

FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CHRISTIAN PERCEPTION(S) ON WIDOWS' SEXUALITY

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Abstract: A global survey on the sexual situation of widows reveals that there is a general infringement on widows' sexuality in many traditions and cultures. The aim of this study was to ascertain the factors responsible for the prevailing perception on widows' sexuality among *Abanyole* of Emuhaya. Interview and Focused Group Discussion schedules were used to collect data from respondents. Relevant literatures were also perused to examine and provide a perspective to the study. Social Justice Lenses were employed in the analysis of the data. Findings were descriptively presented as narrated themes. It is established that there are many varied factors responsible for the prevailing *Abanyole* perception on widows' sexuality which is characteristically male-centered stigmatizing females. These factors fall under physiological, psychological, social and religious categories. It is the view of this article that appropriate engagement with the *Abanyole* culture in light of contemporary realities will lead to a greater appreciation of prevailing perception on widows' sexuality thereby averting female subjugation that characterizes widow sexuality.

Keywords: Widow, Sexuality, Culture, Gender, Trajectory, Christianity, Perception.

Introduction

There are many factor cited for widows' sexuality world over. This could also be the case among *Abanyole* Christian widows. Consequently this article is a report of a study carried out. The underlying objective was to determine factors responsible for the prevailing Christian perception of widows' sexuality among the *Abanyole* of Emuhaya. It sought to answers the question: What factors are responsible for the prevailing Christian perception on widows' sexuality among the *Abanyole* of Emuhaya?

It was established that specific factors are responsible for widows' sexuality and accrue a particular sexual script for Christian widows among *Abanyole*. They form reference point for the expected widows' sexual behavior and activity in terms of who, when, what, where, and how. However, these factors are perceived by some as stereotype, only serving to subjugate women, hence a valid battle front. This calls for Christian women to resent their recipient position and engage the Bible cognizant of both the historical and contemporary realities in order to contribute to their liberation, which is in essence the church's freedom.

Literature Review

Owens (1996) survey revealed various factors responsible for the negative perception of widows' sexuality. They include situation responsible or reasons given for the behavior of and on a widow. These factors determine whether the widow continues sexual expression or becomes a voluntary 'celibate'. They can be summed up as: age at which one is widowed, the family status of the widow, economic status of the widow, health status of the widow, previous sex experiences of the widow, prevailing cultural codes on sex, and prevailing religious codes on sex. The same train of thought is taken by Theological Advisory Group's research entitled, A Biblical Approach to Marriage and family in Africa (1994: 163-166).

According to Hillman (2012: 11- 20) age is a factor in the way people perceive sexuality. However, perception is not static. It has varied over a period of time within cultures. He notes that, historically, in biblical and medieval times as in the contemporary society “sexual relations among the older people were viewed as evil, immoral, perverse, inappropriate, impossible, or pathetically comical, at best.” This notion was modified and perpetuated by the church in the Middle Ages where sexual intercourse was strictly reserved for procreation thus older people were discouraged from engaging in any type of sexual behavior as it was sinful. Cross-culturally, there is a general approval of sexual activity among the older adults in majority cultures. Citing Winn and Newton’s (1982) study, Hillman reports:

More than 106 cultures less than 3% of those cultures were found to have societal sanctions or prohibitions against older people having sex. An analysis of the data gathered by the anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists studying these cultures revealed that 70% and more than 84% of the societies reported sexual activity among its older male and female members, respectively. In many Eastern and Middle Eastern cultures, men and women commonly engaged in sexual relations well beyond the age of 100 and 80, respectively. African cultures maintained that impotence was not a normal function of old age, but an unnatural loss of ability resulting from illness or witchcraft. In the majority of these traditional cultures, menopause was not associated with either more or less sexual activity among older women; it simply represented a “point in a woman’s life.” In certain African and Asiatic cultures, an older woman’s physical attractiveness appeared unrelated to her sexual status; toothless, older women were considered as sexually desirable as younger women. Thus, sexual activity among older men and women in traditional societies is common, and apparently readily accepted throughout most of the world.

An additional difference noted between these traditional societies and our own was that although a double standard appeared to operate with regard to sexuality and aging, it appeared to be in the opposite direction. Specifically, older women were more likely to engage in sexual relations than older men, and older women were often described (in more than one-fourth of the cultures) as becoming less sexually inhibited and more sexually aggressive with advancing age. In certain South American and Eastern cultures, older women were designated teachers for sexually inexperienced young men. Older women also were described as commonly taking younger men for husbands or sex partners, ostensibly because there were few male partners available of their own age. Other older women in South American, Eastern, and North American Indian cultures were described as dressing more seductively, baring their breasts more often in public, and delighting in off-color jokes once past the age of 60 (2012: 13-14).

Family status is another factor that determines a widow’s sexual behavior. This is to do with the size of her family – number and age of her children. It is generally observed that number and age of a widow’s children greatly influences the decision made on her sexual behavior. The children determine the behavior depending on their attitude. As reported of the traditional practice of widow- inheritance in Uganda by Nyanzi (2011) the older widows who do not engage in this practice face severe social consequences. As noted in Hillman (2012:14):

If an older widow does not remarry, her adult children are expected to monitor and oversee her sexual behavior. Because traditional Ugandan beliefs indicate that sexuality is acceptable primarily for procreation, most adult children actively scold, chastise, or actively prohibit their widowed mothers from dating and having other sexual relationships.

Thus it is important to discern the impact of children on sexual beliefs and behavior among the *Abanyole* Christian widows. According to GSLC’s lens of cumulative (dis)advantages, children and the status of the family will determine widow’s sexual beliefs and behavior.

Rebec, Karnjuš, Ličen and Babnik (2015) in their article, ‘Breaking Down Taboos Concerning Sexuality among the elderly’, extensively discussed the physiological and psychosocial aspects of sexuality among elderly. They alluded to many factors that encourage or hinder the expression of sexuality among the elderly. They note that physiological changes in elderly women include: dryness and vaginal atrophy, shorter and narrowed vagina, reduced vaginal discharge and shorter clitoris. They also outline distress caused by “urinary incontinence, removal of the uterus and some other chronic diseases” which affects sexual functioning, emotional state, self esteem and eventually, interpersonal relationship. However, they also note that women experience a release of libido leading to increased desire for sexual contact at this stage because they are no longer afraid of conception to need contraceptives. Even so, older persons are still perceived to be “without sexual needs or incapable of sexual activity.” As a result, the

elderly people “suppress their sexual needs and start to behave in accordance to these beliefs” which are contrary to the reality (2015: 191-192).

On the social factors they discuss the impact of gender, race, ethnicity, educational and environmental background, socioeconomic status, financial resource, and religion on sexuality of the elderly. They underscore the suppression of sexual activity through internalization of negative cultural attitudes, myths and stereotypes about sexuality of elderly. Moreover, religion has demonized sexual activity of the elderly by restricting sexual intercourse to the purpose of procreation.

Though important studies, however, they do not relate the sexual plight of the widows to particular religious context of the *Abanyole*. It is also difficult to do an in depth study on all cultures of the world. This study made deliberate effort to examine reasons given by the *Abanyole* Christians for their perception of the widows’ sexuality.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This article discusses research findings on factors cited by the respondents and/or that have been highlighted by researchers and scholars that bear on the perception on widows’ sexuality. For the sake of discussion the factors are categorized as physiological, psychological, social and religious.

Physiological Factors

Physiological factors relate to the appearance, fitness, and general wellbeing of an individual. Physiological factors are very critical in determining general life and specifically sexual behavior of any woman. This is also true of a widow. These factors influence the individual’s self-image and the judgment of the society of the individual’s behavior. These include age, health, physical appearance and libido.

Age

Informants (CE, 8/8/16; SH, 18/8/16 **OI**) and Discussants (Kima widows, 24/2/17 **FGDs**) cited age as an important factor affecting the attitude widows and the entire society has on their sexual activity. Citing Paul’s advice (1Timothy 5:3-16) on widow care which resonates with the *Abanyole* practice, sixty years seem to be the age at which a widow is thought to be sexually inactive.

Widows that are below sixty years of age are perceived to be sexually active. This means that they are still in their child bearing age. Thus the church is very hesitant to appoint or elect them to leadership or assign them sacramental responsibilities. An Informant (SS, 21/9/16 **OI**) noted that the church exercises a lot of caution because in the event that the widow is overtaken by desires and remarries or engages in sexual activity the church is put in disrepute. He observed that many pastor and other church leaders have been on a receiving end of this matter. They rush into committing young widows to the work of ministry without due consideration. Such young widows are seen as a stumbling block to the public witness of the gospel. He confessed to have consecrated only one widow of less than sixty years due to her longstanding testimony both in the church and from family members during his ministry tenure that spanned over thirty years.

On one hand, it is demonstrated that physiological aging may negatively affect sexual agency as when women who believe their physical attractiveness has declined with age feel less comfortable pursuing sexual activity (Koch, Mansfield, Thurau, and Carey, 2005). On the other hand, it enhances sexual agency when a post-menopausal women feels more in control sexually because they no longer have to worry about pregnancy (Barbre, 1998).

An Informant (PR, 23/8/16 **OI**) narrated a story of an eighty-five year old widow in his village who is accused of keeping a thirty year old young man in her house. The villagers claim that they are living as husband and wife, yet she had employed him as a herd’s boy before the demise of her husband. The respondent explained that it is not about age but the nature and nurture of individual women. There are those who are sexually active to a very old age while others cease early. He also observed that women who have been in a marriage relation experience sexual urgency that has to be correctly channeled. This notion was confirmed by an Informant, a health worker in the

study area. She reported to have noted widows seeking family planning pills who confided that they assist in suppressing their sexual desire (LN, 8/9/16 **OI**).

Thus age as a factor was only limited to those who engage in sexual activity for the purposes of procreation. Many do so for other reasons such as economic, social (to belong or achieve certain end), therapeutic or cultural. Discussants (Kima widows, 24/3/17 **FGDs**) observed that one's sexual conduct is determined by character and not age.

No matter the motivation for sexual activity, widows' age is an important factor. It impacts on one's sexual agency. It also makes one conscious and as such behave in a particular way. Therefore one must be cognizant of one's age, yet avoid stereotyping about it while handling widows' sexuality. Hillman observes such stereotyping in the media in the West. He explains:

In fact, aging men are more likely to appear in mainstream media as primary characters than aging women. What is interesting about this gender bias is that it portrays a reality that is opposite of what is actually true; with advancing age, aging women significantly outnumber aging men. In essence, middle-aged male sexuality is tolerated or even expected, whereas female middle-aged sexuality is "muted." Another notable gender difference in the media is that with advancing age, men continue to command respect and demonstrate sexual prowess, whereas aging women literally lose the ability to be seen as agents of sexual desire and attraction.

It bears repeating that the only form of sexual expression valued in popular culture for middle-aged adults is limited primarily to that of penetrative intercourse among attractive, white, middle-class, heterosexual couples, including women who typically appear younger than their chronological age. These unrealistic and circumscribed portrayals, if internalized, pose significant challenges for middle-aged adults who do not, cannot, or choose not to model the consistently narrow range of behaviors modeled by individuals in the media. Because both middle-aged and older adults represent a demographic that spends a significant amount of time in contact with mass media, it is important for clinicians to review and potentially refute the cognitive schemas that middle-aged and older adult patients have consciously or unconsciously adopted from popular culture (2012: 22, 25).

Generally, as noted by Cattell from among the Samia older women, age and experience enables women to resist the male domination, to assert themselves (1992a). This is also true among the *Abanyole*.

Health

Health is an important influence on one's sexuality. Health concerns the state of soundness of the body, mind and soul. Thus it comprises of the physical, social and spiritual dimensions of an individual. Widows noted that health is a factor in consideration for sexual activity. They noted that the current HIV/AIDS has greatly reduced widows' options and affected their sexual behavior. They noted that it is no longer safe to engage in any sexual union because it entails a long process including medical examination which most men are not willing to undergo (Discussants, Esibila & Kima widows, 3/2/17 & 24/3/17 **FGDs**).

Discussants (elders, 24/2/17 **FGDs**) noted that ailing widows are expected to embrace celibacy. In fact the women vigilantes will always monitor movements of such to ensure that she is not involved with their men. They noted that men are also weary of ailing women especially those with conspicuous symptoms. Therefore, chances of approaching such are minimal.

One's health also affects self-rating. Ailing widows are always withdrawn from the public. As such they harbor little thought about sexual activity.

Physical Appearance

One's physical appearance enhances or suppresses sexual agency. A widow who thinks that she is attractive enough is more likely to initiate or respond to sexual advances. An Informant (SE, 15/7/16 **OI**) advised that modesty must remain a call word of every widow. She observed that people are extremely conscious of widows and whenever a widow adorns herself to attract the attention of men they will definitely come running.

However, another Informant (HN, 26/8/16 **OI**) was quick to observe that such stereotyping has been employed to victimize widows. He noted that beauty is the nature of God. Thus widows should be encouraged to give attention to personal grooming for it is good for them. He also observed that the problem would be more of personal disposition rather than physical attractiveness. Hence advising for discipleship rather than uncalled for vigilante.

This train of thought would not go unchallenged. As earlier noted from studies on sexual culture in Africa, external beauty was rarely a factor for a marriage and for that matter a sexual partner. Family background, track record of industry and respect (for husband and other male relatives) were more important. This was confirmed to have been the case by one of the respondents (Informant, FL, 14/10/16 **OI**). She noted that for men bride wealth was very important. Without which one had to be content as a bachelor. Thus she explained that physical appearance would not deter one from pursuing sexual activity. However, the modern-day society that is driven by consumerism, as presented in advertisement, is drawn toward outward looks. It portrays the young, slim, and light skinned women as sexy. This is different from the *Abanyole* idea of sexuality. However, when a widow wears makeup it raises concerns. Such a widow is monitored to ensure that she adheres to sexual norms.

Libido

The strength of one's urge is referred to as libido. Libido in both men and women changes with age. Women tend to lose their libido faster than men but the urge for sexual activity does continue. Widows differ in the manner in which they experience sexual urge. Some experience intense desire, others moderate while still others have very low desire. It also varies over life span. Libido greatly determines widows' sexual behavior (Discussants, widows, 3/2/17 & 24/3/17 **FGDs**).

A Discussant explained that she had long ceased intercourse by the time her husband died. Before her husband died, she had undergone tubal ligation (TL), which in her mind, destroyed her urge for sexual intercourse. Therefore sex for her case was already a none-issue even before her spouse passed on. She wondered and sympathized with the younger widows that are widowed while still experiencing sexual urge. She noted that life has greatly changed and it is only God who can help them. Thus the widows strongly recommended that younger widows should commit themselves to God and church ministry where they would find true satisfaction (Esibila widows, 3/2/17 **FGDs**).

Another Informant (SE, 15/7/16 **OI**) who has since remarried reported that sexual urge was not one of her reasons for remarriage. She noted that family demands and cost of living have pushed her sexual urge to a remote corner, so that it would take a miracle for her to be sexually aroused. She confided that the reason for her remarriage is to nurture her children who are her future hope.

Still another Informant (TA, 30/7/16 **OI**) explained that she used to experience a lot of sexual urge flushes and it would be a good thing to satisfy her sexual need through coital penetration. She had found out a better way. She noted to find some fulfillment in keeping herself busy with her domestic chores and church ministry. She reported to draw a lot of satisfaction from her singing and dancing in the church choir, reading the word of God, praying and enjoying coffee just before going to bed.

Another Informant (RY, 4/7/16 **OI**) explained that her libido could be reason as to why she has never thought of remarriage. She reported to have had bad experiences that would best be described as rape with her late husband. She observed that sexual urge was not one of her experiences. Hence she fears any thought of remarriage for fear of failing to meet the sexual demands of her would-be suitor.

Finally, a Discussant, (Kima widows, 24/2/16 **FGDs**) not remarried, advised that marriage is not just about sexual intercourse but about two people intimately sharing life's pilgrimage. That life's cares are so much that one requires a partner to confide in and pour ones heart to. She caused a stitch during one of the FGDs meeting by saying that in fact aging people desperately require someone to stroke their backs at night. She observed that there are many benefits in marriage that one would not afford to miss by concentrating on libido and any ability for a sexual intercourse. She, however, noted that there are remedies for low libido that are a simple as observing right nutrition, taking supplements and enhancing self image (Discussant, Esibila Widows, 3/2/17 **FGDs**). These sentiments were also expressed by two other respondents: a health worker and a remarried-lady senior pastor (LN, 8/9/16; JE, 3/10/16 **OI**).

In general, it was observed that widows cite other reasons other than sexual needs for remarriage. A study on sexual desire among *Abanyole* couples will be of interest. Hillman reported as follows on sexual desire among the Japanese in his article, Sex and Aging:

McCurry (2008) of sexual behavior in Japan suggests that one quarter of all married couples (of all ages) did not have sex with each other within the last year, and that more than one-third of married Japanese couples over the age of 50 stopped engaging in sex completely. Other ethnographic studies (Moore 2010) suggest that among older Japanese married couples, a wife's anger and resentment about her husband's infidelity in prior years account for the couple's significant decline in sexual activity. For even well-educated Japanese men over the age of 65, participation and interest in sex was associated with increased vitality in life and passion at work. Various myths about sexual functioning and desire were espoused, in which many Japanese older men blamed the lack of meat in their diet for a decline in sexual desire (2012: 15).

As already cited herein, Amadiume candidly illustrates a variety of African woman's libido and remedies as follows: Sex was not forced on a woman; she was constantly surrounded by children and other people [...]. The sanctity of motherhood meant that women were treated with respect. One woman might desire an intense relationship with her husband; another might see marital obligations as a necessary but loathsome duty. Some might abandon their relationship with their husband and shun "men and their trouble". Indigenous architecture and male/female polygyny made these choices possible. (1987: 114)

Her sentiments affirm that any kind of generalization about women's libido may be inaccurate. There are women that have a high, moderate and lower affinity for sexual intercourse. It also demonstrates the sexual choices that women consciously or unconsciously make but must be accepted and met within a generally acceptable means. Finally, it affirms the woman's power and privilege in a sexual relationship. She is a queen and in charge; not an object and an underdog as most patriarchal cultures of the world would want to portray. Hence her decision must be respected. This is indeed a contradiction.

Psychological Factors

Psychological factors are factors relating to the state of the mind. Sexual behavior is largely determined by the state of an individual's mind. Widows undergo a lot of emotional and traumatic experiences which negatively affects their ability to make sound judgment. This greatly affects their perception of their sexuality. Such factors include security, grief, self-esteem, and loneliness.

Security

Security means the absence of, or assurance of containing, of any threat. The loss of a spouse subjects the widow to a myriad threat depending on her social status. It exposes her to potential dangers of sex pets or opportunists seeking to take advantage of her situation. Therefore security status affects one's sexual behavior. As Discussants (MYW leaders, 8/2/17 FGDs) noted, some widows will choose a suitor because of insecurity. The insecurity could be social, economic or otherwise. Others would do so because they are secure and all they need is someone to explore life together.

Grief

Widows participating in this study displayed intense emotions while recounting the circumstances that led to their husband's death, but emotional intensity grew even greater as they recounted their experiences following the death. Every widow had a story which related that she was accused as the killer, openly oppressed, suppressed, afflicted or insulted by her in-laws, or required to observe some suspicious widowhood customs and traditions. They noted that the complex situation following their spouses' death led to their going through intense grief. An Informant (RY, 4/7/16 OI) described her condition thus:

When my husband died and was buried, I felt like the world had come to a standstill. I spent many hours just alone imagining life without him. I considered the children, the bills, the neighbors, the hostile family members and our friends and wondered how I was going to manage all these alone. For moments I felt numb and breathless. I blamed myself; I felt that I could have done something to have him with us. Alas! I was but a walking corpse.

An Informant (JA, 20/7/16 **OI**) confessed that she nearly ran mad. She noted that her world literally tumbled down at the demise of her husband. She spent many hours crying and cursing.

Citing Lindermann and Parker, Fasoronti and Aruna (2014: 56) explain grief in widowhood in the follow way: Grief is the complex emotional reaction arising from a loss of a spouse and the attendant difficulties and distress are apt to be very great.... Grief consists of a pattern of physiological distress including sighing, shortness of breath, and tightness in the throat, fatigue and loss of muscular strength. The griever is occupied with images of the deceased, often feels guilty about real or imagined rights to the deceased and can be irritable and angry when others try to be soothing. The grief reaction comes in waves, especially when the griever is reminded of the deceased and his grief reaction may last any length from days to years.

Such intense grief impacts negatively on one's sexual behavior. This is because during grieving, one's depiction is affected hence self-image and character. Some widows reported to have ended up in the arms of men who drew closer to them during their intense grief. This in turn compromises their sexuality and character. Conversely, other widows reported abhorring any subsequent marital relationship due to the grief caused by the loss of their spouse that they were yet to come to terms with. This option often shuttered life and livelihood of majority widows (Discussants, Esibila and Kima widows, 3/2/17 & 24.3/17 **FGDs**).

Self Esteem

Self-esteem is the sum total of the widow's self-rating. This has to do with the nurtured individual character that makes a woman take individual action with self-determination. Self-esteem entails a widow's self-worth as she judges from her inner person and from attitudes of significant others. This greatly affects sexual behavior of individuals. Discussants, (Esibila and Kima widows, 3/2/17 & 24.3/17 **FGDs**) observed that this factor affects the widow by exacerbating or suppressing her sexual agency. A widow who feels that she is not good enough yet craves acceptance might adopt a kind of sexual behavior that will earn her the approval of significant others.

This significant others would be her in-laws or a group of other women or widows. Therefore the widow will act like another person just to fit in her social setting. As Hotvedt (1983: 9) observes, sexuality of elderly women is greatly affected by the doubts and fallacies prevalent among men. They include a pervasive belief that sex is 'dirty', sex is linked to fertility which is lost after menopause, negative feelings, loss of worth and a nagging feel of immorality, would seem to be mutually reinforcing.

On the contrary, a widow with a strong character and self-determination will make sexual decision based on facts and the posterity it brings them and those around them. They would not bow to the pressure from the peers, family, significant others or any institution. They know and widely consult on what is good for them and pursue it with due decorum.

Loneliness

Widows in the study area reported to experience loneliness. One widow explained that she never knew loneliness as she came to know it upon the demise of the husband. She said that in the day when she is going about her duties and interacting with people she felt well. This was not the case for the nights. The closing of the bedroom door opened up realizations that she was indeed alone. The house and especially the bedroom seemed bigger than it used to be. The nights became darker and longer. The creeping and croaking of insect and crickets become louder and intense. There was generally no ear to off load her intense fears and share aspirations. She felt alone (Informant, RY, 4/7/16 **OI**).

The widows and elders note that life's pilgrimage is better navigated together. Widows face temptations of considering remarriage due to the lonely state they find themselves in on the demise of the spouse. Some widows simply slow their active participation in community life.

Social Factors

Human beings are social animals and as such accrue their identity from the sum total of what their communities assign them. An African adage of 'I am because we are and because we are then I am' applies. Stated social factors affecting the Christian perception of widows' sexuality include status, family, children, education, matrimonial locality and engendered roles.

Status

As earlier alluded to, the *Abanyole* philosophy categorizes women. Women accrue their status from their persona, their family of origin, academic credentials, financial or asset base, status of their children and their age. Therefore different categories of widows (women) will differ in their sexual behavior depending on their status. As a result some widows wield lots of authority in the community to the extent of being consulted on community issues (Informants, SH, 18/8/16; CE, 8/8/16 **OI**; and Discussants, Kima widows, 24/3/16 **FGDs**). This was true among the *Abanyole*. Nwachukwu-Agbada (2011: 88) underscores this while writing about Igbo women from a Nigerian case:

...[W]omen in Igboland had not always been a helpless sex as recent Igbo feminists are wont to paint them. As indicated earlier, women as a collective constitute a formidable force in the politics of any Igbo clan. And as I had had to state elsewhere, In practically all Igbo communities, women in their natal villages – addressed as “umuada” or “umumboto” – wielded legal, decisional rights comparable to those of a modern supreme court. The “umuada” were last arbiters; they equally had right to intervene, even uninvited, when they believed that there had been a miscarriage of justice.

Family

Family is an important consideration and a determinant for widow's sexual behavior. Family refers to both the nuclear and extended. As significant people in the life of the widow they influence her sexual decisions. There are various family related factors that affect widows' sexuality. They include: number and age of children from the previous marriage, extended family relationship, and family status (Discussants, **FGDs**).

An Informant (HN, 26/8/16 **OI**) related that his daughter-in-law lost her husband. The family sat and resolved to assist her with the schooling of the children and other family basic needs. None of the sons was going to claim her for a wife. She was free in case she needed to find someone to remarry her. They assisted her to claim and access the deceased husband's benefits and she is now settled at her farm in Kitale.

Children

The presence and age of children influences a widow's sexual behavior. Two Discussants in the elders **FGDs** have a firsthand experience of a church organized remarriage following widowhood. They lost their mothers and their fathers being church ministers needed to remarry. They note that the welfare of children is always a priority. They explained that children present a challenge especially to the widow because young children are under the mother's custody and the consent of those of age must be sought. In case of sons, a widow is expected to remain in her matrimonial home as a sign of commitment to the aspirations of the deceased husband and to ensure their inheritance (Discussants, elders, 21/2/17 **FGDs**).

The same is affirmed to be true in a report on Indian situation. It is noted:

The only way a widow could retain a position of honor was to stay as the elder mother in the home of her sons. Widowed man, however, could marry without restraint and gentry, men sometimes elevated a concubine to the status of wife on the death of their first wife (Fasoranti and Aruna, 2014: 56).

All widows participating in this study noted that children are always opposed to any proposal made for a remarriage. This situation leads to strife and anarchy threatening family's cohesion. The elders hinted that it is important to involve children in the process of remarriage by seeking their consent. The two elders who reported having had firsthand experience noted that their parent remained indebted to them for supporting their quest to remarry (Discussants, Elders, 21/2/17 **FGDs**). Hillman clearly captures the emotion of remarrying widows as reported by Nyanzi from Uganda thus,

For older widows in Uganda who do not engage in this practice of widow-inheritance, the social consequences can be severe. If an older widow does not remarry, her adult children are expected to monitor and oversee her sexual behavior. Because traditional Ugandan beliefs indicate that sexuality is acceptable primarily for procreation, most adult children actively scold, chastise, or actively prohibit their widowed mothers from dating and having other sexual relationships.

As noted by one of Nyanzi's participants, an adult daughter of a widowed, older mother who wished to remarry someone other than her brother-in-law, "Imagine how mad I got...to have another man, ah ah no! I told her off in no uncertain terms that this was not going to happen. I was crude. I said to her, 'Mama, do you really want to have another wrinkled body climbing on top of you...?'" Many adult children insist that their widowed mothers move in with them, which also allows them to monitor their whereabouts and limit their privacy (Hillman, 2012: 14).

This is the case among *Abanyole*. Hence, children are a critical factor in a widow's sexual behavior. Their presence, status, age and attitude toward their mother's sexual life greatly determine her subsequent sexual behavior. Those with no children or with younger children are more likely to consider remarriage or inheritance as compared to the ones with grown up children.

Education

UNDP (2016) report on literacy depicts that two-thirds of illiterate people in the world are women. This statistics are a concern given the glaring gender discrimination already existing in most societies in the world. A good education opens up opportunities and possibilities for women which make them better and authentic persons able to take charge of their destiny.

Informants (SH, 18/8/16; SS, 21/9/16 **OI**) and Discussants (elders, 21/2/17; MYW leaders, 8/2/17; **FGDs**) in this study noted that widows' sexual behavior is greatly enhanced by their level and nature of education. Most of the widows who participated in this study have a minimal or no literary education. They noted that educated widows with established career were more in charge of their sexuality than those with no or little education who are unemployed and have no control to the factors of production.

They also noted that schooling opens one to begin to interrogate many things around her. As such, those with formal education and established career naturally escape the village sexual innuendoes. However, as reflected in other literatures, literary education only puts an individual at another level of encountering male domination (Azuike, 2009 and Nwachukwu-Agbada, 2011).

As demonstrated by Adimora-Ezeigbo (2002), the best remedy to issues connected with widow sexuality is re-education. It is by re-socializing the women (widows), by nurturing their character, and arming them with effectual arsenals, enabling them to discern and counter patriarchal assumptions with zeal and acumen. This can be done at all levels as is demonstrated by the Okwara sisters of the Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Children of the Eagle* novel.

Matrimonial Locality

Matrimonial locality is an issue that greatly affects widows' sexuality. The *Abanyole* as most of other societies are patrilocal. This entails that the wife joins the husband's family upon marriage. As such she is deemed an alien with no power to make decision. Most of the families claim ownership of the late son's or brother's estates including the wife. Such was a case for a young widow already alluded to (Informant, TA, 30/7/16 **OI**). Her in-law suggested moving in with her but she declined. The in-law latter threatened her that if she was not willing to have him, then she should never think of anyone else coming to his brother's compound. The widow latter gave in for the sake of her children, but she demanded that the union be solemnized in church.

Gendered Roles

Culturally ascribed gender roles affect sexual behavior that a widow embraces. Discussants (MYW leaders, 8/2/17 **FGDs**) noted that there are roles among the *Abanyole* that are a preserve for the men. An Informant (DH, 12/8/16 **OI**) confirmed that in South Bunyore a woman is not allowed to plant a banana stem, trees and demarcations for land boundaries, and bequeath wealth to her children. She also cannot preside over or represent her family on an

important family function. Fasoranti and Aruna describes Nigerian situation as portrayed by Ahosi which concur with the views of my Informants:

It has been rightly observed that the differential between men's and women's role in Nigeria as with other societies as one of complementary and superior relationship in favor of men. It involves a hierarchy in which men are given greater leverage over decision making and resources than women. The result is a cultural setting that invariably supports male domination and female subordination (Fasoranti and Aruna, 2014: 53).

Religious Factors

Religious factors here refer to the religious reasons given for or against widows expected sexual behavior. Widows and communities applaud voluntary celibacy as the highest good for every widow while others oblige them to remarry under certain conditions. Factors given for such positions include religious commitment, God's grace, celibacy as a higher good, and terms and conditions of marriage.

Religious Commitment

Discussants (Widows 3/2/17 & 24/3/17 and Elders, 21/2/17 **FGDs**) noted that religious commitment affected widows' sexual behavior. Widows already committed to the work of the church more easily embrace celibacy than others. This research also found out that because of the criteria used to elect and appoint leaders both laity and clergy in the church many widows who are already in or aspire for such responsibility 'choose' celibacy as a way of life.

It was also observed that widows empowered through formal education, controlled factors of production and/or endowed with spiritual powers and held senior position within their denominations are freer in making decisions that went against the norms. Such widows are fully in-charge of their destiny and easily rally their society to support their cause.

God's Grace

In Christian teaching, grace is depicted as the kindness, unmerited favor and sustaining influence of God to man (Douglas, 1987). It is the basis upon human relationship with God is founded, sustained and eternally secured. Christians often pray for God's grace whenever they are faced with hurtful moments in life such as are brought about by widowhood.

An Informant (SE, 15/7/16 **OI**) pointed out that it is the grace of God that has kept her. She pointed out that she used to experience intense sexual urges following the demise of her husband. The urges came at times when she fanaticized about the rich and fulfilling life they had led with the deceased. This would gradually disintegrate into intense hatred and grief.

This she said lasted for such a long time that she became concerned. Finally she resorted to committing herself to God in prayer. She noted that gradually the experience vanished. She explained that since this happened at night she could wake up freshen, read her Bible and spend most of her time in prayer. This discipline stepped up her commitment to God and His service. She has since found peace and helps other widows facing the same challenge (SE, 15/7/16 **OI**).

These sentiments were reflected upon by Discussants (Church leaders, 24/2/17 **FGDs**). They noted that God's grace is sufficient to embrace widows in trouble. They said that it is of great importance for widows to commit themselves to God in prayer, to study the Bible, to attend church functions and to serve in the church in order to grow in the grace of God. This will, they observed, sustain them through all manner of challenges they face and will make them humble and wise.

Discussants (Kima widows, 24/3/17 **FGDs**) noted that God's grace play an integral part in a widow's ability to move on with life. They related that the pain of widowhood is so intense and sharper than birth pangs. It renders them numb. Therefore some widows go through life-motion as mere objects. It actually takes the grace of God and kindness of those around to restore them to sanity.

Religious Attitude towards Sex and Sexuality: Widow Celibacy as the Higher Good

The discussions and interviews made pointed out an emerging script among the *Abanyole* Christians, that widow celibacy is the higher good. This has become a popular trend that even young widows committed to their Christian faith are opting not to enter any marital relation. Informants (SE, 15/7/16; RY, 4/7/16; TA, 30/7/16; JA, 20/7/16 **OI**) and Discussants (widows 3/2/17 & 24/3/17; MYW leaders, 8/2/17; elders, 21/2/17 **FGDs**) explained that the reason for the trend especially for Christians is that remarriage is deemed sinful and a sign of weakness. Those who remarry are considered 'weak' Christians who are unfit for leadership and teaching positions in church. This position is supported by the Discussants (24/2/17) in the Church leaders' FGDs which noted that the church is not opposed to widow remarriage but does not consider such ones for leadership opportunities.

Informants (HN, 26/8/16; PR, 23/8/16; SS, 21/10/16 **OI**) suggested that instead of a widow indulging in sexual immorality; she should find a husband and remarry. These sentiments were echoed throughout the study by participating widows, elders and other opinion leaders. An Informant (DH, 12/8/16 **OI**) decried this trend, noting that it is unusual with a potential of inhibiting procreation. She felt that younger widows should marry and bear children. The problem is that the church in Bunyore has not demystified widow remarriage. She said that long ago the church played a leading role and encouraged and embraced young widows who remarried. The contemporary church 'discriminates' those who remarry. They are perceived as sinners especially since it is difficult for a widow to find a single man. She illustrated this with a case of a widow in her village that was 'forced' to renounce her marriage for her to be considered for a leadership position in her church. She found this to be discriminatory against women in view of their special family attachment.

Terms and Conditions for Continual Sexual Gratification

Sexual gratification in human beings is relational and as such entails fulfillment of certain terms and conditions. Sexual activity of an *Abanyole* widow is highly loaded with taboos. These taboos can repel widows and the would-be suitors from pursuing remarriage. First, According to the Christian faith and practice, sex is sacred and is to be practiced within the confines of a marital relation. This necessitates that any widow wishing to continue to engage in sexual activity to remarry. The remarriage of a widow is loaded with a lot of cultural implications.

The very thought that a widow is sexually unclean with the late husband's ghost requiring to be cleansed by another man to ward-off the ghost repels potential suitors and reduces widow's self-esteem. Cleansing is a process requiring precision and commitment in ritual performance. This process does not spare Christians as elicited from the respondents (Informants, SS, 21/9/16 **OI**) and observed in the study area.

Second, according to Christian faith and practice, marriage is a strictly monogynous institution. It does not allow for polygamous arrangements that would accommodate widows wishing to maintain their previous matrimonial homes. This makes it difficult for widows who have children, especially male, and are committed to their maintenance and to guarantee them an inheritance.

Third is the condition for being enlisted on the widows' roll and church leadership opportunity. According to the Christian teaching it is only widows that have been married ones (I Timothy 5:9) and in good standing with the church that qualify to be enrolled as beneficiaries of church aid. The same criterion is employed in the qualification of leadership. Widows that are allowed to serve in the church are those who have been married only once. This condition puts off most of widows' pursuit for sexual agency (SH, 18/8/16; FL, 14/10/16 **OI**; Church leaders, 24/3/17 **FGDs**).

Summary

This article discussed factors responsible for Christian perception on widows' sexuality among the *Abanyole* of Emuhaya. These factors are categorized as physiological, psychological, social and religious. It was established that these factors affect widows' decision on matters of sexuality to various degrees, depending on an individual widow. The study noted that *Abanyole* socio-cultural factors, that are patriarchal, greatly impacted widows' decisions leading to the perceived infringement on their rights. Religious factors which have their root in ancient Judaistic culture of the Old Testament, Hellenistic culture of the Septuagint and New Testament which were interpreted and transmitted through European culture that was male dominant only served to reinforce the *Abanyole* Christian

widows' plight. However, despite all these factors, widows are demonstrating power in their daily lives to wither all kind of oppression. They resist male dominance, especially that which touches their sexual life by making public declaration of their displeasure.

Summary and Conclusion

The article set out to determine factors responsible for the prevailing Christian perception on widows' sexuality among the *Abanyole* of Emuhaya. It sought to answer the question: What are the factors responsible for the prevailing Christian perception on widows' sexuality among the *Abanyole* of Emuhaya? It established that there are many wide range and context specific factors responsible for the prevailing Christian perception on widows' sexuality among *Abanyole* of Emuhaya. These factors are categorized as physiological, psychological, social and religious. Physiologically, one's age, general health, physical appearance and libido were noted to influence one's sexual perception and behavior. Psychologically, one's sense of security, grief, self-esteem and loneliness was found to impact on an individual's sexuality. Socially, the individual's status in terms family as in the number and age of children, academic qualification and economic ability, matrimonial locality and engendered roles were found to impact on one's sexual behavior. Finally, from a religious perspective, an individual's sense of religious responsibility and aspiration, position and entitlement greatly influences his or her opinion and behavior relating to sexuality. Hence, specific factors are responsible for widows' sexuality and accrue a particular sexual script for Christian widows among *Abanyole*. They form reference point for the expected widows' sexual behavior and activity in terms of who, when, what, where, and how. However, these factors are perceived by some as stereotypes only serving to subjugate women, hence a valid battle front. This calls for Christian women to resent their recipient position and engage the Bible cognizant of both the historical and contemporary realities in order to contribute to their liberation which is the church's freedom.

Christianity reinforces a particular practice and behavior by either sanctioning it or daunting it. Therefore those factors that resonate with Christian thinking among the churchd *Abanyole* widows should be cultivated. This study therefore recommends that the Christian communities among the *Abanyole* mitigate those factors that negatively impacts on widows' sexuality. The article opines that a genuine gender mainstreaming and empowerment program that takes serious cognizance of gender parity to mitigate gender power play involved.

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