AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC
STATUS OF WIDOWS IN ESANLAND 1981-2005

Daniels Sylvester Airebamen

Abstract

Although widows constitute as much as 25 percent of the adult female population and widowers about 7.5 percent of the adult male population in many African societies, they have been topics of little interest to the researchers in the humanistic disciplines. The available literature on widowhood focuses almost entirely on cultural norms of widow remarriage and the adverse implication of widowhood practices. No emphasis is laid on how much the practices contribute to the survival and evolution of groups. Not much is known about the widowers and the changing roles of widowhood as modernity demands. It is in order to arrest these lapses that the paper employs the use of historical methodology to fathom out the realities of widowhood and its socio-economic implication in Esan land. The study starts by edifying the mode of inheritance as entrenched by the customs and tradition of the Esan people and interrogates the socio-economic positions of widows from 1981-2005 in order to allay the challenges of widows in the international rebirth milieu.
Introduction

It can be said that there is no group more affected by sin of omission than widows. They are painfully absent from statistics of many developing nations, and they are rarely mentioned in the multitude of reports on women’s poverty, development, health or human rights published in the last twenty-five years.1 Growing evidences of their vulnerability, both socio-economic and psychological now challenges many conventional views and assumptions about this “invisible” group of women.

This issue of women is an overview of an aspect of women’s live which receives varying treatment within different regions and countries. For developed countries substantial statistical information exists on the ages and numbers of widows and widowers, whereas the data available on the subject of widowhood for developing countries are extremely limited.2 And it is in these regions that there has been the most neglect, and where the need for action to eliminate discrimination is most imperative. According to A. Sessay and A. Odebiyi ed., these widows are the specific sub-group that should be targeted for prompt intervention considering the incidence of depression among them, the socio-economic dilemma that the crisis of widowhood brings to them, and the sudden change in their status. ³ Even with the critical areas of concern for the women at Beijing ’95, coupled with the state of widowhood being exacerbated by

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conditions of poverty, armed conflict, lack of access to social services and resources, widows got no special mention in the Beijing Platform for Action.4

African widows, irrespective of ethnic groups, are among the most vulnerable and destitute women in the region south of the Sahara. Common to both Francophone and Anglophone countries in the region is the concept that death does not end a marriage. While the widow may have no rights to ownership of her husband’s property, she is usually expected to fulfill obligations towards her deceased husband through her participation in traditional practices. In return she would be allowed to remain in her home and to have rights to cultivate land. This process which tends to culminates into wife-inheritance termed “Uhanmin” in Esanland is expected to provide financial, social, economic, and emotional support and protection for the widow. In the pre-colonial time, this pattern of reciprocal duties and obligations in an extended family protected the widow and her children. But today the custom is more likely to be used to oppress and exploit them because many inheritors have hidden under the guise of widow inheritance to sequestrate the properties of the widows. And it is believed that the low status, poverty and violence experienced by widows stemmed from discriminations in inheritance custom, the potential nature of society and the domination of oppressive traditional practices and customary codes, which take precedence over constitutional guarantees of equality and international women human rights.5

Above all, the issues of inheritance and discriminations against women have been the subject of the law reform in many African Anglophone countries. Their governments have legislated for equality in inheritance rights in compliance with their obligations under the Beijing Platform for Action and Human Rights Treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Convention on the Rights of the Girl-Child. However, it is clear that at the local level, discriminatory customary rules on inheritance still apply. It is only in rare cases where

4 Women 2000. Widowhood: Invisible Women, Secluded or Excluded…. 1
courageous widows defied threats of violence and take their cases to court that some independent and creative judges have decreed that international law as laid down under the above convention takes precedence over customs and religion.\textsuperscript{6}

In many African societies, it is glaring that widow coping strategies involved exploitative informal sector work, putting children into child labour, begging and ultimately sex work. But on the other hand, it is worthy of note to discovered that many widows had in the face of the same tragedy shown remarkable determination and courage by either individually or in cooperation with others had become self-supporting and entrepreneurial by running small businesses, farming and supporting their children and other dependants. It is this discovering that informed the imperativeness of this paper. And it is hope that at the end of this research essay one would have come to a better understanding of the Esan people, and grasp their unique model of inheritance and socio-economic emancipation in order to reduce the overbearing challenges facing widows in their match toward the acclaimed egalitarian society.

\textsuperscript{6} Women 2000. Widowhood: Invisible Women, Secluded or Excluded…. 9
The Geo-Sociological background of Esan People

Esan people are generally a unique race, great people with great minds and great talents. They are hospitable, peace–loving and generous people. Esanland is in the northern part of the Nigerian forest region. It is located north-east of Benin. It was a division in the old province of Bendel state now broken into Edo and Delta state. It is bounded in the north by Etsako, on the west by Benin, on the south by the western Igbo and on the east by the river Niger and the Igala. Prior to the colonial era, there was no rigidly fixed geographical boundary. The area expanded and contracted under various political and socio-economic circumstances of the period.

The climate throughout Esanland is favourably cool. It is almost temperate all the year round in Irrua and Uromi area. The heavy rains are from May to October with some two weeks break popularly known as “August Break”. The onset and end of this season is usually heralded by thunderstorms. The dry season sets in after the first week of November with the heat of the sun much tempered by the Hammatan which last from the months of November to February. And the hottest season being February to April.

Presently, Esan occupies five local government areas, namely Esan North East, Esan South East, Esan West, Esan Central and Igueben. The predominant occupation of the people is farming and trading. It has 36 kingdoms with independent kings known as the Onojie. And like any other African community, Esan people are noted for being religious, valuable traditions, rich cultural heritage and any other enviable traits and characters.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL DATA ON WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES IN ESANLAND 1981 - 2005

For an effective dissemination of information and for a cognate data base analysis, the study undergoes the following research on widowhood and widowhood practices in Esanland from 1981 – 2005.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information</th>
<th>Data</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Percentage of widows among adult female</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Percentage of widowers among adult male</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Reason for high percentage in widows</td>
<td>Economic crunch, life expectancy in Nigeria at 45 years, and inability to marry at advance age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reason for low percentage in widowers</td>
<td>Polygamy and ability to marry at advance age</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. If historically and contemporary corpse had been washed for the widow to drink</td>
<td>It is a taboo in Esanland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Where had the widow been forced to remarry the kin of the deceased</td>
<td>Compelled in the pre-colonial and colonial period for obvious inheritance and continuity purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Where the matrimonial property had been confiscated by the in-laws of the widow</td>
<td>Any of such case will be sanction by the gods, ancestors and the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Where plates and cup were not washed nor cleansed for the widow to eat and drink</td>
<td>Always cleansed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Where widows had been bastardized, assaulted or indicted unreasonably</td>
<td>Indicted where suspicion is glaring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Where widow had been locked up in a room with corpse of her husband</td>
<td>It is a taboo in Esanland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Where the widow was not allowed to bathe during mourning periods</td>
<td>Compulsory bathe in the early morning, except where the widow is indisposed but wash her face and legs</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Where the widow has been made to sleep on the bare floor without a mat</td>
<td>Always with a mat or foam. Depend on the choice of the widow</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Where the widow had been left alone unattended to</td>
<td>Her relatives is always sent to keep her company</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Where a compulsory scrapping of the hair and pubic regions was enforce</td>
<td>At will. Not compulsory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Where widowhood lasted for as long as a year</td>
<td>Always three months and half. Both</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>16.</td>
<td>Where it is a compulsion for a widow to be inherited as a property</td>
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<td>17.</td>
<td>Which areas of widowhood in Esanland that are dehumanizing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Percentage of women that wanted widowhood rites abrogated</td>
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<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Percentage of men that wanted widowhood rites abrogated</td>
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<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Percentage of women that wanted widowhood rites modified or refined</td>
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<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Percentage of women that wanted it intact</td>
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<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Percentage of men that wanted it modified or refined</td>
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<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Percentage of widows access to NGOs and government intervention</td>
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<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Percentage of widowers access to NGOs and government intervention</td>
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<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Percentage of literature and organization to create awareness on the intricacies and suffering of the widows in Esanland</td>
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<td>26.</td>
<td>Percentage of widow inheritance in Esanland in the contemporary time</td>
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<td>27.</td>
<td>Percentage of widows remarrying outside their late husband’s place</td>
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<td>28.</td>
<td>Percentage of widows resident in their matrimonial home</td>
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<td>29.</td>
<td>Percentage of widows resident with their natal family</td>
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Source – field survey.\(^9\)

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The Socio-Economic Position of Widows in Esanland up to 1960

Unlike the situation in many African societies, widows in Esanland are not subjected to contradictory plural legal systems. The mode of inheritance is entrenched in the customs and tradition of the people. The first son inherits the property of the father. Where there is more than one wife, the first sons of each doors shares the property with the first son taking the lion share. No relatives or community interferes with the property of a man with a family. In the pre-colonial time, a woman has no inheritance in Esanland. But contemporary Esanland allocate inheritance to the female child in the absence of a male child without prejudice. Any relatives of the man that withhold any part of the properties from the heir await the sanctions of the ancestors and gods which are always very deadly, especially if the deceased was a junior brother. In most communities in Esanland, no elderly man or woman eats or partake in the burial ceremony of her junior ones, let alone to subvert their property. It is a taboo in Esanland to sequestrate the property of a deceased brother. Anywhere it happens, it is an aberration of the system, and punitive measures await such culprits. Therefore, inheritance is accrued to the widow via the first son. If the son is under-aged, the mother takes custody and management of the husband’s estate pending when the son assumes office. In reality, widows make decisions about their own lives depending on the options available to them. In many cases, they had the freedom to live alone and manage their affairs, to form relationships with consorts, or in some system, to marry again.

In Esanland, despite some cultural and traditional restrictions, widows have lots of choice. They are socially and economically capable. In pre-colonial period, the Esan people, both the men and the women engaged in farming as a major occupation. With this they were able to fend for their polygamous families as well as other personal needs. Men did most of the tedious work while the women undertook the lighter ones. It was only in some cases where there was no help for the woman that she did combined both jobs and sometimes involved the children. The Esan woman was never the lazy type. She was like

10 Chief Inegbedion Edetanlen. Age; 99. Date; 17th October, 2012. In his palace, Eguare Ekpoma
her male counterpart. Even before the coming of the European and during colonial period, the Esan woman was first and foremost a farmer and could be engaged in other productions after farm requirements had been met. Through these periods, labour was both a social and economic factors in Esan society. The men could boast of the numbers of roles of yams he had in a year; while the women the numbers of drums of palm oil. The women were never found wanton. Side by side with their male counterpart they engaged in subsistence farming and later in the productions of these crops during the cash economy. The oil palm is indigenous to West Africa where it must have first developed along forest margins in the savannah.\(^{11}\) Oil palm trees are found all over Esanland where they grow plenteously. Therefore Esan farmers engaged in the exploitation of the oil palm for food, palm wine, broom sticks, body oil, soap, and for cash nexus. In the last century before 1900, with the Industrial Revolution going on in Europe, there was a great demand for oil, which was used as a lubricant for the machines and for making soap, candle and margarine. According to Dike:

> With the increasing population at the time of the industrial revolution in Britain came change in the social customs and industrial requirements. As British people began to take washing seriously the demand for soap rose considerably and palm oil was the chief constituent in the manufacture. The substitution of metal for wooden machinery and the development of railways caused a sharp rise in the use of oil as a lubricant. The existing sources of animal fats were not only inadequate but also sometimes unsuitable. West African palm oil was found to satisfy this need.\(^{12}\)

> Okojie opined that the palm oil and kernel are produced by the women who buy the ripe nuts from the men for local use and export abroad. According to him, the method used in making the oil is crude and arduous, but about 90\% of the oil is grade one.\(^{13}\)

> Other cash crops were cotton, rubber and cocoa. Cloth weaving was a female industry before the advent of the European. Until the twentieth century, the people still adopted the traditional system of cotton production, which was by first intercropping it

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\(^{13}\) Okojie, C. G. 1994. *Esan Native Laws and Customs*. 26
with other food crops. When Europeans began to trade with Esan, they encouraged the people to produce more cotton which they were prepared to buy. According to Igbafe, the Europeans wanted cotton because:

Of shortage in the world supply of cotton, Lancashire experienced a period of violent fluctuations in the price of cotton. Secondly, the consequent entry and American speculation in the cotton helped to worsen the position as far as Lancashire’s manufactures were concerned. Thirdly, the situations became so desperate that most of the Lancashire mills began to run short time for long periods.14

Apart from economic trees like oil palm and rubber in which men and women actively took part in its indigenous productions, timber was another forest product in Esanland which was in high demand in Europe. Located in the forest savannah zone, Esan forests were blessed with abundant timber resources. These provided the raw materials for mortar and pestles, doors and troughs that were earlier produced by the people long before the coming of the Europeans. Among the timbers were Mahogany, Iroko, walnuts Opepe, Camwood and Ebony just to mention a few.15

Initially, concessions to exploit Esan forest were granted to a number of companies. These were Messrs A.C.B. Henri and Company, Messrs W.B. Maclever and Company, etc. They acquired concessions to exploits the Sylvan wealth in the area. Messrs W.B. Maclever and Company had the area South of Esan from Ewohimi to Ubuluku and to Ugen; then from Amahor through River Ossiomo and West from Iruekpen through Ujemen. The company also acquired about a mile east of Emu and Inyenlen. Messrs A.C.B. Henri and Company had the area North and Northeast of Esan from Ewatto to Ewohimi through Okhordua to Ewossa. McNeil Scott and Company had Usugbenu, Ihumudumu, Ugiamwen, Ukpenu, Igor, Udo, Uromi and Urho. Messrs Miller

15 N.A.I. CSO 26 ID 2291/A Intelligence Reports, Ishan I, 1925 – 1926, Compiled by H.G. Aveling et al.
Brothers Ltd., acquired Oria, Illushi mainland to Inyenlen from Uzea, Anegbette and Ugboha.\textsuperscript{16}

The exploitation of all these forest resources was and is still a big business which involved much labour across the forest belt. A conscious traveler down Esanland can still see men and their wives engaging in these timber and palm oil business. As the British had encouraged the people to develop individual rubber and oil palm plantations, both men and women responded to the call as a result of the economic benefits. Since rubber and oil palms remained permanently on the land, individual cultivators, both men and women use that avenue to lay permanent claims over such lands till this day.

\textbf{Esan Widows in the Age of Modernization}

However, with the age of modernization, farming as major occupation occupies the minds of only a few in Esanland since vast opportunities develop every now and then. The cash nexus brought about by modernization especially with the founding of Ambrose Alli University in the city of Ekpoma in 1981 turned the average Esan woman into expert in terms of trading. Though at the beginning the items of trade were basically farm produce, it has taken a different shape as several items apart from farm produce are now been traded in various market places across Esanland. Unlike the Hausa and Yoruba, trading in Esanland is done mainly by women. To corroborate this fact, it may proved difficult in some area especially Ekpoma, Igueben, Ubiaja and Uromi to move a few kilometers without sighting a spot or an area of commercial activity ranging from the simple phone boots to the more complex high scale trading shops – a living testimony to the fact that the Esan woman is industrious and dynamic in nature.

From the precedence, the degrees to which Esan women cum the widows are economically self-reliant are evident in this study. Since African women generally

\textsuperscript{16} N.A.I. CSO 26 ID 2291/A Intelligence Reports, Ishan I, 1925 – 1926, Compiled by H.G. Aveling \textit{et al.}
contribute substantially to the household economy and often provide most of all the support for themselves and their children, this should not be surprising. If widows are poor, it is because they have depended so much on their husband as the main breadwinners, and that their domestic or agricultural work in the family has not resulted in economic independence at the demise of their husband.\textsuperscript{17}

In some cases, a widow can prove to be more of enriching economic independence with increased status. Female-headed households can be relatively well off. An energetic entrepreneurial widow can gain more respect as the main decision maker, a role she may never have enjoyed whilst in marriage. In societies where husband is the sole provider, his death could leave his family destitute. In some patriarchal societies, widows could maintain economic independence. A woman would carry on her husband’s business and be accorded full recognition. In some cases widows had greater opportunity for social mobilization than house-wives. Also women who are “presumably celibate” were much more able and likely to challenge conventional sexual behavior cum economic breakthrough than married women in the society.\textsuperscript{18} So the idea and perception of widows as being mere passive pawns runs counter to the lofty ideals of feminism. For what a man can do a woman can do also, is a popular cliché by proponents of women liberation movement globally. The statement has not only become popular, it has also been proved to be realistic looking at several areas of human endeavour that women are actively involved in today.

Contrary to commonly held views, there is generally no communal support for widows especially in Esanland. The widows are self-reliant, living alone and heading their own households. They may receive occasional gifts, but concepts of communal support and corporate group responsibility are rarely idealized. Generally, widows

\textsuperscript{17} Women 2000. Widowhood: Invisible Women, Secluded or Excluded…. 10

\textsuperscript{18}
support themselves, sometimes with the assistance of children. Older widows rely on sons, co-wives’ sons and daughters.\textsuperscript{19}

A growing body of literature documents the importance of women’s economic activities in Africa. Research by Help/Age International suggests that older widows are recognized as playing a key role in both economic development and in social and family stability. Policy makers agree that if the productive resources and caring roles of elderly widows were suddenly withdrawn, the socio-economic effect would be devastating.\textsuperscript{20} A growing body literature documents the important of women economic activities in Africa. In some societies, women are the primary subsistence producers. The type and degree of female and male economic interdependence relate to labour organization, the requirements of the productive technology, and to patterns of income distribution. Unlike Western marriages in which conjugal funds are combined, in many African marriages, there is no pooling of resources. Men and women control their respective incomes and make independent contributions to the household. One or both may also have outside obligations.\textsuperscript{21}

In western societies with common conjugal funds, the death of a husband sometimes leaves the widow in reduced economic circumstances.\textsuperscript{22} This does not necessarily happen in African societies. In Esanland, the indefatigable widows continue to produce goods much as they did before. The widow acquires effective managerial control over the husband’s estate. Whether widow experience economic difficulties, depends on the nature and importance of the husband contribution while alive. The position of Esan widows is much the same as when their husbands were alive. Though some widows are made poorer in some societies like the Igbo and Yoruba, the Esan widows are better off than even wives since they inherits their husband’s properties without any encumbrances and are free to pursue their own activities without

\textsuperscript{19} Potash, B. 1980. Widows in Africa: An Introduction…. 27
\textsuperscript{20} Women 2000. Widowhood: Invisible Women, Secluded or Excluded…. 10
\textsuperscript{22} Potash, B. 1980. Widows in Africa: An Introduction…. 28
impediment. They need not provide assistance on their husband’s farms any longer nor much of communal distractions. With their children, they have full control over the assets of their late husbands.

Dependence on children is also particularly important as the study reveals. We have seen the difficulties experienced by widow without a child. According to Etienne and Schildkrout, adopted children as well as own children are important to a woman’s wealth and to her support at old age. Imagine a widow that has no such provision! Even if she looks up to affinal supports, to what extent can they provide? It is only out of moral obligation and the possible re-enforcement by fear of supernatural reprisals that the siblings have to provide for her. Thus, sons inherit their father’s estate through their mother in the house property complex. If there are adult sons they inherit and their widowed mother suffers no hardship. A son would not deprive his mother of assets and might well be willing to have her manage household affairs.

As regards assistance, the degree and type of economic assistance the Esan widows has from kin of both sides is variable. Distinctions should be made between the provision of goods and income, labour assistance, and access to productive resources. In none of the Esan communities do affine take full responsibility for providing goods or income for the widows. If at all, the aftermath is always regrettable. Occasional gifts may be made if relationships are keen and good, but there is no such expectation of support. In Esanland where women produce the bulk of the subsistence goods and earn cash through farming and trading, many widows are largely self-sufficient.

Conclusion

Having critically examined the socio-economic nature of widowhood rites and practices in Esanland in the period under review, it becomes absolutely clear that the

processes involved were quite ancient, and has sound underlying reasons for its validity. Among the people of all ages, widowhood is understood as a period of intense cultural practices by a widow or widower which is characterized by expressions of sorrow and grief, traditionally symbolic of love and respect for the late spouse. This period is specially dotted by several purifications rite for the widows, that which verify her innocence and culminate in wife inheritance (Uhanmin). All these are for the singular view to restore the widow’s cultural and socio-economic identity from the alienation into which the death of her spouse has plunged her. From the foregoing, it is clear that based on cultural understanding, widowhood and its practices were designed for the good of the widow, the community at large and as a way of paying homage to the deceased especially in a community that nurtures the belief in the strong connection between the living and the death.

Today, though widowhood rites and practices are still in vogue in all African societies, the institution of widow inheritance is fast becoming a mere shadow of what it used to be in Esanland. Modernity has become the order of the day. Widows can now move from one city to another in search of the greener pasture at their disposal. She is no longer encumbered by the state of incommunicado subjected by the pre-colonial history. Moreover, the monetization of the economy as distinct from the pre-colonial era and the expansion of employment outside agriculture concomitant on the present era have altered the relative value system associated with kinship status and the dominant role of widowhood across ages.

On the whole, the study recognizes that the socio-economic and psychological impact of a husband’s death on the widow is not always easy. Widow generally may have hard time providing enough cash for the family upkeep, especially when there are younger children to send to school. The extent to which the loss of a spouse modifies a widow’s standard of living varies from society to society. It is usually the more affluent wife that is most likely to suffer relative deprivation than the less affluent ones. If the husband was a good provider, the widow’s income will often decline at the death of the husband unless there
are adult children to make up the difference. Otherwise, the less affluent women that carried a greater burden of support as wives during the hay days as do the typical Esan woman may find their position as widows difficult, but not adversely changed.
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17 Women 2000. Widowhood: Invisible Women, Secluded or Excluded…. 10


20 Women 2000. Widowhood: Invisible Women, Secluded or Excluded…. 10


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