it occurs against women precisely because of their gender and this violates their rights as human beings. Jack Donnelly describes human rights as those rights that are inherent to all human beings irrespective of nationality, sex, ethnic group, colour, religion, language, etc.²³ Every human person is entitled to human rights without discrimination. They are things due to human beings simply because they are human beings. Looking critically at this definition of human rights, customary practices of widowhood rites are GBV against the fundamental human rights of the widows. They impose special hardships and vulnerabilities on women. The widows in Africa find themselves in a situation in which they cannot live normal life after the death of their husbands. Through the traditional practices, they are subjected to suffering multiple human rights violation from the community and in-laws.

Considering the definition of violence against women given above, widowhood rituals are practices that rip widows of their respect, human rights and dignity. Article 20 of the Protocol to the African Charter caters for situations where widows are subjected to all sorts of degrading and humiliating treatment by virtue of their status as widows. It makes clear that States shall take appropriate legal measures to ensure that widows enjoy all human rights through the implementation of the following provisions:

- a) that widows are not subjected to inhuman, humiliating or degrading treatment;
- b) a widow shall automatically become the guardian and custodian of her children, after the death of her husband, unless this is contrary to the interests and the welfare of the children;
- c) a widow shall have the right to remarry, and in that event, to marry the person of her choice.

Also, article 21(1) addresses the problems associated with inheritance as follows: "A widow shall have the right to an equitable share in the inheritance of the property of her husband. A widow shall have the right to continue to live in the matrimonial house. In case of remarriage, she shall retain this right if the house belongs to her or she has inherited it."²⁴ It is evident from these provisions that

²³Jack Donnelly, *Human Rights as Natural Right*, New York: Alba House 1992, 19.

²⁴The Protocol to the African Charter, 21

the Women's Protocol to the African Charter has therefore made commendable strides in promoting and protecting the rights of all women, widows inclusive.

However, despite of all these, women, and most especially widows, almost all over the world are still facing gross violations of their rights. The examples of widowhood practices above, are demeaning and degrading because they reduce a widow's self-worth in so many ways. The practices are limited to widows while widowers are sympathized with. Erinoshu points out that in the few instances that men are required to undergo some 'cleansing rituals' the procedures are much more simple than what their females counterparts experience. The most dehumanizing widowhood rites occur as a result of the inequalities between men and women. This state of affairs is attributable to certain perceptions that these practices are an integral part of custom and culture and must therefore be acceptable.²⁵

Widowhood rites are thus another classic form of discrimination against women that violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity. Thus this is the breach of article 6 of the UDHR which states: "All are equal before the law..."²⁶ The imposition of widowhood practices in present day maintains unequal power relations for women and perpetuates the belief in the superiority of men over women, through the imbalance of severity in cleansing rituals. Sossou's exposé explains it:

The behavior surrounding mourning is inherently gendered. Rituals are more to do with exalting the position of the dead man than allowing a real outlet for the widow's grief... Far more restrictions are placed on a widow than on a widower. It is widows, not widowers, who must endure the most humiliating rituals in relation...²⁷

The most exploitative practice concerns the disposal of property. At the death of her husband, all her husband's properties are eventually taken away from her without considering her situation and circumstances. Boparai points out that in the event of a husband's death, and in the absence of an older son, his brothers or male relations embark on what is tantamount to looting his property or asset disregarding the widow's joint or independent contribution.

²⁵Layi Erinoshu, *Widowhood Rites in Nigeria: Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children*, Lagos, Macmillan, 2000, 18.

²⁶ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml. (Accessed 29.10.2012).

²⁷Marie-Antoinette Sossou, "Widowhood Practices in West Africa: The Silent Victims," *International Journal of Social Welfare* 11, 2 (2002) 201-209, at 202.

Under customary law, which governs most marriages in Nigeria, a wife has absolutely no right to the husband's property or income.²⁸ It is evident from this that the problem of the inhuman treatment of the widows is with the patriarchal structure of African society. Patriarchy reinforces widowhood rites by placing more value on the lives of men over women. According to Kalra and Bhugra the shameful widowhood rituals which violate women's dignity and human rights are based on the false premise of male superiority and social and cultural inferiority of women. A woman is regarded as a property under African customary laws.²⁹ Contrary to The Charter for the Rights of Widows (Article 2), many widows are denied their right to inheritance. Since they are perceived as inheritable property themselves according to the customary laws, it goes without saying that they have no entitlement to property ownership on the occasion of the death of their husbands. This is a great form of human rights violation.

Also, a cultural rite that confines a widow to a house for months, depending on the culture, infringes on article 13 of the UDHR, which guarantees freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state. A lot of sanctions placed on widows by the society make it difficult for women to express their viewpoint on widowhood. Widows do not talk about themselves either for fear of what their kin may say or think about their outspoken nature, so they remain silent; they constantly hide behind their masks and wear smiling faces even in the face of hardship and deprivation. One may then ask: How much choice do the widows really have because it is known that the African woman seldom expresses herself, since she has been indoctrinated by her growing up in an exploitative sexist society?³⁰ As a result of this she bottles up most of the time and she resigns to fate. Hence, the widows could be regarded as silent victims who suffer cruel and dehumanizing cultural and ritual practices as a mourning process for their dead spouses.

Despite the fact that Nigeria is a signatory to almost all of the international conventions on women's rights, which heralded the national gender policy to promote gender equity, and despite its ban

²⁸ Harinder Boparai, "Women in Family: Law and Attitudes: The Nigerian Experience," *Nigerian Women in Social Change*, ed. Simi Afonja and Bisi Aina, Ile-Ife, Obafemi Awolowo University Press Ltd, 1995, 145.

²⁹ Kalra and Bhugra, "Sexual Violence against Women: Understanding Cross-cultural Intersections," *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 55, 3 (2013) 244-259, at 254.

³⁰ Richard F. Stratton, "The Shallow Grave: Archetypes of Female Experience in African Fiction," *Research in African Literatures* 19, 2 (1988) 25-34, at 28.

by Section 34(1) of the 1999 Constitution, which guarantees the rights of all against torture and other inhuman or degrading treatment, her efforts have not translated into the expected social sphere for the women folk.³¹ Women, as a result, continue to be at the receiving end of violence in Nigeria. The struggle for the dignity and equal rights of women is the global human and civil rights struggle of our time. The need to recognize women as having equal worth as men and allow them to fully exercise their human rights is increasingly urgent due to the resurgence of divisions in today's world.

The Church and Promotion of Human Rights

The basis for a Catholic teaching on human rights is the origin and destiny of human beings, which is God Himself. Beginning with Genesis, Scripture teaches that women and men are created in God's image (cf. Gen 1:27). Jesus himself always respected the human dignity of women. Pope John Paul II reminds us that "Christ's way of acting, the Gospel of his words and deeds, is a consistent protest against whatever offends the dignity of women."³² The Church sees all human rights as the embodiment of fundamental natural characteristics of every human person and this endowed him/her with special dignity. Thus *Gaudium et Spes* gives a comprehensive list of necessary things for a dignified life:

food, clothing, housing, the right to freely choose state of life and set up a family, the right to education and work, to good name, to respect, to proper knowledge, the right to act according to the dictates of conscience and to safeguard one's privacy, and rightful freedom even in the matters of religion.³³

Also, in her teaching on human rights, the Church stresses equality of all human persons. According to *Octogesima Adveniens*, all human beings, because of their common origin and nature and the same supernatural destiny they enjoy, should have equal right to economic, political and social life (16). Hence, the Church visualizes that the equality of all persons should include the right to healthy and peaceful environment (OA, 47), and the right to life, to bodily integrity and to the means suitable for a decent living.³⁴

³¹Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey NDHS, 2013 (FR293) – The DHS Program, <https://dhsprogram.com>pubs>pdf>

³²Pope John Paul II, *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women, Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 15, available on the Vatican website: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem

³³*Gaudium et Spes*, The Church in the Modern World, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Flannery Austin, Mumbai: St Paul, 2001, 69.

³⁴John XXII, *Pacem in Terris*, Nairobi: Paulines, 1990, 11.

Within the concept of common good, GS, 69 states:

God intended the earth with everything contained in it for the use of all human beings and peoples. Thus under the guidance of justice together with charity, created goods should be in abundance for all in equitable manner. Whatever the forms of property may be, as adapted to the legitimate institutions of peoples according to diverse and changeable circumstances, attention must always be paid to this universal goal of earthly goods.

Hence the Church sees the need to defend human rights not merely as legal issue but basically moral issue because they deal with humans and their individual consciences. The Church sees the fundamental rights as categorical expressions or the embodiment of the fundamental moral characteristics and dignity of every human being.

Being aware that there are still too many practices that debase and degrade women in the name of ancestral tradition, John Paul II in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, condemns all violence against the dignity of women when he writes: "The Church deplores and condemns, to the extent that they are still found in some African societies, all the customs and practices which deprive women of their rights and respect due to them."³⁵ Among all acts of violence against women he condemned is the oppression of widows in the name of tradition.

Considering these above, widows are humans and as such they need a fair treatment from their spouses, relatives and members of the community; these rites which are considered appropriate by the culture are most of the time detrimental to the health and well-being of the widows and their offspring; therefore, the rites to a large extent need to be dropped to enable women to live normally despite the exit of their husbands. Also, the opinion that man is the true representative of the human species, and that woman is a less felicitous variation of it, is incompatible with the teaching of the Scripture about the equality of men and women both as created and redeemed beings (Gen 1:27). Man and woman have received a common task which they can accomplish only in real partnership. The Catholic Church teaches that every person, regardless of sex, nationality, race, or creed, has dignity because he/she is made in the image of God; created by Him and for Him and, from the moment of her conception, his/her life has value.

³⁵John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Africa, *Ecclesia in Africa*, Nairobi: Paulines, 1995, 121.

Conclusion

Gender-based violence generally is covertly and overtly perpetuated, and elimination of the act remains a mirage since it has cultural undertones. When violence is directed against a woman because she is a woman or where such violence affects women “disproportionately,” is gender-based violence. Widows suffer a disproportionate form of ritual cleansing compared to widowers in Africa. Widowhood rites have endured throughout the ages as part of the customary law of many communities in Africa, although many aspects of those rights infringe upon the human rights of widows. It is unfortunate that there are no effective laws protecting the widows. Being created in the image and likeness of God, women as well as men are created equal in dignity. Widowhood rites demean the dignity and rights of women. There is therefore a need for women empowerment schemes to help women so as to exercise their fundamental human rights. Education remains a *sine qua non* in African women’s empowerment, to help them assert themselves, and reject all forms of oppression and violence which have been sustained under the vehicle of ‘culture.’ There should also be public enlightenment campaign to educate people about the plight of widows. In addition, Church in Nigeria and elsewhere has a duty to create cultural change by speaking out against oppressive and unconscionable widowhood practices and other forms of gender-based violence. The Government has the greatest responsibility to take appropriate and effective measures to protect women’s right to dignity and freedom from violence. Government at all levels should enact legislation to protect them and their children.