

# **We Are Strangers in Our Homes: Older Widows and Property Inheritance among the Esan of South-South Nigeria**

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*Abstract.* The study examined the plight of older widows as it relates to property inheritance among the Esan of South-South Nigeria. The aim of the paper was to identify the challenges associated with bereavement among widows particularly on property and assets bequeathed from their late spouse and the strategies they employed to cope with the identified challenges. This study was conducted with the aim of raising discourses towards addressing the social-cultural issues affecting the survival of the widows. Data for the study were purposively collected from respondents in two local government areas - namely, Esan Central and Esan West - with the aid of questionnaires and in-depth interviews. In all, 200 questionnaires were administered, out of which 180 (90.0 per cent) were retrieved and analysed. Moreover, 36 in-depth interviews were conducted with purposively selected older widows with certain peculiarities. About 33 per cent of the widows suffered eviction from late husband's house, others suffered partial denial from inheritances. Arising from these, the consequences of negative cultural practices were illustrated through loneliness (16.7 per cent), poor access to basic healthcare (15.5 per cent), constant illness (11.5 per cent) and poverty (6.6 per cent). Other challenges identified include psychological trauma (5.6 per cent), poor nutrition (5.6 per cent), abandonment (3.9 per cent) and loneliness (1.7 per cent). It concluded that socio-cultural practices attributed to inheritance among widows escalates their predicaments among the Esan people. The policy implication is for actions geared towards correcting these oppressive actions towards the widows through the instruments of social institutions and legal framework.

*Keywords:* older widows, property inheritance, Esan, Nigeria.

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## Introduction

The widow is a veritable specimen of suffering. She depicts clearly the male-dominated society in which we all live and man's inhumanity to woman. She is buffeted on all sides, first by her grief which she is not allowed to suffer silently, then by the society who decrees that she is a leaf in the wind, all on her own (Egbemode, 2006 : 1).

In Sub-Saharan Africa countries, inheritance is a critical mode of property transfer usually bequeathed through either formal or informal channels (Cooper, 2011). Crucial to this concept, are three basic assumptions: first, that men by their nature need to acquire property for their sustenance and to be able to live a good life; second, that when they die, they leave their property to those left behind; and third, that mechanically, they continue to controls their property even upon their death (Nyong'o & Ongalo 2005).

In many traditional African communities, older widows are generally the poorest of the poor and least protected by the law because their lives are determined by local, patriarchal interpretations of tradition, custom and religion. In many of these communities, social and economic indicators portray that the older widows suffer the double jeopardy of ageism and sexism (Bernard, Phillips, Machine & Davis, 2000). In traditional African society, death does not end a marriage, as a widow is expected to move into a 'levirate' arrangement with her brother-in-law or other male relative or heir. The children conceived are born within the union belonged to the dead man. In some ethnic groups widows are 'inherited' by the heir and integrated into the extended family. While these traditional practices effectively guaranteed the widow and her children's protection, in contemporary time, these cultural arrangements are changing. This is partly due to modernization and gradual erosion of the extended family system. It is not surprising that nowadays, the older widows find themselves deserted and thrown out of the family homestead for good. The grief that many of the older widows experience is not just the sadness of bereavement but the realization of the loss of their position in the family that in many cases, results in their utter abandonment, destitution, dishonour property disinheritance. Thus, for an older woman, the loss of a partner through death involves a series of losses, which include loss of companionship, material resources, a life partner and someone to negotiate on her behalf in a male dominated society.

In traditional Nigeria society, a woman was not entitled to own land (Akande, 1999), nor had the right to inherit family property as she was always bypassed, when there was a male child to inherit the father's property in her instead. Property is regarded as a source of personal protection from intruders and from the climate. It is also said to be the base, the 'legitimacy' for further territorial or commercial acquisition, without which the right to ownerships, there is no source of security, identity, shelter, leisure and so on. Therefore, acquisition of property becomes issues of welfare or 'needs' rather than claims (Ashworth, 1993). Similarly, the concept of inheritance in the traditional Nigerian society does not consider women as entitled to inherit any property. In fact, women were regarded as part of the property to be shared at the demise of their husbands. This was more prominent and

peculiar in the Igbo society. Hence, the pre-colonial Nigeria society recognized widow's inheritance, and therefore, elevated men above women (Omoruyi, 1994; Emiola, 1997). Lack of inherited assets in the form of land, savings and other forms of capital was found to have left many older widows vulnerable to both chronic and intergenerational transmitted poverty (Cooper, 2011). Following the death of their husbands, many of them subsist on no or low wages earned in physical arduous jobs in the informal sector. Consequently, the financial burden on the household for food security can be very dire. It is therefore not surprising that many widows continue to work well into old age in a bid to support their household financial needs. According to the United Nations (2001) and Orubuloye (1987), the situation of older widows is compounded by the dwindling economic fortune, diminishing extended family system, the shift from agro-based to industrial society, migration of young people to cities which have often left older persons unsupported, as well as eroding their economic independence. In many African countries, attempts to revise discriminatory laws and encourage women's participation in all spheres of social life have been frustrated by deep-rooted cultural barriers that frequently run correspondingly with poverty. These cultural practices indicate that older widows occupy a precarious position in societal affairs and more often than not, they suffer from discriminatory laws and traditions which keep them in perpetual jeopardy.

Although concerns are being raised on the plights of younger widows are made to undergo after the demise of their spouses so as to address perceived or real gender imbalance in many African societies, older widows' deprivation of property left behind by their husbands, the conditions in which they are forced to live, the violations of their human rights has attracted very little attention among social researchers and policy makers. One explanation for the neglect of this vast category of abused women is the assumption that widows are mainly older women who are cared for and respected by their extended or joint families. It is this neglect and gap in understanding the compounding challenges of widow who suffer extreme dispossession of bequeathed property which are further compounded by the dwindling social support network that this paper aimed at raising discourse about. The particular reference to the contemporary Esan society is motivated by the social of this practice with very high prevalence.

### **Older widows and property inheritance among the Esan**

As in many African societies, the concept of inheritance exists among the Esan. In many of the Esan communities, when a man dies, the properties he acquired over his life time are transmitted to those he left behind as their inheritance. It is one of the most common means by which a man transfers his physical property and assets to his successor/s. It could be in form of estate or property that he acquired through inheritance or handed down to his heir upon his death. Traditionally, it was a kind of social insurance bequeathed to the inheritor/s as a means of survival. Crucial to the concept of inheritance among the Esan, is that Native Laws and Customs are governed by the principles of primogeniture whereby the first surviving son in a family inherits the entire estate (the title, if any) of his late father, with none of the inheritance going to the wives and other children provided he performed the proper burial ceremony.

Although, the principles of equality and non-discrimination form the cornerstone upon which all human rights are based, under the Esan native laws and customs, discriminatory practices against the female child and women is widespread. Thus, under the Esan Native laws and customs, the concept of equality of both male and female was not only an illusion but an allegory. By Esan tradition, women are not entitled to property inheritance whether from their family of orientation or procreation. Like many African societies, Esan women suffer all forms of discrimination rights from birth to old age, some of it are inflicted by other women (Ajie, 2009). As Isibor (n.d.) and Akande (1999) stated,

The female child at birth is regarded as inferior to the male child and boxed into stereotypes. She does all the chores as useful as she is, her mother risks being thrown out of her matrimonial home if she is unable to produce a male child even though it has been biologically and scientifically proven that the choice of the sex of the child is hinged on the male spermatozoa. At old age, she is branded a witch and stoned to death if married and childless. If her husband dies even at the ripe old age of 90, she is the first suspect. To prove her innocence she is compelled to go through certain obnoxious widowhood practices such as, must shave her hair, must sleep on the floor with the corpse for days, must drink the water used in bathing deceased. She is disposes of the property she helped to acquired with her husband. (Isibor, n.d. : 4-5).

Women were non-persons. When they were not making babies or performing domestic chores and tilling the soil, they faded into anonymity. They could not own land. They could not hold titles in a society where titles were the ultimate testimony of self-actualization. They were merely pieces of property owned by the men and thus subject to whatever use they were put to. (Akande, 1999 : 114).

Under Esan native laws and customs, women are generally relegated to the status of second class citizens. For instance, they also postulate that a widow cannot inherit in the intestate estate of her deceased husband because she is regarded as part of the estate to be inherited by the son or relative. Most Esan men believe that '*okhuo ilagbada bhu uku*', meaning that 'a woman does not inherit a sword'. Literally, the 'sword' symbolises property or assets left behind by their late father. Among the Esan, it is only the first son that has an exclusive right to inherit the sword. According to Obi (1966), even where a husband in his lifetime allots a farm, a house or some other form of landed property to his wife for her use and enjoyment, the latter does not thereby acquire inheritance rights in it.

However, a widow of a deceased Esan man is not entirely without some rights in her husband's estate. She has a life interest in the use of a house which is not an '*igiogbe*' (daughter whose parents are of that same village) as long as she remains within the deceased's house. Since Esan society is patriarchal and patrilineal, the sons (especially the first son) enjoy a pre-eminent position in succession matters. The principle of primogeniture

applies in its pure form among the Esans. The eldest son inherits all the properties of his deceased father after performing the funeral rites. The property inherited includes land, house, economic trees, domestic animals, his married and unmarried sisters, brothers and even debts incurred by his late father (Okojie, 1994). He also inherits all his late father's wives except his mother who is usually inherited by the uncle (*omin-ijogbe*). If neither the son nor the uncle wanted the woman, any other man in the extended family (*uenlen*) would be asked to inherit her since it is against the tradition for any woman who is not a daughter of the family to live as such after she had become a widow. Thus, in traditional Esan society, an older widow who inherits had a place in the family after the death of the original husband. Even the childless ones are inherited and integrated into the family. However, they are highly disadvantaged in matters of inheritance and succession.

Among the Esan, the allotment of property rights to only the first son has historically left older widows particularly disadvantaged. Thus, in Esanland, property inheritance is one area where older women customarily face significant discrimination and abuse of their rights. She cannot inherit in the intestate estate of her deceased husband because according to the native laws and customs, she is part of the estate to be inherited by the first son or relative (Obi, 1966; Okojie, 1994; Eboiyehi, 2008). By tradition, upon the demise of her spouse, an older widow is inherited as it is believed that upon her marriage she became the property of the husband and considered to be property inherited (Eboiyehi, 2008, 2014). This cultural practice is justified by the common saying that '*a property cannot inherit property*'. The only exception is when she could only enjoy her husbands' estate through her first son (if she is the mother of the first and oldest son in the family) who is the primogenitor without any opposition from the extended family members. Thus, the polygynous system of marriage among the Esan, which involves a man marrying more than one wife, further complicates older widows' inheritance and property rights particularly, those who are not opportune to give birth to the first son in the family. This implies that other older widows within the household who did not have the opportunity of having the first son in the family are usually cut of any sort of inheritance from the deceased husband. In most cast cases, they are often stripped and cheated out of the property and assets they helped to acquire with their late husbands (Peterman, 2010). Rather than supporting them, relatives also confiscate the property and assets that legally belonged to them, including land, housing, bank savings, pensions, furniture, cattle, farming equipment, cooking utensils, clothing and in most cases, they are expelled from their family home (Izumi 2007). This leaves them without access to means of livelihoods, which would eventually make them vulnerable to further hardship and exploitation.

It is noteworthy here that accusation of witchcraft activities is often used by family members to disinherit them of their property. During the process, some of them are humiliated and robbed of self-esteem while others literally die defending their property. Without shelter, food security or means of livelihoods, older widows often become subject to physical, sexual and mental abuse. While they suffer the grief of the bereavement of their spouses, they also realize that the demise of their husbands implies losing their position in the family which, in many cases, leads to their abandonment, destitution, and dishonour. Certainly, lack of shelter to lay their heads and money to support themselves, mean an undignified and

unpleasant last period of life or premature death. Since they have no resources to rely on, they are easily susceptible to preventable diseases which often lead to untimely death. It is in this respect that Izumi (2007) defines property disinheritance of older widows as a form of gender-based violence while Blair (2010) described their plight as 'a hidden humanitarian crisis'. Moreover, the intergenerational relationship that existed to integrate older widows into the extended family system in the traditional Esan society is diminishing due to urban migration, western influence and other exogenous forces. A number of studies (Higuchi, 1996; United Nations, 1998a, 2001; Sokolovsky, 2000; Akeredolu-Ale & Aribiah 2001) have shown that ill health is most prevalent among older widows in most developing countries and that majority of them are living in devastating poverty. Unlike in the developed countries where social security for older persons is a priority, there are no policy or government welfare systems for older persons in Nigeria (Ebigbola, 2000; Akeredolu-Ale & Aribiah, 2001; Eboiyehi, 2008). In an attempt to forestall the increasing plights of this segment of the older population, the federal government and some voluntary bodies have taken on the responsibility of establishing institutions for them. These institutions are however, located in major cities and are only meant for destitute and those older persons without children. In addition, these homes are not only too few to accommodate the increasing number of the older widows, but also in most cases, they are seen as alien to most African societies (Kayongo-Male & Onyango, 1984). Furthermore, these homes are located in the urban centres to the detriment of the rural areas, as it has been presumed that the problems of older persons are worse-off in the urban areas compared to the rural areas.

The great diversity in the socio-economic fate of these older widows excluded from property inheritance then poses a persistent question as to how they survive in the face of harsh economic climate especially the rural ones whose hardships are aggravated by migration of the young family members to cities in search of job opportunities that are sometimes not in existence. This unfortunate situation has led some of them to resort to begging or become destitute, an act, which was in the past considered as demeaning and shameful to the entire family members (Togonu-Bickersteth, 1997, 2014). In recognition of the challenges facing older women, the United Nations (1983) held its first *World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna* in 1982. This was followed by the *Commission of the Status of Women - The Beijing Platform for Action* (ibid., 1996) adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, *International Year of Older Persons in 1999* (ibid., 1998b), and the *Second World Assembly on Ageing in Madrid* (ibid., 2002) in 2002. The latter included a number of recommendations which encompassed a plan of action to provide older persons with protection, housing and environment, health and nutrition, income security and provision of care and support. It was also suggested that special studies be carried out on the situation of the poor, vulnerable and handicapped older women in various societies. Nevertheless, despite these efforts and recommendations emanating from them, there was not mention of the plight of older widows who are being disinherited of their property. Although there is no official data on the disinheritance of older widows of the property they acquired with their late husbands, various research reports exist on how this cultural practice continues to underline both younger and older widows (Barrera, & Corbacho, 2012). Furthermore, the ways in which older widows sustain themselves after their properties have been taken away, and themselves thrown out of the family house, have not been yet been officially documented in Nigeria. It is noteworthy that

the belief that it is the duty and responsibility of the children to cater for their aged mothers is no longer held due to Nigeria's economic crunch since mid-1980s. It is against this background that this paper addresses the following research questions: What are the experiences and challenges associated with property inheritance among widows in the study area? And, what are the social explanations for property disinheritance and how can these be addressed?

## **Methodology**

### *Study Location*

The Esan people, formerly known as Ishan people, inhabit an area that lies between Longitude 60° 5' and Latitude 6° 5' in the geographical centre of Edo State, about 80 kilometres north-east of Benin City, and hence, in south-south Nigeria. By this factor of proximity and the fact that they share a basic cultural substratum, they are regarded as neighbours of Bini (Bradbury, 1973).

Geologically, Esan land is on a highland, surrounded by slopes down to the lower River Niger. The Esan people are bordered to the south-east by Agbor, to the south by Benin City, to the east and north by Etsako and to the west by River Niger. The Esan live in compact village settlements ranging in size from small hamlets to towns of several thousand people. They subsist primarily on yams, supplemented by corn (maize), plantains, cassava, and other vegetables. Livestock includes goats, sheep, dogs, and fowl, used mainly for sacrificial offerings. Blacksmithing and weaving ceremonial cloth (*igbolu ododo* or *igbulu esan*) are traditional crafts. Presently, Esan people are predominantly found in five Local Government Areas (LGAs) namely; Esan West, Esan Central, Esan South-East, Esan North-East and Igueben. These local government areas consist of over thirty major towns and several villages that share common cultures and social systems. Esan people dwell in rural, semi-urban and urban areas. The Federal Republic of Nigeria Official Gazette (2007) put the population of Esan at 587,898 comprising 300,729 (51.2 per cent) males and 287,129 (48.8 per cent) females, and is estimated to grow to 605, 535 by the year 2020, at three per cent growth rate.

### *Sources of Data*

Data collection for this study was first carried out between February and June, 2009 when we were collecting data for a study titled, *Surviving without children: Life histories of childless aged women in Esan, Nigeria* (Eboiyehi 2009). The second round of the data collection for this paper was conducted from October 2015 to January 2016. Hence, this study is a portion of a large qualitative and quantitative data collected in 2009. The data were collected from respondents in two selected Local Government areas in Esan with the aid of questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The questionnaires consisted of four sections. Section one focused on socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. This involved their age, religion, highest level of formal education attained, occupation, level of income, number of children and living arrangement. Section two dwelled on the challenges facing older widows

disposed of their property after the demise of their husbands. Section three centred on various strategies employed by the respondents to cope with the identified problems while section four provided policy implication of the study. In all, 200 questionnaires were purposively administered to older widows using semi-structured interviews schedule. Out of the 200 questionnaires administered, 180 (90.0 per cent) were retrieved and analysed. Since the majority of the respondents were not literate, the questions were read out to them and filled by the researchers and their assistants who understand and speak Esan dialects fluently. Older widows in this study were defined as women aged 60 years or older whose husbands have died and who have not remarried. Simple descriptive model were used to analyse each of the objectives.

Face-to-face interviews were also conducted using an interview schedule. In all, thirty-six in-depth interviews were conducted to further understand the impacts property disinheritance on the interviewees, assess the various strategies employed to cope with the identified problems and suggested what could be done to improve their living conditions. Due to the low literacy level of the participants, interviews were conducted in local dialect since one of the researchers hailed from study area. The study employed the snowball sampling approach, whereby an older widow volunteered information leading to the identification of other older widows facing similar circumstances. There was no strict sampling procedure utilized. Interviews were held based on the willingness of the interviewees to participate in the study. However, the interviewees who met the criteria used for the definition of older widows were selected for the study. Where an interviewee's permission was obtained, a tape recorder was used. Interviewees were encouraged to express their views freely and as elaborately as time would allow. The use of in-depth interview method also enabled the researchers to record non-verbal displays for a meaningful interpretation. The data provided were transcribed and translated for analyses. Verbatim quotations of relevant statements were done.

## **Interpretation of Results**

### *Social and demographic characteristics of the respondents*

Tables 1 and 2 show the percentage distribution of respondents by their socio-demographic characteristics. Table 1 indicates that more than half of the respondents (51.1 per cent) fall within a wide range of young old age from 60 and 70 years. Out of this, 27.8 per cent falls within the age range of 60 and 65 years while 23.3 per cent are within the age range of 66 to 70 years. This age category could more critical and demanding for older widows in terms of self-support, especially farming, petty trading, feeding, clothing, etc that would have been provided if spouse were to be alive. This was followed by 18.3 per cent who were within the age bracket of 71 to 75 years and 13.9 per cent of them fall with the age range of 76 to 80 years. Precisely 9.4 per cent, 4.5 per cent and 2.8 per cent of the respondents were within the age bracket of 81 and 85 years and 91 years and above respectively.

**Table 1: Social and demographic characteristics of the respondents (N= 180)**

Socio-Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
<b>Age in years</b>		
60-65	50	27.8
66-70	42	23.3
71-75	33	18.3
76-80	25	13.9
81- 85	17	09.4
86-90	08	04.5
91 +	05	02.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Age at Marriage</b>		
15-20	64	35.6
21-25	49	27.2
26-30	34	18.9
31-35	19	10.5
36 +	14	07.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Type of Marriage</b>		
Monogamous marriage	15	8.3
Polygynous marriage	165	91.7
Others		
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Number of Children Currently Have</b>		
1-2	17	09.5
3-4	42	23.3
5-6	51	28.3
7-8	42	23.3
9-10	20	11.1
11+	08	04.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Status in Family</b>		
First wife	35	19.4
Second wife	40	22.2
Third wife	55	30.6
Fourth wife	50	27.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Sex of first child</b>		
Male	30	16.7
Female	150	83.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Socio-Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>		
Christianity	140	77.8
Islam	15	8.3
African Traditional Religion	25	13.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Level of education</b>		
No formal education	130	72.2
Primary school	40	22.2
Secondary school drop-out	05	02.8
Secondary school	05	02.8
Tertiary Institution	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Occupation</b>		
Civil Servant	-	-
Professionals (e.g. Traditional Birth Attendants)	05	02.8
Farming	40	22.2
Petty Trading	80	44.4
Full-time housewife	55	30.5
Begging	20	11.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Level of Income per month</b>		
No income	90	50.0
Less than ₦ 5000.00	26	14.5
₦ 5,001- ₦ 10,000.00	24	13.3
₦ 10,001- ₦ 15, 000.00	20	11.1
₦ 15,001 – ₦ 20,000.00	11	6.1
Above ₦ 20,000.00	09	5.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Age at marriage shows that majority of the respondents (35.6 per cent) got married at the age of between 15 and 20 years, 27.2 per cent of them got married between the ages of 21 and 25 years while 18.9 per cent got married between the ages of 26 and 30 years. Only 10.5 per cent and 7.8 per cent of the respondents got married at the ages of between 31 and 35 years and 36 years and above. Most of the respondents (91.7 per cent) were polygynists (i.e. married to men with another wife or other wives while only 8.3 per cent were monogamists. Majority of the respondents (28.3 per cent) had between five and six children, 23.3 per cent had between three and four children and seven and eight children respectively. Surprisingly, 11.1 per cent and 4.5 per cent of the respondents reported having between nine and ten children and over 11 children respectively. Only 9.5 per cent of the respondents reported having between one child and two children. The majority of the respondents (30.6 per cent) were their late husbands' third wives, 27.8 per cent were fifth wives, 22.2 per cent were second wives and only 19.4 per cent were first wives.

**Table 2: Family Characteristics (N= 180)**

<b>Respondent's Family Related Data</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Educational level of Respondent's Children</b>		
No formal education	70	38.9
Primary school	50	27.8
Secondary school	45	25.0
Tertiary education	15	8.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Employment Status of Children</b>		
Unemployed	90	50.0
Formal employment	10	5.6
Informal employment	80	44.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Children's Family Size</b>		
1-2	37	20.5
3-4	66	36.7
5+	77	42.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Living Arrangement</b>		
Alone	60	33.3
With children	30	16.7
On rent	40	22.2
Parent's family house	45	25.0
With Others	5	2.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Adult Composition of the Household</b>		
None	105	58.3
Presence of Adult Male	55	30.6
Presence of Adult Female	20	11.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Most of the respondents (83.3 per cent) said their first children are females while only 16.7 per cent had first children as sons. The majority of the respondents were Christian Muslims. Only a few of them were traditional worshippers. Christianity contributes more than half (77.8 per cent of the sample) indicating a preponderance of Roman Catholics in the study area. This is traceable to the history of Christianity and the first of the latter to come to this area was the catholic mission. This dominant religious influence is likely have a remarkable positive impact on respondents' coping strategy. Islam is not a strong factor in the area and those who subscribed to it are mostly migrants from Agbede and Ujagben near Auchi and Irrua who have reasonable number of Muslims.

Illiteracy level among the respondents was very high perhaps due to rural nature of the of the study area such that 72.2 per cent had no formal education. Primary education was remarkably high compared to other educational level attained with 22.2 per cent who had completed their primary school education, 2.8 per cent dropped out of secondary school and only 2.8 per cent completed their secondary school education. This result would have a lot of implications for the level of income, occupation and the number of children they currently have. It is therefore not surprising that 44.4 per cent of the respondents responded they were petty traders, 30.5 per cent were full-time housewives. 22.2 per cent were farmers, 11.1 per cent begged for alms while 2.8 per cent were professional Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs). Arising from the respondents' low level of education and occupational status, their level of income was also extremely low. Their income distribution shows that half of the respondents (50 per cent) had no monthly income. As many as 14.5 per cent received less than ₦ 5,000 per month, 13.3 per cent received between ₦ 5,001,000 - ₦ 10,000. Only 5 per cent of the respondents earned more than ₦ 20, 000.00 per month. The implies that the income is so low that it does not cover their basis needs. Further inquiry into how they spent their income revealed that the majority of the respondents spent most of their income on illnesses, food and house rent. This was found to have negative impact on household food security, which further pushes most of them below the poverty line.

Table 2 also shows the data related to respondent's family. The table indicates that majority of the respondents' children (38.9 per cent) had no formal education, 27.8 per cent attended primary school, and 25.0 per cent only attended secondary school while only 8.3 per cent attended tertiary institutions. This finding is traced to low educational background of the respondents themselves, their occupations and level of income. For instance, the employment status of respondents' children has revealed that 50 per cent of them were unemployed, 44.4 per cent were employed in the informal sectors while 5.6 per cent were in the formal sectors. The table indicates that 42.8 per cent of the respondents' children have family size of five and above, 36.7 per cent have family size of between three and four while the family size of 20.5 per cent of them was between one and two. Respondents' living arrangement shows that 33.3 per cent of them were living alone, 25 per cent were living in parents' family house, 22.2 per cent were on rent, 16.7 per cent were co-residing with children while 2.8 per cent were living in other places such as church houses and houses built mosques. Data on adult composition of the household reveals that more than half (58.3 per cent) were living alone, 30.6 per cent were residing with adult males while only 11.1 per cent had the presence of adult females.

As table 3 demonstrates, different kinds of challenges ranging from 'cultural practices such as primogeniture and widow inheritance' (33.3 per cent), 'isolation' (16.7 per cent), 'poor access to basic healthcare' (15.5 per cent), 'constant illness' (11.1 per cent), 'poverty' (6.6 per cent), 'psychological trauma' (5.6 per cent), 'poor nutrition' (5.6 per cent), 'abandonment' (3.9 per cent) to 'loneliness' (1.7 per cent) were identified. Psychological trauma was found to be more prevalent among those rural older widows most who were ejected from their spouses' houses.

**Table 3: Challenges**

Cultural practices (e.g. primogeniture, widow inheritance etc)	60	33.3
Psychological trauma	10	5.6
Poor access to basic healthcare	28	15.5
Loneliness	3	1.7
Isolation	30	16.7
Constant illness	20	11.1
Abandonment	7	3.9
Poor nutrition	10	5.6
Poverty	12	6.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>

It is noteworthy that the poor shelter in which some of the respondents lived after being ejected from family house. During the in-depth interviews, it was found that 20 of the older widows were ejected from their spouses' houses. Poor diets without nutritional values were also observed to be common among the rural older widows (five cases), while payment of house rent and electricity bill was a major challenge for three older widows in the urban area. Mostly affected by this shift are the childless older widows particularly, those who have nobody to cater for them. A woman aged 78 years, and living in the rural community, stated that

All the properties I acquired with my husband including my personal effects have been wickedly taken away from me because I do not have a child from him. They said all the assets belonged to my late husband, which only the oldest son is entitled to. By this act I have been wickedly thrown into abject poverty. Government should please come to my aid. Government should stop thinking that the family members are still there to take care of us. That era has gone. Our situation is compounded because the culture says everything a man owns belongs to the oldest son alone. In most cases the oldest son abandons the older widow especially if such widow is not his mother to fend for herself with failing strength. Help us tell government that older widows are suffering. We are dying. In most cases, I go to bed with empty stomach. How can a woman suffer all the days of her life with her a man and in the end she is thrown away without any inheritance? This is where the culture has placed us. That is why we are calling on government to come to our aid.

A respondent aged 75 years, also living in a rural setting, affirmed the above and stated with deep sorrow that

This is the eleventh year since my husband died. This is the eleventh year since I have been denied access to his house and property. This is the eleventh year since I have been ejected from the house I helped to build with him. This is the eleventh year since I have living in penury, lack and want. I was thrown away from my husband's house by his family members simply because I did not have children from him. They call me a witch because I do not have a child to fight for me. If not for some kind-hearted people who give me food, money and clothe me, I would have since died. My church members also assist me and assure me of expected good end. I have no child of my own to take care of me and support me.

Similarly, an 84-year old interviewee living in a rural community noted that when she

...married my husband, I never knew that life would turn out this way. I suffered with him under the rain and under the sun to ensure we have a roof over our heads. We plant all the cash crops (economic trees) together. I have three daughters from him. When I could not give birth to a son, I advised him to marry another wife who eventually had three sons from him. I assisted in bringing them up but when my husband died, I suddenly became a stranger in my house. My husband's first son who used to call me his 'mother' was advised to send me away from the house based on advice he received from extended family members. That is how I became a "stranger in my house". I have challenges paying for a room apartment. I am hypertensive. I have no good food to eat and no money to buy the prescribed drugs. Unfortunately, my daughters are in the cities. They have their families to cater for. I never thought life would turn out this way.

Congruently, another childless widow aged 80 years, and also living in a rural community, remarked

When my husband died, his children summoned me and asked me what I was still doing in the house. I was told that the man who I was married to had died and that I no longer belong to the family. They said if I did not know, I am a stranger in the family. I was given only one week to pack my few belongings without having access to his property. This was how I became a beggar; a poor woman begging for money, food and clothes to put on. Old age is a serious problem at

least to those of us who do not have children to lean on. How to feed is a problem. At my age, I am supposed to depend on my children for food and other support especially now that I have been ejected from my late husband's house.

In Esan culture, a woman who is not lucky to be the mother of the first or oldest son also suffers the same disinheritance as the childless older widows. According to an older widow living in a rural community and aged 65 years,

In our culture, women do not have any right of inheritance not only in their husbands' house but also in their fathers' house. The problem with those of us who are not so lucky to give birth to the first son is the same with the childless women. Having only daughters is the same as having no child. That is not to say the mother of the first son is entitled to inheritance. No, she can only enjoy the assets left behind by her late husband through her son. No son or child will like to see his mother suffers. The rest wives are left to fend for themselves in the midst of nothing and so, many of them remain poor for the remaining part of their lives. So, if I must answer your question I will say poverty is a major problem we are facing.

In addition, another widow aged 69 years old, also living in a rural community, stated:

In this place, a woman who is not the mother of the first son is like a woman without a child. She will not be given any inheritance rights. A mother with first son in the family can only inherit through the husband first son. The first son alone can inherit all the property including his father's younger wives and his own younger sisters. Nobody cares about me any longer because I am an old woman. Sometimes, I go to bed without food and nobody cares. My children are in the city. Unfortunately, none of them has a good job in the city.

Loneliness was another major challenge facing some of the older widows after the death of their spouses. This is compounded with the diminishing supports from the extended family members and rural-urban migration of young family members who are supposed to cater for them. Although some of these older widows visit their friends, they complained that loneliness was a prominent problem at least at the homestead. An older widow aged 75 years, and living in a rural community, remarked as follows:

I lost my husband about six years ago. Since then life has not been the same for me. As you can see, I am living alone here on rent when my husband's children ejected me from his house. I was his third wife and had three children, all boys, from him. My first son is the sixth son in the family and has no inheritance rights. The three of them are in the city. Although they are trying their best, I am not as happy as I

should be because money is not everything. You need to see how I feel; it is as if I am living alone in the midst of a crowd. I need somebody around me to talk to, run errands for me, cook for me and discuss with me. I am seriously missing my husband. He was a great man.

Another interviewee aged 78 years, but living in an urban setting, stated:

The major problem facing us is that those who are supposed to take care of us or support us are longer there, unlike in the olden days when an older person is surrounded with his or her offspring. They are in the cities with or without jobs leaving us to fend for ourselves with little or no strength. What can an old woman without husband do? The extended family who used to cater for them are the ones who are throwing them away from the house they helped to build now. In the olden days, extended family members used to send the best part of their harvest to the older person or send their children home to stay with them and help them. What we have today is older widows living in loneliness and poverty. This is a major problem confronting me most especially. Without any means of livelihood, I am helpless.

Hence, no wonder that an interviewee in her late 70s, and living in a rural community, affirmed that she is

...struggling to procure food and to feed is my major challenge. Most times, I develop high blood pressure, when on daily basis I think of where and how to get money to buy food, drugs, pay my rent and live a healthier life. But as you can see, I am walking on a tight rope between survival and starvation.

Indeed, it is not surprising that insufficiency of food and malnutrition remains a key challenge for many of these older widows since, unlike what happened in the past, their offspring provided them with much food and comfort. Practically, all the in-depth interviewees consistently mentioned ill-health and lack of basic income as their major challenges. According to an 82 years old interviewee living in an urban setting, her

...major problem is ill health. I need money to buy drugs, food to take care of myself. But the money is not there. Initially, I felt bad when I was denied my inheritance. But my daughter rose up to the occasion. I would have since died if not because of my daughter... She is the one supporting me.

Another interviewee aged 78 years, and also living in an urban setting, was not as lucky as the above interviewee, and remarked that:

Thinking about not inheriting a pin from my husband is traumatizing. It is seriously affecting my health. I see myself as someone who has come to the world to labour in vain. How can one suffer all her life to help build a house and at the end she is thrown out from the same house? It is very painful. I have been ill but I do not have money to go for medical check-up or feed myself. I do not have anybody to look after me. I have no access to my husband's property. My husband's children have since abandoned me. They said I was the one who was responsible for his death. They called me a witch. Because of this I was driven away from his house. My question is, how could I have killed a man who had made me a woman? How can I kill my pride?

Table 4 shows the different coping strategies as employed by the respondents to alleviate their sufferings. Material supports from co-resident and non-co-resident children and relatives were found to be the most important coping strategies for the older widows.

**Table 4: Coping Strategies Employed by the Respondents**

Coping Strategies	Frequency	Percent
Alms begging	9	5.0
Support from co-resident and non co-resident children	70	38.9
Support from other family members	10	5.6
Support from religious bodies	6	3.3
Petty trading	35	19.4
Subsistence farming	30	16.7
Support from Local Government	17	9.4
Pension	3	1.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Two types of material support were identified during this study which included provision of food and/or clothes, while financial support consists of payment of house rent, medical and electricity bills. Half of them received support in the form of food and/or clothes from non-co-resident children while a similar number received financial and material support from non-co-resident offspring. When only older widows with at least one non-co resident children are considered, less than half receive both material and financial supports from children outside their households. Altogether, 38.9 per cent of the respondents received

support from children and other family members (5.6 per cent). According to an interviewee aged 76 years and residing in a rural community,

My family is of immense assistance to me. My children support me according to their ability and capability, although some of them are trying to survive in a situation of high unemployment and scarce resources. They are really trying their best for me. Nobody can blame anybody nowadays because the country is hard.

Another interviewee aged 70 years and also living in a rural community stated that her “brothers and sisters in the cities have been assisting me. They send money, drugs, foodstuff and clothes”. Similarly, another female interviewee aged 62, and again living in a rural setting, commented as follows:

I am living in my son’s house. My son and other children employ a medical doctor who is always coming here to take care of me whenever I am ill. He comes regularly for my medical check-up. My children also employ a woman for me who is always coming here to clean the house, wash my clothes and cook for me. Apart from these, they send money and food items regularly. Also, they sent three of my grandchildren who are living with me to assist and run errands for me.

A quarter (nine) of the interviewees relied on church-related assistance and good Samaritans for means of livelihood. As affirmed by an interviewee aged 72 years living in a rural setting, “I would have since died if not for members of my church. They assisted by giving me food, clothes and money. At times, they send their children to assist me”. Only a few of the interviewees’ livelihoods - (1.7 per cent) - depended on pension. One of the pensioners aged 69 years, and living in an urban setting, affirmed that

I worked and retired as a clerk from the State Ministry of Education. Since I am not used to farming, I cannot suddenly go into farming after my retirement about ten years ago, I depend on pension and sporadic remittances from my children.

An emerging trend in the study was that the traditional responsibilities of the extended family of catering for the older widows were gradually being taken over by service care providers. Out of the 36 interviewees, five reported that they benefited from financial support, provision of eyeglasses and repair of their roof from the local government. Three recorded formal services for the widows by the local government included relief scheme for

the older widows, the childless and destitute, roof repairs and provision of eyeglasses. One of the interviewees stated as follows:

[the Local Government Chairman, Esan Central] introduced a scheme which he called 'Relief Scheme for the older widows, the childless and destitute'. He has been assisting us by placing all the older widows on ₦ 500.00 monthly. He also assisted some of us whose roofs were blown off by winds during the last raining season. The local government also bought glasses for some of us who cannot see clearly.

In the urban community, the few older widows without support noted how they solicited for public alms as a coping strategy. This finding was affirmed in the words of one of the childless older widows aged 78 years: "After the death of my husband, I have been begging for food and money because there is nobody to cater for me". Similarly, another interviewee aged 70 years stated that

Suffering leads to frustration. When one does not have food to eat, no husband and children to lean on and no money to spend, one will become restless. An average human being will like to survive. In trying to survive in the midst of this economic hardship and there is neither child nor husband to lean on for support and when no family member is willing to assist, one would have no option than to beg. I do not want to die in hunger, so I beg to survive.

### **Discussion of findings**

As exposed in this paper, the myriads of challenges associated with loss of spouse that widows are confronted with in the study area cut across cultural practices, isolation, and poor access to basic healthcare, constant illness, poverty, psychological trauma, poor nutrition, and abandonment to loneliness. These challenges were linked to cultural practices, diminishing of functions of the extended family system, migration of young people to towns and cities in search of education and employment opportunities and the down-turn of the economy. The findings are similar to those identified in other research reports (e.g. United Nations, 1998c; Orubuloye, 1987; Akeredolu-Ale & Aribiah, 2001; Eboiyehi, 2008). Eboiyehi (2008) for instance, observed that the challenges facing the older persons in general and older widows in particular, stem from the current economic crisis, the shift from agro-based to industrial society, migration of young people to cities which have often left older persons unsupported or eroded their economic independence. Children's absence was also found to have left many of the older widows (whose properties and assets were grabbed) without emotional, financial and physical support. Material supports from co-resident and non-co-resident children and relatives were found to most important coping strategies for the older widows indicating that even though there is a decline in care and support for older widows in the study area, family members particularly children still provides some supports for their older mothers excluded from property inheritance. In other words, although there are

still evidences of support networks for vulnerable widows, the effect is far below that obtained in a typical traditional Esan society. The traditional Esan system provides every older widow an easy way to be integrated to the extended family system.

Surprisingly, an emerging phenomenon in the study area is that some of older persons who had nobody to cater for them had resorted to alms begging unlike what was obtained in the traditional Esan society where it was the collective responsibilities of the children and entire extended family members to cater for the older widows. These responsibilities were found to be gradually being taken over by service care providers. Others who have nobody to cater for them resorted to alms begging. This finding is in tandem with earlier study by Togonu-Bickersteth (1997, 2014) of Yoruba older persons of South-western Nigeria. In the study she found that this unfortunate situation has led some older persons to resort to alms begging which in the past were considered demeaning and shameful to the entire family members (ibid., 1997).

In contemporary Esan, survival among older widows is a difficult process in which coping strategy is very demanding. Even though they still depend on their kin for survival, meeting their needs in the absence of spouses poses a lot of strain on them. In the face of present economic crisis, high inflation, unemployment and out-migration of offspring, it seems that the future care and support for this segment of the population may be more difficult. The difficulty arises from government's failure to provide social security for the aged, particularly of older widows. Sadly, the economic reforms embarked upon by the Federal Government have also imposed constraints on older widows and their supposed caregivers. However, the same structure, which has imposed these constraints, has also enabled the older widows to do things they would not otherwise be able to do by employing various mechanisms such as petty trading, farming among others. That is what Giddens (1991) referred to when highlighting the 'constraining' and 'enabling' functions of the structure.

A little difference was observed between rural and urban older widows with respect to support from non-co-resident children. The older widows who live in rural areas were more likely to receive remittances from their non-co-residing offspring in form of money, drugs as well as clothes, than their urban counterparts. Furthermore, it was found that compared with their counterparts in the urban areas, the older rural widows with children were also more likely to live adjacent to or near non co-resident children. A cluster of related dwelling units in which the aged parents and married children reside functioned in ways similar to a single household with a substantial amount of sharing of food and resources, especially with aged parents are common. This situation made it possible for family members in the rural areas to cater for their older mothers though minimally compared to the traditional period. Unlike in the urban area, it was found that some, though very few, of the older widows living in the rural areas lived with at least a younger relative who they depended upon for care and support. Thus, in rural areas, the familial system of taking care of older widows, either with or without children, remains in existence, though minimally.

## Conclusion

The issue of disinheriting older widows of property after the demise of their husbands in Nigeria is clearly a growing human rights concern requiring increased attention and action from government, Civil Society Organizations, Community Based Organizations and academia. This issue is similar to a number of other practices which have negative effects on older women's rights of enjoyment, including elder abuse, witchcraft accusations, abandonment and lack of care and support. In particular, the failure of government over the right of older widows to inherit property left behind by their late husbands which result in older women's rights abuse highlight the need for increased collaborative work on the most appropriate and effective ways to address such issues and for joint evaluations from all relevant actors on the development of policies and interventions. The paper concluded that since older widows are among the most vulnerable groups in the study area, denying them their bequeathing rights will further exacerbate their already poor conditions which may also negatively affect them and members of their households. The paper therefore suggests that there is a need for government and all other concern agencies and organization to look at the direction of this segment of the population so as to alleviate the infringement of their fundamental human rights.

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