

Chapter 5

Exploring the nexus between widowhood practices, women's mental health, and sustainable development: Implications for SDGS, case study of Nigeria

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1 Introduction

Widowhood is a global phenomenon impacting millions of women, often bringing significant socio-cultural and economic consequences (Obagboye & James, 2022). In numerous societies, including Nigeria, widowhood customs are deeply rooted in traditional practices and norms, profoundly influencing the lives and well-being of widows (Abimbola et al., 2023). Despite this, the interplay between widowhood practices, women's mental health, and sustainable development remains a complex and underexplored area of study (Erving et al., 2022). This research aims to investigate this intersection, focusing on how widowhood practices affect women's mental health within the framework of sustainable development, with a particular emphasis on Nigeria. The study centers on the intricate connections between widowhood practices, women's mental health, and sustainable development. Widowhood practices include a variety of customs, traditions, and rituals that dictate the lives of widows after the death of their spouses (Munala et al., 2022). These practices differ significantly across cultures but frequently involve limitations on inheritance rights, social exclusion, and stigmatization. In Nigeria, such practices are deeply embedded in cultural traditions, often reinforcing gender inequalities and increasing the vulnerabilities of widows (Kalu & Umunna, 2022).

Women's mental health, especially in the context of widowhood, is a crucial dimension of this research. The experience of losing a spouse can be deeply traumatic, leading to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among widows (Ennis & Majid, 2020). The death of a partner not only disrupts social support systems but also leaves widows facing economic challenges and social exclusion, further deteriorating their mental health (Urbaniak et al., 2023). Moreover, the relationship between widowhood practices and

women’s mental health has important implications for sustainable development. Addressing these issues is essential for creating equitable and resilient societies, as the well-being of widows is closely tied to broader social and economic progress. By exploring these connections, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how widowhood practices impact women’s mental health and, in turn, influence sustainable development efforts.

Table.1 Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDGs, 2019)

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	Description
SDG 01. No poverty	End poverty in all its forms, everywhere
SDG 02. Zero hunger	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture
SDG 03. Good health and well-being	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
SDG 04. Quality education	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
SDG 05. Gender equality	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
SDG 06. Clean water and Sanitation	Ensure available and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
SDG 07. Affordable and clean Energy	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
SDG 08. Decent work and economic growth	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all
SDG 09. Industry, innovation, and Infrastructure	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation
SDG 10. Reduced inequalities	Reduce inequality within and among countries
SDG 11. Sustainable cities and Communities	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
SDG 12. Responsible consumption and production	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

SDG 13. Climate action	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
SDG 14. Life below water	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
SDG 15. Life on land	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss
SDG 16. Peace, justice and strong Institutions	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
SDG 17. Partnerships for the goals	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) strive to foster inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development worldwide, with a strong focus on gender equality, poverty reduction, and health and well-being, as outlined in Table 1 (UN-SDGs, 2019; Fonseca et al., 2020). However, the negative impacts of widowhood practices on women's mental health can obstruct progress toward these goals, limiting the empowerment and socio-economic inclusion of widows. Exploring the connection between widowhood practices, women's mental health, and sustainable development is vital for several reasons. First, it highlights the gendered aspects of widowhood and the distinct challenges widows face across different socio-cultural settings. By identifying the root causes of these challenges, policymakers and stakeholders can design targeted measures to support widows and enhance their well-being. Second, analyzing how widowhood practices affect women's mental health is crucial for addressing mental health inequalities and promoting psychological well-being among widows. Mental health is a cornerstone of human development, influencing individual functioning, social interactions, and productivity. Ignoring the mental health needs of widows not only prolongs their suffering but also hinders efforts to achieve sustainable development targets (Odi et al., 2024). Additionally, understanding the interplay between widowhood practices, women's mental health, and sustainable development is key to advancing gender equality and social justice (Mhlanga and Ndhlovu, 2023). Widows are often marginalized and excluded within their communities, facing discrimination and the denial of basic rights (Sharma, 2020). By

addressing discriminatory practices and advocating for gender-sensitive policies, societies can promote inclusivity and enable widows to fully engage in social, economic, and political activities (Humayun and Chaturvedi, 2023). The main objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate the socio-cultural factors influencing widowhood practices in Nigeria and their effects on women's mental health.
2. To evaluate the prevalence and types of mental health disorders among widows in Nigeria.
3. To analyze how widowhood practices and women's mental health impact the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria.
4. To propose policy recommendations and interventions to address the relationship between widowhood practices, women's mental health, and sustainable development in Nigeria. By addressing these objectives, this study seeks to expand the existing knowledge on widowhood practices, women's mental health, and sustainable development, while also guiding policies and practices aimed at empowering and improving the well-being of widows in Nigeria and beyond.

2. Widowhood Practices in Nigeria: Cultural, Legal, and Socio-Economic Perspectives

Widowhood is a significant life event that affects millions of women globally, with profound implications for their social, economic, and psychological well-being (Adetoyese and Adeyemi, 2022). In Nigeria, widowhood practices are deeply intertwined with cultural beliefs, traditional customs, and legal frameworks, shaping the experiences and status of widows within society. This research aims to explore the cultural, legal, and socio-economic aspects of widowhood practices in Nigeria, shedding light on the challenges faced by widows and the implications for gender equality and human rights. Widowhood practices in Nigeria are deeply rooted in cultural and traditional beliefs, varying across ethnic groups and regions (Milazzo and Van de Walle, 2021.). These practices often dictate the roles, responsibilities, and treatment of widows within their communities. Some common cultural aspects of widowhood practices in Nigeria include: Widows are expected to observe mourning periods, during which they may be required to wear specific clothing, refrain from social activities, and participate in mourning rituals (Skrozic and Kijamet, 2022). These rituals may vary in duration and intensity depending on cultural norms and beliefs. In many Nigerian cultures, widows face challenges in

accessing inheritance rights upon the death of their husbands. Customary laws and practices often prioritize male heirs, leaving widows vulnerable to property dispossession and economic insecurity (Joireman and Tchatchoua-Djomo, 2023). In some communities, widows are subjected to widowhood cleansing rituals, which are believed to cleanse them of spiritual impurities associated with their husband's death (Nwadiakor and Agunwa, 2021). These rituals may involve symbolic acts or ceremonies and can perpetuate stigma and discrimination against widows. Widows may experience social isolation and ostracism within their communities, as they are often perceived as bearers of bad luck or cursed (O'Brien, K., 2023). This isolation can exacerbate feelings of loneliness, depression, and psychological distress among widows. Nigeria has enacted various legal frameworks and policies aimed at addressing the rights and welfare of widows (Izzi and Fab-Eme, 2020). However, implementation and enforcement remain significant challenges, particularly at the grassroots level. Some key legal provisions related to widowhood in Nigeria include: The Nigerian Constitution guarantees the rights of individuals to non-discrimination, equality before the law, and protection of property rights (Eze *et al.*, 2022). Customary laws and practices often override constitutional provisions, particularly concerning inheritance rights for widows. This legislation aims to protect the rights of children, including inheritance rights for children of deceased parents, implementation gaps and resistance to legal reforms hinder its effectiveness in safeguarding the rights of widows and their children (Sone, 2021; Kumar *et al.*, 2022). Enacted in 2015, this law criminalizes various forms of violence, including widowhood-related abuses such as forced evictions, property grabbing, and harmful widowhood practices, enforcement and awareness-raising efforts are needed to address cultural barriers and ensure access to justice for widows as illustrated in Table 2 (Ladan and Tawfiq, 2021, Durosaye, 2023).

Widowhood has significant socio-economic implications for women in Nigeria, often exacerbating existing gender inequalities and economic vulnerabilities (Dube, 2023). Some of the socio-economic challenges faced by widows include: Widows often experience economic disempowerment following the death of their husbands, as they may lose access to financial resources, land, and property, lack of economic independence can perpetuate dependence on extended family members or lead to economic exploitation (Christopherson *et al.*, 2022). Widows are at heightened risk of poverty and vulnerability, particularly in rural areas where access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities is limited (Herbst-Debby *et al.*, 2021). Poverty rates among widows and their children are often higher compared to the general population, exacerbating their socio-economic marginalization. Widows face barriers in accessing essential social services, including healthcare, education, and legal aid, discrimination, stigma, and lack of awareness about their rights further hinder their access to support services, leaving

them marginalized and underserved (Kirkbride *et al.*, 2024). Widowhood practices in Nigeria are deeply entrenched in cultural beliefs, marital statuses, legal systems, and socio-economic structures, shaping the experiences and outcomes of widows within society, Figure 1 (Ononokpono *et al.*, 2022). Addressing the challenges faced by widows requires multi-dimensional approaches that address cultural norms, legal reforms, and socio-economic inequalities. Efforts to promote gender equality, protect human rights, and empower widows are essential for achieving sustainable development and fostering inclusive societies in Nigeria (Ayodeji and Ade-Ibijola, 2022).

3. Women's Mental Health in the Context of Widowhood: Understanding the Impact, Prevalence, and Socio-Cultural Influences in Nigeria

The experience of widowhood represents a pivotal life transition that frequently leads to significant transformations in women's lives, profoundly affecting their psychological well-being and overall mental health (Ugwu *et al.*, 2020). In the Nigerian context, the customs surrounding widowhood, the prevalence of mental health challenges among widows, and socio-cultural influences are critical determinants of women's mental health outcomes (Ofuoku and Oyibo, 2022). This study seeks to investigate the intricate relationship between widowhood and women's mental health in Nigeria, with a particular focus on the effects of widowhood traditions, the prevalence of mental health disorders among widows, and the socio-cultural elements that shape mental health outcomes. Widowhood customs in Nigeria can negatively affect women's mental health due to the associated social, economic, and cultural difficulties (Eteng, 2022). Key consequences of these practices on women's mental health include: The death of a spouse often leads to a breakdown in social support systems, resulting in emotions of loneliness, seclusion, and neglect. In numerous Nigerian societies, widows face social stigma and exclusion, which intensifies their feelings of isolation and psychological anguish (Akhter-Khan *et al.*, 2023). Widowhood frequently brings about financial struggles for women, especially in cultures where widows are deprived of inheritance rights and economic assets. Financial instability can cause stress, anxiety, and depression as widows grapple with fulfilling their basic needs and supporting their families (Ciciurkaite and Brown, 2022). Widows in Nigeria often encounter prejudice and social exclusion due to cultural norms that perceive them as bearers of misfortune or curses (Musili, 2024). Such discrimination can severely impact widows' self-worth, mental health, and sense of community belonging. Additionally, many Nigerian widows lack legal recourse against discriminatory actions like property seizure, forced eviction, and denial of inheritance rights. This absence of legal protections exposes widows to exploitation and mistreatment, further exacerbating

their psychological suffering and emotional pain. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), comprising 17 interrelated objectives, and environmental challenges, as depicted in Figure 1.

Child Right Act Law 2003	National Gender Policy 2006	National Gender Policy Strategic Framework 2008-2013	National Policy on Education 2014	Violence Against Person (Prohibition) Act 2015
Protection against: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Early child marriage ✓ Child labour ✓ Sexual violence 	Protection against: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Gender based violence Girl's/Women's Empowerment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Strengthen the capabilities of women to take advantage of economic and political opportunities ✓ Promote equal opportunities for both men and women 	Protection against: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ All form of discrimination ✓ Sexual and gender-based violence ✓ Women abuse 	 ✓ Girl's/Women's Empowerment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Increase girls' enrolment and retention rates in schools ✓ Reduce the out of school girl children 	Protection against: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Domestic violence ✓ Female genital mutilation ✓ Rape and sexual abuse ✓

Education/Awareness:	Education/Awareness:	Education/Awareness:	✓	✓ Education/Awar
✓ On child	✓ Educate and	✓ Change in		ness:
labour	sensitise	public		✓ On female
✓ Child	stakeholders on	perception of		genital
marriage	effectively	the roles of		mutilation
	integrating gender	women		
	equality in	✓ Review and		
	National	change		
	development	schools		
	policies/program	curricula		
	mes	(primary and		
		secondary) to		
		reflect		
		changing and		
		empowering		
		gender roles		
		for women		

Table 2: Comparison of Gender Policies in Nigeria (ILO, 2015; Ladan and Tawfiq, 2021, Durosaye, 2023)

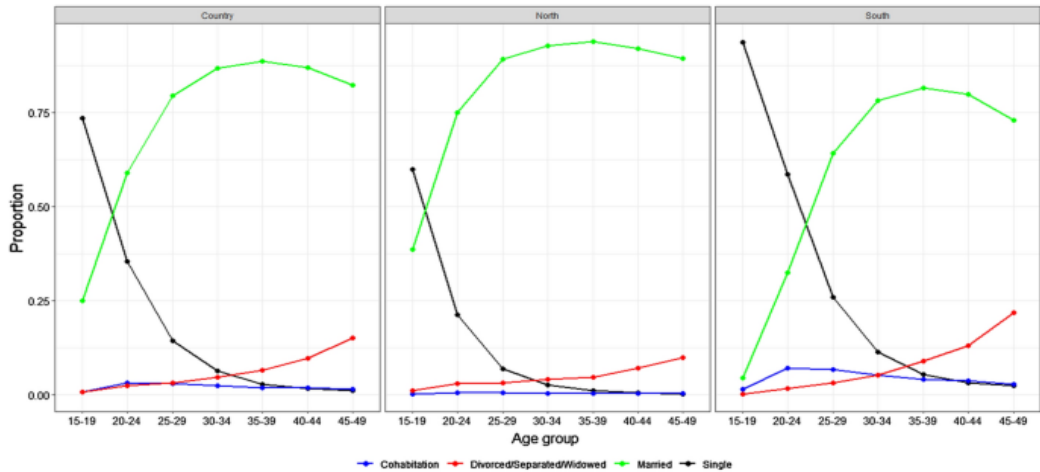


Figure 1: Marital Statuses of Women in Nigeria (Ononokpono *et al.*, 2022)

3.1. Prevalence of Mental Health Issues Among Widows in Nigeria

The high occurrence of mental health challenges among widows in Nigeria is a pressing issue, with research revealing elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) within this group (Adetoyese & Adeyemi, 2022). Several factors contribute to the widespread mental health struggles among Nigerian widows: The death of a spouse is a deeply distressing event that often triggers severe emotional and psychological reactions (Ennis & Majid, 2020). The sudden and unexpected loss of a partner can evoke profound grief, sorrow, and hopelessness, increasing the risk of mental health disorders. Widows in Nigeria frequently encounter substantial socio-economic challenges, such as poverty, joblessness, and limited access to healthcare and social support systems (Ezelote *et al.*, 2021). These financial struggles can worsen mental health conditions and hinder widows' ability to manage their grief and loss effectively. The experience of widowhood often disrupts social roles and relationships, leading to feelings of loneliness, isolation, and withdrawal from social interactions (King *et al.*, 2021). The loss of a spouse can also alter a widow's social standing and sense of identity, further exacerbating mental health difficulties.

Cultural beliefs and traditions surrounding widowhood play a significant role in shaping how widows process and express their emotions. Societal expectations related to mourning rituals, expressions of grief, and the perceived role of widows in the community can influence their mental health outcomes and willingness to seek help (Fasanmi & Ayivor, 2021). These factors collectively highlight the complex interplay of emotional,

socio-economic, and cultural elements that contribute to the mental health challenges faced by widows in Nigeria. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that considers the unique experiences and needs of this vulnerable population.

3.2. Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing Mental Health Outcomes

The mental health outcomes of widows in Nigeria are significantly influenced by socio-cultural factors, as highlighted by Endurance and Maryam (2020). Key elements shaping these outcomes include gender roles and societal expectations, which often dictate how widows are viewed and treated. In many cases, cultural norms that emphasize male dominance can marginalize widows, restricting their independence and fostering feelings

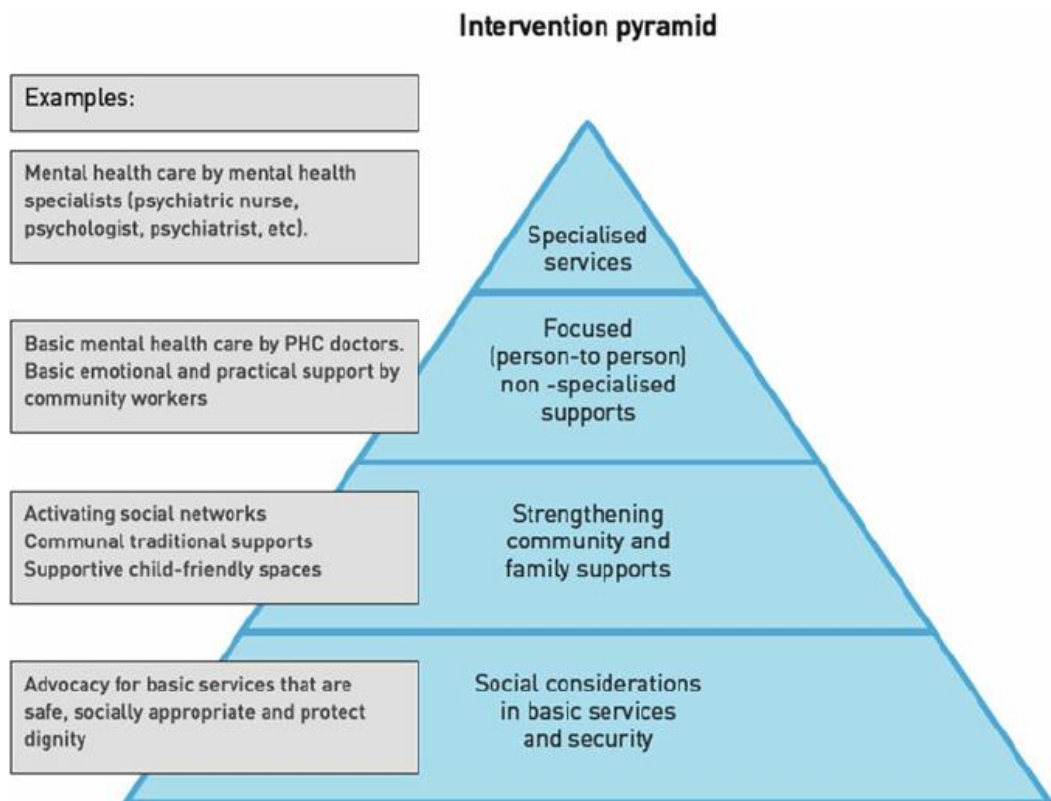


Figure 2: Intervention pyramid (Osime, 2021)

of helplessness and vulnerability (Kosec et al., 2021). Additionally, the stigma and discrimination associated with widowhood can severely impact mental health. Widows frequently encounter prejudice, social exclusion, and ostracism due to entrenched cultural

practices, resulting in emotions of shame, low self-worth, and isolation (Ejim, 2021). The presence of robust support systems and community resources also plays a critical role in determining the mental health of widows. Access to counseling, strong social networks, and community-driven initiatives can mitigate the psychological challenges of widowhood, fostering resilience and emotional well-being (Reynolds 3rd et al., 2022). Equally important is the availability of healthcare services, particularly mental health support. However, systemic barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, resource limitations, and the stigma surrounding mental health often hinder widows from receiving timely and effective care. The mental health of women experiencing widowhood in Nigeria is shaped by a multifaceted combination of cultural practices, mental health prevalence, and socio-cultural dynamics (Sarkinfa and Babayo, 2021). To address these needs effectively, holistic strategies are required. These should focus on challenging harmful cultural beliefs, strengthening social support systems, and ensuring access to mental health services. By acknowledging the distinct challenges widows face and implementing gender-sensitive measures, Nigeria can enhance the mental well-being and empowerment of widows. Such efforts align with sustainable development goals and promote social justice, as illustrated in Figure 2 (Osime, 2021).

4. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Women's Well-being: Bridging the Gap for Gender Equality

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a holistic framework designed to tackle global issues and foster sustainable progress (Fallah Shayan et al., 2022). A central focus of the SDGs is the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. This study seeks to examine the connections between the SDGs and the well-being of women, emphasizing relevant goals, the effects of gender inequality on sustainable development, and the significance of integrating women's mental health and widowhood practices into the SDG agenda.

Eliminating gender disparities is vital for sustainable development for multiple reasons. First, gender equality is strongly associated with economic growth and productivity. Reducing the gender gap in workforce participation and entrepreneurial activities can enhance GDP and drive broader development (Crane, 2022). Second, gender inequality can weaken social cohesion and stability, potentially leading to conflict and unrest. Advancing gender equality and women's rights can foster peace and strengthen social unity (Onditi et al., 2021). Third, unequal access to healthcare and education disproportionately harms the health and well-being of women and girls (Giudice et al., 2021). Tackling these inequities is critical for ensuring universal health and well-being.

Additionally, women are key contributors to environmental sustainability, particularly in managing resources and adapting to climate change. Empowering women and ensuring gender equality can improve resilience to environmental challenges and support sustainable development (Huyer et al., 2021).

The SDGs serve as a robust framework for addressing gender inequality and advancing women's rights and well-being. To achieve sustainable development, it is essential to recognize the connections between women's mental health, widowhood practices, and the SDGs, while placing gender equality and women's empowerment at the core of development initiatives (Adekile, 2020; Aihie, 2021). By prioritizing gender equality and women's rights, nations can create more inclusive and resilient societies, thereby advancing the broader objectives of sustainable development.

5. Methodology for Studying Women's Mental Health in the Context of Widowhood and its Implications for Sustainable Development.

The methodology section of this study is designed to detail the strategies and techniques employed to explore women's mental health within the framework of widowhood and its impact on sustainable development. Utilizing a mixed-methods design, the research integrates qualitative interviews, survey data, and analysis of secondary sources to achieve a thorough and nuanced comprehension of the topic.

5.1 Research Design and Approach:

Integrated Methodology : This research adopts a mixed-methods framework, blending qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis strategies (Doss and Rubin, 2021). By integrating these approaches, the study aims to thoroughly examine the intricate aspects of women's mental health during widowhood, while also using statistical data to validate qualitative observations.

Exploratory Framework : Owing to the multifaceted nature of the subject and the necessity to investigate various dimensions, an exploratory research design is employed (Makri and Neely, 2021). This flexible and open-ended approach facilitates the identification of emerging themes and patterns during data collection and analysis.

Data Collection Techniques : **Semi-Structured Interviews:**** In-depth interviews are carried out with widows, community leaders, mental health practitioners, and policymakers to gain detailed perspectives on their experiences, views, and attitudes regarding widowhood, women's mental health, and sustainable development (Aborisade

and Olayinka-Aliu, 2023; Kabembo, 2024). These conversations are recorded and transcribed for detailed examination.

Quantitative Surveys : Surveys are distributed to widows to evaluate the frequency of mental health challenges, such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Standardized tools and questionnaires are utilized to assess mental health outcomes and related contributing factors. Surveys are administered either online or in person, depending on the accessibility of participants.

Secondary Data Review : The study also involves an analysis of existing literature, reports, and statistical data on widowhood practices, women's mental health, and sustainable development, with a focus on Nigeria (Nwakanma and Abu, 2020). This review of secondary sources offers contextual background and supports the primary data collection process.

5.2 Sampling Techniques and Participant Selection Criteria

Targeted Sampling : Individuals are deliberately chosen for their direct connection to the research subject and their capacity to offer meaningful contributions (Onimisi, 2020). The study includes widows from varied economic, regional, and cultural backgrounds to capture a wide range of viewpoints (Ugwu et al., 2020).

Referral Sampling: A referral-based approach is utilized to recruit additional participants, leveraging recommendations from those already involved in the study. This method is particularly effective in accessing individuals who might otherwise be difficult to reach, thereby broadening the scope and depth of the collected data.

Selection Guidelines : Participants for both qualitative interviews and surveys are chosen according to predefined criteria, such as being widowed, living in Nigeria, and expressing a willingness to engage in the research (Akhter-Kha et al., 2023). For interviews, further considerations like age, educational background, and economic standing are factored in to ensure a diverse sample.

5.3 Ethical Considerations

Before taking part in the study, all individuals are given comprehensive details regarding the research goals, methods, potential risks, and anticipated benefits (Pietilä et al., 2020). Each participant provides informed consent, guaranteeing that their involvement is voluntary and that their autonomy is respected. Throughout the research, strict measures

are taken to uphold the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Personal identifiers are safeguarded, and data is securely stored to prevent any unauthorized access (Brittain et al., 2020). During interviews and surveys, participants' privacy is prioritized, with steps taken to foster a secure and supportive atmosphere for discussing personal experiences and sensitive details (Munson and Ensign, 2021). The study has been granted ethical clearance by the appropriate institutional review board or ethics committee, confirming adherence to ethical norms and standards for research involving human participants. This research utilizes a mixed-methods framework to explore women's mental health in the context of widowhood and its relevance to sustainable development in Nigeria. By integrating qualitative interviews, surveys, and analysis of secondary data, the study seeks to offer a thorough understanding of the topic while maintaining ethical integrity (Pyo et al., 2023).

6. Case Study: Widowhood Practices, Women's Mental Health, and Sustainable Development in Nigeria

Nigeria, a nation renowned for its vibrant cultural heritage, is composed of numerous ethnic groups, each with distinct traditions and customs related to widowhood (Milazzo and Van de Walle, 2021). This case study examines the contextual framework of widowhood practices in Nigeria, evaluates empirical data and findings concerning the mental health of widowed women, and investigates the challenges and opportunities in addressing the intersection of widowhood practices, women's mental health, and sustainable development in the country. Widowhood practices in Nigeria are deeply embedded in cultural, traditional, and religious frameworks, differing significantly across ethnicities and regions. In many Nigerian societies, widows encounter significant obstacles in securing inheritance rights after their husbands' passing (Ehumadu, 2022). Customary laws frequently favor male descendants, leaving widows at risk of losing property and facing financial instability. Widows are often required to adhere to mourning customs, such as wearing designated attire, avoiding social engagements, and taking part in mourning rites (Akanni, 2020). The length and strictness of these practices differ widely among cultures and communities. In certain areas, widows undergo cleansing rituals intended to remove spiritual impurities linked to their spouse's death. These rituals, which may include symbolic gestures or ceremonies, can reinforce stigma and discrimination against widows. Additionally, widows in Nigeria often experience a reduction in social standing and encounter prejudice within their communities (Muoghalu and Abrifor, 2020). They are sometimes viewed as bearers of misfortune or cursed, resulting in social exclusion, ostracism, and marginalization.

6.1. Analysis of Empirical Data and Findings

Research findings indicate that widows in Nigeria are disproportionately affected by mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Rwang et al., 2022). The psychological distress experienced by widows is often intensified by the death of a spouse, socio-economic pressures, and societal stigma. In Nigeria, widows frequently encounter severe socio-economic hardships, including poverty, joblessness, and limited access to healthcare and educational opportunities (Eneji and Agri, 2020). These economic disadvantages worsen mental health conditions, making it harder for widows to manage grief and trauma effectively. Additionally, gender-based inequalities in Nigeria further exacerbate the vulnerabilities of widows, particularly in accessing resources, legal rights, and community support (Amoo et al., 2022). Systemic inequities continue to marginalize widows, creating barriers to addressing their mental health concerns adequately.

6.2 Challenges and Opportunities for Addressing the Nexus

To tackle the interconnected issues of widowhood practices, women's mental health, and sustainable development in Nigeria, it is imperative to enact legal reforms that safeguard widows' rights and advance gender equality (Onwugbenu, 2023). Strengthening the enforcement of current laws and introducing new policies to protect inheritance rights, curb property seizure, and eliminate discrimination against widows is critical. Equally important is enhancing access to mental health resources and support systems tailored to widows' needs. Building mental health infrastructure, educating healthcare providers, and increasing public awareness about mental health can significantly reduce the psychological burden faced by widows (Javed et al., 2021). Additionally, empowering widows through vocational training, microfinance initiatives, and income-generating projects can boost their economic standing and mental health. Access to financial tools and economic opportunities can diminish their susceptibility to poverty and social marginalization (Herbst-Debby et al., 2021). Mobilizing communities through dialogue and awareness campaigns about widowhood practices, women's rights, and mental health is crucial for dismantling detrimental norms and fostering inclusivity. Interventions at the community level, involving religious and traditional leaders, women's organizations, and civil society groups, can drive societal transformation and provide support to widows (Ezeogueri-Oyewole and Suleiman, 2023). The intersection of widowhood practices, women's mental health, and sustainable development in Nigeria offers both obstacles and avenues for progress. By confronting the socio-cultural, legal, and economic elements that exacerbate widows' vulnerabilities, Nigeria can foster gender equality, uphold women's

rights, and improve widows' well-being, thereby contributing to sustainable development and social justice (Garrison, 2021; Agbonika and San, 2023).

7.0. Implications for Policy and Practice: Enhancing Support for Widows' Well-being and Mental Health

To effectively tackle the intricate issues widows encounter, such as societal widowhood customs and mental health struggles, a comprehensive strategy is essential. This strategy should encompass policy changes, better service provision, and the inclusion of mental health aspects within wider development plans (Alghamdi et al., 2023). This study delves into policy suggestions aimed at fostering gender-responsive reforms for widows, methods to improve mental health support and services for this group, and the incorporation of mental health concerns into the frameworks used to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

7.1. Policy Recommendations to Promote Gender-Sensitive Widowhood Reforms

Introduce and rigorously implement legislation that safeguards widows' inheritance rights and combats property seizure. Enhance legal systems to eliminate discriminatory practices and guarantee equitable access to property and assets for widows (Christopherson et al., 2022). Launch public education initiatives and awareness programs to counteract damaging cultural beliefs and stereotypes associated with widowhood. Collaborate with traditional and religious leaders, community stakeholders, and policymakers to foster attitudes and actions that are sensitive to gender issues (Bulus, 2023). Roll out social welfare programs specifically designed for widows, such as cash assistance, pension plans, and initiatives supporting livelihood development (Midgley, 2020). Ensure these social protection measures are tailored to address the unique challenges and vulnerabilities faced by widows. Facilitate widows' access to justice by setting up legal aid clinics, offering free legal services, and educating law enforcement and judicial staff on gender-sensitive handling of widowhood-related cases (Oladele and Alake Adekunle, 2020).

7.2. Strategies for Improving Mental Health Services and Support for Widows

Incorporate mental health services into primary healthcare systems to enhance accessibility and reduce costs, as depicted in Figure 3 (Abdulmalik et al., 2019; Anyebe

et al., 2021). Educate healthcare professionals on recognizing and managing mental health conditions in widows, such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Develop specialized psychosocial support initiatives for widows, including counseling sessions, support groups, and peer mentorship programs (Wasilewski et al., 2022). Equip mental health practitioners and community health workers with the skills to provide culturally appropriate and gender-aware psychosocial support. Encourage community involvement in fostering social support and solidarity networks for widows. Collaborate with local leaders, women's organizations, and volunteers to establish safe environments where widows can share their experiences, gain knowledge, and receive emotional assistance (Ogega, 2022). Strengthen the abilities of healthcare providers, social workers, and community leaders to identify and address the mental health challenges faced by widows. Implement training initiatives focused on trauma-informed care, grief counseling, and strategies for promoting mental well-being (Holmes et al., 2023).

7.3. Integration of Mental Health Considerations into SDG Implementation Frameworks

Integrate mental health considerations into national development policies, strategies, and action plans, including those aligned with the SDGs (Owolabi *et al.*, 2023). Ensure that mental health is prioritized as a cross-cutting issue across all sectors, including health, education, gender equality, and poverty reduction. Collect disaggregated data on mental health indicators, including prevalence rates, access to services, and treatment outcomes among widows (Ilinca *et al.*, 2022). Monitor progress towards mental health targets within the SDGs and evaluate the impact of interventions on widows' mental well-being (Kirkbride *et al.*, 2024). Foster collaboration between government agencies, civil society organizations, and development partners to address the intersectionality of widowhood, gender, and mental health within the SDG framework (Lecoutere *et al.* 2024). Pool resources and expertise to develop comprehensive, multi-sectoral approaches to promoting women's well-being and mental health. Advocate for the inclusion of mental health on national and international policy agendas, including within the SDG review and reporting processes (Patel *et al.*, 2023). Engage in policy dialogue with stakeholders to raise awareness about the importance of mental health for sustainable development and

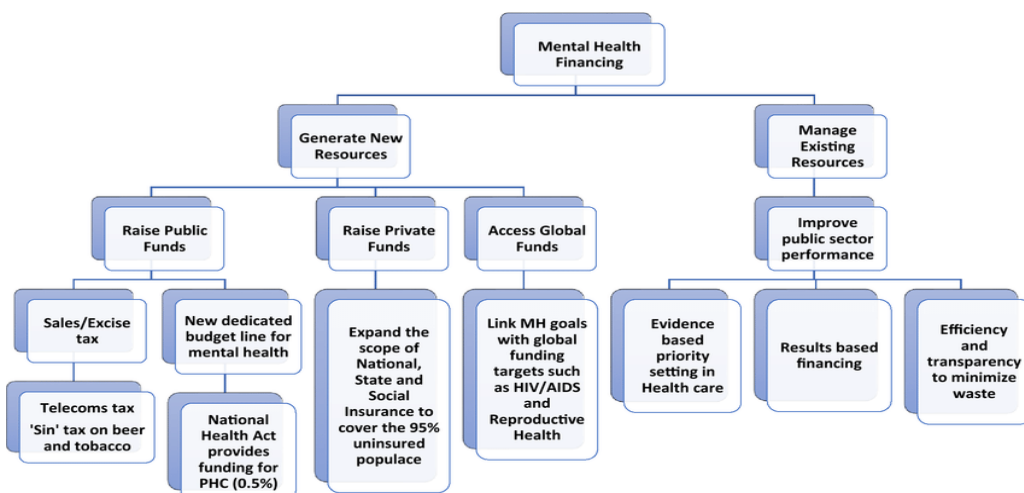


Figure 3: Model of mental health financing for Nigeria (Abdulmalik *et al.*, 2019)

mobilize support for evidence-based interventions. Policy and practice play critical roles in addressing the challenges faced by widows and promoting their well-being, including mental health (Abbas *et al.*, 2020). By implementing gender-sensitive widowhood reforms, improving mental health services and support, and integrating mental health considerations into SDG implementation frameworks, policymakers and practitioners can advance the rights and dignity of widows and contribute to sustainable development and social justice (Bulsari, 2021; Olusegun and Oyelade, 2022). It is imperative to prioritize the empowerment and inclusion of widows within broader development agendas, ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of equitable and sustainable development (Ngang, 2021; Fahm and Memud, 2024).

8. Conclusion

In summary, this study has examined the complex relationship between societal practices, the mental health of women, and sustainable development, highlighting the critical connections among these elements. By analyzing a wide range of literature and empirical data, key insights have been uncovered, revealing the diverse challenges widowed women face globally and their impact on sustainable development. Additionally, the importance of addressing this relationship to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been stressed, alongside a call for more research and coordinated efforts to tackle the root causes. Widowhood customs differ widely across cultures and regions, but they frequently result in negative outcomes for widowed women, including social exclusion, economic vulnerability, psychological struggles, and even physical harm. Widowhood is

consistently linked to higher rates of mental health issues among women, such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Contributing factors like social isolation, financial difficulties, and discriminatory practices worsen these risks, highlighting the necessity for holistic support systems. Widowed women from marginalized communities, including those in rural areas, low-income families, or conflict zones, encounter additional challenges due to overlapping forms of discrimination and disadvantage. Addressing the needs of these vulnerable groups is essential for fostering fair and inclusive development. The negative consequences of widowhood practices and mental health challenges for women extend beyond individual well-being, affecting broader socio-economic outcomes and sustainable development goals. Gender inequalities in access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making further intensify these issues, impeding progress toward the SDGs. Effective policy and intervention strategies must adopt a comprehensive approach, incorporating legal reforms, social safety nets, healthcare services, psychosocial support, and community-driven initiatives. Central to these efforts is the promotion of gender equality, human rights, and social justice.

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