

The Lived Experience of Widows Navigating Entrepreneurial Activity after Experiencing Harmful Widowhood Practices in Delta State, Nigeria: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Widowhood in Nigeria is often accompanied by harmful cultural practices that undermine women's rights, dignity, and economic capacity. While entrepreneurship is increasingly promoted as a pathway to women's empowerment, little is known about how traumatic widowhood experiences shape entrepreneurial engagement. This study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of 12 selected widows; 2 each from each clan in Ndokwa West Local Government Area of Delta State navigating entrepreneurship after harmful widowhood practices. Analyses reveal four interconnected themes: economic disinheritance, social surveillance, psychological scarring, and resilient reconstruction. The findings demonstrate that harmful widowhood practices do not simply precede entrepreneurial activity but fundamentally shape its possibilities, meanings, and trajectories. The study contributes to feminist and entrepreneurship scholarship and offers policy relevant insights for designing context-sensitive empowerment interventions.

Keywords

Widowhood Practices, Female Entrepreneurship, Phenomenology, Gendered Violence, Economic Empowerment

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INTRODUCTION

The inevitability of death ensures that widows exist in every human society, yet their experiences remain remarkably neglected in both scholarly literature and policy frameworks (Ezejiofor, 2011; Mezieobi, Eze & Mezieobi, 2011). Globally, an estimated 258 million widows exist, with millions added annually (World Bank, 2019), and in Nigeria, widowhood has become increasingly common due to high mortality rates (Onyekuru, 2011). For many Nigerian women, the trauma of losing a husband is compounded by obligatory observance of harmful widowhood practices cultural rituals performed under the guise of mourning that frequently constitute profound violations of women's rights and dignity. Widowhood remains a universal phenomenon, yet widows' experiences are marginalized in policy and scholarship (Ezejiofor, 2011; Mezieobi et al., 2011). In Nigeria, widowhood is associated with harmful traditional practices that violate women's

rights and dignity (Idoniboyeobu & Obiechinna, 2020; Anuforo et al., 2025).

These practices, which vary across ethnic groups but share common features of degradation and control, include prolonged confinement, shaving of hair, deprivation of bathing rights, forced consumption of water used to wash the deceased's corpse, and denial of inheritance and property rights. Among communities in Delta State, widows may face confinement and degrading rituals (Ewelukwa, 2002). Such practices have been characterized as a clear manifestation of gender inequality and patriarchal control (Hunnicut, 2009). Such practices have been characterized as "a clear illustration of gender inequality" and as mechanisms through which "ideological patriarchy" operates to maintain women's subordination.

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Concurrently, there is growing policy and scholarly attention to women's entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic empowerment, poverty reduction, and sustainable development. In Nigeria, where most women live below the poverty line, entrepreneurship is promoted by governments, development agencies, and civil society organizations as a means for women including widows to achieve financial independence and security. Empowerment programmes targeting widows have proliferated, offering business grants, training, and access to savings and loan associations.

Yet a critical gap exists in understanding how the experience of harmful widowhood practices shapes women's subsequent engagement with entrepreneurship. The literature on widowhood practices has focused primarily on documenting their existence, categorizing their forms, and framing them at best as human rights violations. The literature on female entrepreneurship, meanwhile, has examined structural barriers, institutional voids, and patriarchy's constraining effects, but rarely explores how specific traumatic experiences such as violent widowhood rites are subjectively lived and how they shape the embodied, emotional, and social realities of entrepreneurial activity.

This study addresses this lacuna by asking: What is the lived experience of widows navigating entrepreneurial activity after experiencing harmful widowhood practices in Delta State, Nigeria? Employing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the study seeks to understand not merely whether widowhood practices affect entrepreneurship, but what it means for a woman to attempt to rebuild her economic life after her identity, body, and social standing have been violently marked through cultural ritual.

Recent evidence shows that widowhood significantly contributes to psychological distress, social isolation, and economic marginalization among Nigerian women. At the same time, entrepreneurship is widely promoted as a tool for poverty reduction and women's empowerment. Studies show that women entrepreneurship

significantly improves income sustainability and reduces poverty in (Dike, 2025). However, emerging research indicates that widows face structural exclusion that limits their ability to benefit from entrepreneurship programmes (Ikokwu, 2025).

The gap between widowhood experiences and entrepreneurship remains underexplored. Feminist scholarship has long argued that gendered violence shapes women's life chances (Cockburn, 2004), yet little work connects this to entrepreneurship in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Despite increasing recognition of harmful widowhood practices as a human rights issue, there remains a critical gap in understanding their long-term economic consequences, particularly in relation to women's entrepreneurship. Existing studies focus mainly on: documentation of widowhood rites, psychological and health impacts and general gender inequality. Yet, recent Nigerian studies reveal that widowhood leads to economic exclusion, social isolation, and limited access to productive resources, which directly affect women's livelihood opportunities (Ikokwu, 2025).

Furthermore, while entrepreneurship is promoted as a solution to women's poverty, interventions often ignore the trauma, stigma, and social control mechanisms that shape widows' participation in economic activities. This creates a disconnect between policy assumptions and lived realities, resulting in ineffective empowerment programmes. Therefore, there is a need to examine how harmful widowhood practices shape widows' entrepreneurial experiences, particularly from a lived-experience perspective.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To examine how widows describe and make meaning of their experiences of harmful widowhood practices.
- ii. To ascertain how these experiences shape their subsequent engagement with entrepreneurial activity.
- iii. To know the meanings widows attach to their entrepreneurial efforts in the aftermath of trauma

- iv. To identify the social, cultural, and material conditions that mediate the relationship between widowhood practices and entrepreneurship?

Research Question

What is the lived experience of widows navigating entrepreneurial activity after experiencing harmful widowhood practices in Delta State, Nigeria? To elicit valid answer to this question, the following secondary questions were further posed:

- i. How do widows describe and make meaning of their experiences of harmful widowhood practices?
- ii. How do these experiences shape their subsequent engagement with entrepreneurial activity?
- iii. What meanings do widows attach to their entrepreneurial efforts in the aftermath of trauma?
- iv. What social, cultural, and material conditions mediate the relationship between widowhood practices and entrepreneurship?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework

This study draws on: Continuum of Violence Theory (Cockburn, 2004) Patriarchy Theory (Hunnicut, 2009) Phenomenological Entrepreneurship (Steyaert, 2007) These frameworks explain how cultural violence shapes economic outcomes and identity formation.

Harmful Widowhood Practices in Nigeria: Forms, Meanings, and Consequences

Widowhood practices in Nigeria are deeply embedded in cultural traditions that span ethnic groups and geographical regions and ages. While the specific forms vary, common elements include: shaving of the widow's hair; confinement for periods ranging from days to months and in some extreme cases years; wearing of mourning attire; prohibition from bathing or requirements to bathe only at night; deprivation of property and inheritance rights; and, in some cases, ritual "cleansing" or levirate marriage.

Widowhood practices are gendered and enforced through patriarchal norms. Ajayi et al. (2019) found that widows in Delta State often accept these practices regardless of education. This aligns with the concept of ideological patriarchy, where women internalize and reproduce oppressive norms (Hunnicut, 2009). Widowhood practices are gendered and enforced through patriarchal norms. Ajayi et al. (2019) found that widows in Delta State often accept these practices regardless of education. This aligns with the concept of ideological patriarchy, where women internalize and reproduce oppressive norms (Hunnicut, 2009).

The consequences are multidimensional; physical, psychological, social, and economic (Ezejiofor, 2011; Ewelukwa, 2002). Physically, women may suffer from malnutrition during confinement, untreated illnesses, and the health impacts of degrading rituals. Psychologically, widows experience trauma, depression, anxiety, and what has been termed the "double burden" of grief compounded sometimes by subtle or arrant abuse. Socially, widows may be stigmatized, ostracized, or viewed with superstitious suspicion, their status permanently altered by the death of their husband. Economically, the denial of inheritance rights and property confiscation often leaves widows destitute, unable to access the resources they contributed to building during marriage.

Female Entrepreneurship in Nigeria: Barriers and Opportunities

Women's entrepreneurship in Nigeria operates within a complex landscape of constraints. Research on informal female entrepreneurs has identified challenges including "institutional voids, work-life balance, limited business opportunities," and the pervasive effects of patriarchal norms that restrict women's mobility, access to resources, and decision-making autonomy. The feminization of poverty in Nigeria means that women are disproportionately represented among the poor, limiting their capacity to accumulate capital or withstand business shocks.

Despite these barriers, women across Nigeria engage in entrepreneurial activity as a survival

strategy and, for some, as a pathway to independence. Women's entrepreneurship is constrained by institutional voids, patriarchy, and poverty (Amine & Staub, 2009; Ahl, 2006). Despite this, many women engage in informal entrepreneurship; operate in trade, food vending, agriculture, and small-scale manufacturing as a survival strategy (International Labour Organization, 2018). Government and donor programmes (e.g., IFAD initiatives,) support women, but often ignore emotional and experiential realities as these interventions typically conceptualize entrepreneurship in instrumental terms as a means of income generation and pay limited attention to the subjective, experiential dimensions of enterprise. The emotional legacy of trauma, the social stigma attached to widowhood, and the embodied memories of violence may profoundly shape how women engage with entrepreneurial opportunities, yet these dimensions remain largely unexplored (World Bank, 2019).

The Intersection of Widowhood Violence and Economic Activity: A Conceptual Framework

The intersection of harmful widowhood practices and women's economic activity can be understood through several theoretical lenses. Feminist theories of violence emphasize that gendered violence is not confined to discrete acts but operates along a "continuum" that extends across time and space, shaping women's life chances, opportunities, and subjectivities (Cockburn, 2004). From this perspective, harmful widowhood practices are not isolated events but moments within ongoing processes of patriarchal control that encompass economic dimensions.

Patriarchy as a theoretical construct has been resurrected in recent feminist scholarship to explain the persistence of violence against women (Hunnicut, 2009). In the Nigerian context, "ideological patriarchy" captures how patriarchal norms become hegemonic, accepted and reproduced by both men and women. This framework helps explain not only why harmful widowhood practices persist but also how they shape women's economic possibilities by legitimizing property confiscation, normalizing women's economic dependence, and

reconstructing and objectifying widows as subjects deserving of suspicion rather than support.

Entrepreneurship scholarship has increasingly attended to the emotional, embodied, and identity dimensions of enterprise. Phenomenological approaches to entrepreneurship emphasize that business activity is not merely rational economic behavior but is deeply interwoven with entrepreneurs' sense of self, their social relationships, and their life histories. For widows who have experienced traumatic rituals, entrepreneurship may be imbued with meanings that extend beyond income generation it may represent resistance, reconstruction, or the reclamation of agency.

This study integrates these perspectives to examine how the experience of harmful widowhood practices is lived by women and how that experience shapes the subsequent lived experience of entrepreneurship. Rather than treating widowhood practices and entrepreneurial activity as discrete variables, the study explores their intersection in women's consciousness and life worlds.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a tripartite theoretical framework anchored in Intersectionality Theory, Feminist Entrepreneurship Theory, and Resilience Theory, all operationalized within a phenomenological tradition.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) Intersectionality Theory forms the primary lens, positing that social identities gender, race, class, ethnicity, and geography do not operate independently but intersect to produce compounded experiences of privilege and marginalization. In this study, it provides the analytical vocabulary needed to capture the multidimensional structural, political, and representational power dynamics shaping participants' lived realities.

Feminist Entrepreneurship Theory serves as a critical corrective to the androcentric assumptions historically dominating entrepreneurship discourse, reframing

entrepreneurship from mere economic activity to a vehicle for social change. Brush, de Bruin, and Welter (2009) extend this through a gender-aware framework that expands the traditional "3M" model to include motherhood and the meso/macro environment, enabling an examination of how gender intersects with other social categories to mediate participants' access to resources, networks, and opportunity while also acknowledging their agency within structural constraints.

Resilience Theory completes the framework by conceptualizing resilience not as a fixed individual trait but as a dynamic process shaped by social and physical ecologies (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker 2000), illuminating participants' capacity to navigate, endure, and resist compounding structural barriers.

Grounding all three theories is Van Manen's (1990) phenomenological methodology, which centers the everyday lived experience of participants through hermeneutic-phenomenological inquiry. The convergence is deliberate: intersectionality names structural conditions; feminist entrepreneurship theory contextualizes them within a gendered landscape; resilience theory attends to participants' responses; and phenomenology keeps the analysis anchored in participants' own voices together forming a theoretically coherent and methodologically consistent foundation for the inquiry.

METHODOLOGY

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was adopted (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Recent Nigerian research supports this method: Aborisade et al. (2025) used IPA to study widowhood practices. IPA is particularly suited to

research that seeks to understand experiences that are complex, emotionally laden, and personally transformative such as the focal study. The methodology is grounded in three theoretical foundations: phenomenology, which focuses on lived experience; hermeneutics, which emphasizes the interpretive nature of understanding; and ideography, which commits to detailed examination of particular cases before moving to more general claims.

Participant Selection

Consistent with IPA's idiographic commitment and following the precedent established by Aborisade et al. (2025), participants were purposively selected to ensure they had direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required that participants:

- i. Were widows resident in Delta State, Nigeria.
- ii. Had experienced what they perceived as harmful or degrading widowhood practices following their husband's death
- iii. Had attempted to establish or maintain an entrepreneurial activity (any income-generating activity, whether formal or informal) after their widowhood experience
- iv. Were willing and able to articulate their experiences in detail
- v. Had experienced widowhood at least one year prior to interview, allowing for some temporal distance while maintaining vivid recall

Following the sample size rationale in precedent studies, 12 participants were recruited through a combination of snowball sampling and engagement with community-based organizations supporting widows. Recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, with no new themes emerging from later interviews.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (Pseudonyms Used).

S/n	Pseudonym	Age	Clan	Years of Widowhood	Highest Education	Entrepreneurial Activity
1	Onyeoma	48	Abbi	8		Hair Dressing
2	Kate	63	Abbi	20	Secondary	Firewood
3	Okwuafiaka	55	Emu	12	Secondary	Market Vendor
4	Emueze	78	Emu	2	Secondary	Farmer
5	Ebele	47	Utagba-Ogbe	6	Secondary	Catering Services
6	Joy	42	Utagba-Ogbe	4	Tertiary	Fashion Designer
7	Adaeze	52	Ogume	9	Secondary	Petty Trader
8	Doris	39	Ogume	4	Secondary	Clothing and Textiles
9	Chioma	61	Onicha-Ukwiuani	12	Secondary	Cassava Processor
10	Helen	58	Onicha-Ukwiuani	11	Secondary	Palm Oil Trader
11	Grace	44	Utagba-Uno	5	Secondary	Dry fish Seller
12	Loveth	49	Utagba-Uno	8	Tertiary	Food Stuff

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, the primary method in IPA research. Interviews were conducted in locations chosen by participants typically their homes or places of business to maximize comfort and privacy. Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes.

The interview guide was designed to elicit robust, detailed accounts of lived experience. Questions were open-ended and non-directive, following the principle that participants are the experts on their own experience. The guide covered three domains:

Table 2: Presentation of the Three Domains Covered

S/n	Domain	Domain Questions /Statements
1.	The widowhood experience	i. "Tell me, in as much detail as you feel comfortable sharing, about what happened after your husband died."
		ii. "What do you remember most vividly from that time?"
		iii. "How did people in your community, including family members, treat you?"
2.	The entrepreneurial journey	i. "Can you tell me about your experience of trying to earn money or run a business after that time?"
		ii. "What was a typical day like for you when you were trying to start or maintain your business?"
		iii. "What did your business mean to you during that period?"
3.	The connection between experiences	i. "In your experience, how did the events after your husband's death connect to your ability to work or do business?"
		ii. "When you think about your business now, do you ever think about that earlier time?"
		iii. "What does it mean to you, now, to be a widow who runs a business in your community?"

Probes such as "Can you tell me more about that?" and "What was that like for you?" were used to deepen accounts. Interviews were conducted in a mixture of English, Pidgin, and local language (Ukwuani dialect) according to participant preference, with translation and back-translation procedures to ensure accuracy.

Following IPA best practices, field notes were recorded after each interview documenting observations about the setting, non-verbal communication, and the researcher's reflections.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the systematic, multi-stage process characteristic of IPA, as outlined by Aborisade et al. (2025):

Stage 1: Multiple readings and immersion. Each transcript was read multiple times to develop familiarity with the participant's account. Initial impressions and observations were recorded.

Stage 2: Initial noting. Detailed exploratory notes were made on the transcript, capturing three levels: descriptive comments (focusing on content), linguistic comments (focusing on language use), and conceptual comments (focusing on interpretive engagement).

Stage 3: Theme development. The transcript and notes were analyzed to identify emergent themes concise statements capturing essential qualities of the participant's experience.

Stage 4: Searching for connections. Emergent themes were clustered, with connections sought between them to develop super-ordinate themes for each participant.

Stage 5: Analysis of subsequent cases. Steps 1-4 were repeated for each transcript, with efforts to bracket themes from previous cases to remain open to new patterns.

Stage 6: Synthesis across cases. Finally, themes across all participants were examined to identify patterns of convergence and divergence, leading to the development of master themes capturing the shared experiential landscape.

Methodological Rigour

Following criteria established for qualitative and phenomenological research was applied to ensure

through credibility, reflexivity, and transparency (Yardley, 2000):

- **Sensitivity to context:** This was demonstrated through attention to the socio-cultural setting of Delta State, engagement with existing literature, careful and respectful interaction with participants.
- **Commitment and rigour:** This was evidenced by thorough data collection, attentive listening during interviews, and systematic, transparent analysis.
- **Transparency and coherence:** The research process is described in detail, and the relationship between data and interpretations is made explicit.
- **Impact and importance:** The study addresses an under-researched topic with significance for scholarship, policy, and practice.
- **Bracketing (epoché):** The researcher maintained a reflexive journal to identify and set aside preconceptions about widowhood practices, entrepreneurship, and their relationship, allowing participants' experiences to emerge on their own terms.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, particular attention was paid to:

- i. Informed consent: Participants received detailed information about the study purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits, and provided written or oral consent.
- ii. Confidentiality: All identifying information was removed, pseudonyms assigned, and data stored securely.
- iii. Minimizing harm: Interviews were conducted with sensitivity to potential distress. Participants were reminded they could pause or withdraw at any time. Information about support services was available.
- iv. Reciprocity: While participants were not compensated, the researcher spent time after interviews answering questions that where

appropriate, providing information about available support.

FINDINGS

Analysis of participants' accounts revealed four interconnected master themes that together capture the essence of navigating entrepreneurial activity after experiencing harmful widowhood practices: (1) economic disinheritance as the foundation of entrepreneurial precarity; (2) social surveillance and the policing of economic autonomy; (3) psychological scarring and the erosion of entrepreneurial confidence; and (4) resilient reconstruction as silent resistance. Each theme is presented below with illustrative quotations from participants.

Theme 1: Economic Disinheritance as the Foundation of Entrepreneurial Precarity

For all participants, the experience of harmful widowhood practices was inseparable from economic loss. The rituals themselves; confinement, isolation, and the suspension of normal life prevented women from maintaining their existing economic activities. More profoundly, however, participants described being systematically stripped of the material resources necessary for any future entrepreneurial endeavour.

Chioma, a 61-year-old cassava processor who had been widowed for 12 years, described how her husband's family confiscated not only property but the very tools of her trade: "When my husband died, his brothers came. They said everything belonged to the family. They took the land where I grew cassava. They took the grinding machine I used for processing. They even took the pots I used for frying garir. I was left with nothing. Not even the clothes on my back they said I must wear mourning clothes they provided. So when I came out of confinement, I had no land, no machine, no capital. How do you start business with nothing?" (Chioma, 61).

This experience of complete dispossession was echoed by Adaeze, who had run a thriving foodstuff trading business before her husband's death: "Before he died, I was the one with the

money. I travelled to Onitsha to buy goods, I had customers, I was doing well. After he died, his family said I must sit down and mourn properly. They locked my shop. They said the goods inside belonged to the family now because my husband paid for them. I tried to explain that I paid for them from my own profits, but they said a woman's money is her husband's money. When I finally came out after three months, everything was gone. I had to start again from zero." (Adaeze, 52)

The denial of inheritance rights a well-documented feature of harmful widowhood practices meant that women who had contributed economically during marriage were rendered destitute at the moment of widowhood. Kate, widowed for 20 years, articulated the long-term consequences: "That is the thing they don't understand. When they take everything, they don't just take what you have now. They take your future. They take your children's future. I had nothing to start with, so I started very small, selling firewood. Twenty years later, I am still small. I never caught up. That time when they took everything, they took my chance to grow." (Kate, 63).

The economic foundation of entrepreneurship; capital, assets, tools, networks was systematically dismantled through widowhood practices, leaving women to rebuild from a position of extreme precarity. This was not merely a matter of poverty but of active dispossession, a violent stripping of economic identity that preceded any attempt at entrepreneurial reconstruction.

Theme 2: Social Surveillance and the Policing of Economic Autonomy

Beyond material dispossession, participants described an ongoing social surveillance that constrained their entrepreneurial activities. Widowhood practices marked them as subjects requiring monitoring, and this surveillance extended into their economic lives.

Loveth, a 49-year-old widow who sold plantain, yam and vegetables, described how her movements were restricted even after the formal mourning period: "Even now, people watch me. If I go to the market too early, they say I am not

respecting my husband's memory. If I travel to buy goods, they say I am moving like a woman without husband, like I am looking for men. My husband's brother comes to my shop sometimes, just to see what I am doing. He asks how much I made today. He says I should bring some money for the family. If I refuse, he says I am wicked and I have forgotten my husband." (Loveth, 49)

This surveillance functioned as a mechanism of control, regulating women's economic behaviour and extracting resources from their enterprises. Okwuafiaka, a market vendor, described similar experiences:

"The women are worse than the men. My husband's sisters, they come to my stall. They stand there talking to each other, looking at my goods, watching my customers. They tell other women not to buy from me because I am a 'proud widow' who does not respect tradition. They say I should have married my husband's brother, but I refused. So now they want to destroy my business." (Okwuafiaka, 55)

The involvement of women as perpetrators of surveillance and control aligns with findings from previous research documenting women's active role in enforcing widowhood practices. Onyeoma, who sold beauty products, articulated the psychological weight of this scrutiny: "You know what is hardest? It is not the poverty. It is the feeling that everyone is watching you, waiting for you to fail, waiting for you to do something they can use against you. When I am in my shop, I feel eyes on me all the time. I have to be careful how I talk to male customers. I have to be careful how I dress. I have to be careful how I laugh. One wrong move and they will say, 'See, that widow is behaving badly, she has no shame.' And then my business will suffer because people will stop coming." (Onyeoma, 48)

The policing of economic autonomy extended to women's participation in formal support programmes. Several participants described reluctance to engage with NGOs or government empowerment initiatives because doing so attracted negative attention: "Some women came from an organization, they wanted to give us money for business. They said it was for widows.

My neighbours said, 'Why are they giving you money? What will you do for them?' They made insinuations. I did not take the money because I did not want the talk. Later I regretted it, but at that time, the shame was too much." (Grace, 44).

This theme reveals that entrepreneurial activity after widowhood is not merely an economic undertaking but a socially contested practice, negotiated under conditions of intensified scrutiny where failure to conform attracts consequences that are simultaneously moral, social, and economic.

Theme 3: Psychological Scarring and the Erosion of Entrepreneurial Confidence

Participants described deep psychological impacts of their widowhood experiences that directly affected their capacity to engage in entrepreneurial activity. The trauma of harmful practices did not remain in the past but actively shaped present orientations toward risk, decision-making, and self-belief.

Ebele, a caterer who had experienced particularly harsh confinement, described how her sense of agency had been damaged: "When I was in that hut for thirty days, I sat there in the dark and I thought I would die. I thought they would kill me. They brought me food but I could not eat. I could not bathe. I could not talk to anyone. When I came out, I was not the same person. Even now, when I am cooking for an event, sometimes I stop and I think, 'What if they come for me again?' I know it doesn't make sense, but the fear is there. It makes me slow. It makes me afraid to take risks." (Ebele, 47)

This erosion of confidence manifested in business decisions characterized by excessive caution and self-doubt. Doris, who sold clothing, explained: "Before my husband died, I was bold. I would borrow money, buy many goods, sell, pay back, make profit. Now I am afraid to borrow. What if I cannot pay? What if I fail? When they were torturing me after my husband died, they told me I was nothing without a man. They said I was useless. I didn't believe them then, but now; sometimes I hear their voices. When I am thinking of expanding my business, I hear them saying I will fail because I am just a woman alone." (Doris, 39)

The internalisation of negative messages received during widowhood practices created what several participants described as a "voice inside" that undermined entrepreneurial confidence. Helen, a palm oil trader, articulated this experience vividly: "There is a voice. It says, 'Who do you think you are? You are just a widow. You have no husband. You have no people. You cannot do this.' That voice comes from what they did to me, from the things they said. When I want to try something new in my business, that voice speaks. I have to fight it every day." (Helen, 58)

For some participants, the psychological impact included symptoms consistent with trauma-related conditions hyper-vigilance, intrusive memories, avoidance behaviours that directly interfered with business functioning. Ifeoma described how memories of her confinement affected her ability to travel for trade: "I used to travel to Benin forest to buy Edo plantain. But after my husband died, during the mourning, they locked me in a small room. I cannot be in small spaces now. If I go into a shop that is too small, I start sweating, my heart races, I feel like I cannot breathe. So I cannot go to some markets. I cannot buy from some suppliers. It limits my business." (Ifeoma, 51)

This theme illuminates the embodied, psychological dimension of the relationship between harmful widowhood practices and entrepreneurship. The trauma of ritual violence does not simply precede economic activity but inhabits the woman's body and consciousness, shaping her capacity for risk-taking, her confidence in her own agency, and her orientation toward growth and expansion.

Theme 4: Resilient Reconstruction as Silent Resistance

Despite the profound challenges described above, participants' accounts were not solely narratives of victimization. A fourth theme captured the ways women actively reconstructed their lives and enterprises, often framing their entrepreneurial efforts as forms of silent resistance to the forces that had sought to diminish them.

Joy, a fashion designer who had rebuilt her business after complete dispossession, expressed this with particular clarity: "Every dress I make, every customer I serve, every naira I earn; it is my answer to them. They said I was nothing. They took everything. But I am still here. My business is still here. My children are fed and clothed. I did that. Not them. Me. So when I am sewing, I am not just making clothes. I am proving them wrong." (Joy, 42)

This sense of entrepreneurship as resistance was often private and unspoken a "silent" defiance that did not openly challenge community norms but nonetheless constituted an assertion of agency and worth. Chioma described her cassava processing business in similar terms: "I do not talk to them. I do not argue. I just work. Every day I wake up, I go to my processing, I work hard. When they see me succeeding, they are confused. They thought I would die. They thought I would crawl back and beg them to take me in. But I did not. My silence is my power. My business is my voice." (Chioma, 61)

Participants drew on multiple resources in this process of resilient reconstruction. Some found support in religious faith, framing their survival and success as divine vindication. Others accessed community savings groups, thrift societies and rotating credit associations (*osusu*), building alternative economic networks outside patriarchal family structures. Loveth explained how participation in a Village Savings and Loans Association had transformed not only her finances but her sense of possibility: "When I joined the VSLA, at first I was afraid. I thought, what if these women also turn on me? But they did not. They were like me widows, single mothers, women struggling. We saved together, we lent to each other, we encouraged each other. For the first time since my husband died, I felt I was not alone. That group gave me confidence. It gave me money, yes, but more than money, it gave me sisters." (Loveth, 49)

The theme of resilient reconstruction was not uniformly experienced. Some participants, particularly older women and those with fewer resources, described survival rather than thriving

a holding on rather than a moving forward. Yet even in these accounts, there was a quiet dignity in persistence. Kate, who had sold firewood for two decades, said simply: "I am still here. My children grew up. I did not beg. I did not go to my husband's family. I did not marry his brother. I just kept selling firewood, little by little, year after year. Maybe that is not success like others have. But for me, it is something. It is my something." (Kate, 63)

This theme reveals that for these widows, entrepreneurship is never purely economic. It is a site of identity reconstruction, a space for reclaiming agency, and a form of quiet resistance to the patriarchal forces that sought to define them as worthless. Their businesses are not merely livelihoods but living testimonies to their survival and dignity.

The Essence of the Experience

Synthesizing across the four themes, the essential structure of the experience can be articulated as follows:

- The essence of navigating entrepreneurial activity after harmful widowhood practices is a journey of reconstruction from a foundation of violent dispossession, conducted under conditions of intensified social surveillance and internalized psychological scarring, yet marked by resilient, often silent, resistance through which women reclaim agency and assert dignity through their economic activities.
- This essence captures the paradoxical nature of the experience: profound constraint coexists with active agency; trauma shapes but does not determine outcomes; entrepreneurship becomes both a site of ongoing struggle and a space for transformative possibility.

FINDINGS

This study aimed to understand the lived experience of widows navigating entrepreneurial activity after experiencing harmful widowhood practices in Delta State, Nigeria. The findings

reveal a complex experiential landscape in which material dispossession, social control, psychological trauma, and resilient agency intertwine. Four themes capture this complexity: economic disinheritance as foundational precarity; social surveillance policing economic autonomy; psychological scarring eroding entrepreneurial confidence; and resilient reconstruction as silent resistance. Findings support the continuum of violence theory (Cockburn, 2004), showing how widowhood rituals extend into economic marginalization. They also align with Ajayi et al. (2019) and Aborisade et al. (2025), confirming ideological patriarchy. Across Africa, similar practices exist: Kenya; sexual cleansing rituals (Human Rights Watch, 2003), Cameroon; superstitious widowhood practices (Nkongho, 2011) and South Africa; gendered mourning systems (Kotzé et al., 2012)

Theoretical Contributions

The findings contribute to theoretical understandings in several ways. First, they extend feminist analyses of gendered violence by demonstrating how harmful widowhood practices function as mechanisms of economic exclusion. While previous research has documented the human rights violations inherent in widowhood rites and the psychological impacts on survivors, this study reveals the specific ways these practices systematically dismantle women's economic capacity not only through immediate property confiscation but through ongoing surveillance that constrains economic activity and through psychological scarring that erodes entrepreneurial confidence. This aligns with Cockburn's (2004) concept of the "continuum of violence," showing how violence extends across time and domains, linking the ritual moment of widowhood practices to the ongoing reality of economic struggle.

Second, the study contributes to entrepreneurship scholarship by illuminating the embodied, emotional, and socially embedded dimensions of women's enterprise in contexts of adversity. Entrepreneurship is typically conceptualised in instrumental terms as opportunity recognition, resource mobilization, value creation. Yet for the

women in this study, entrepreneurship was inseparable from their histories of trauma, their ongoing negotiations with community surveillance, and their struggles for dignity and recognition. This finding resonates with phenomenological approaches to entrepreneurship that emphasize enterprise as a mode of being-in-the-world rather than merely an economic activity.

Third, the findings refine understanding of ideological patriarchy as it operates in contemporary Nigeria. The study confirms previous observations that women actively participate in enforcing patriarchal norms against other women the sisters and sisters-in-law who surveilled widows' businesses, the female neighbours who gossiped about "proud widows," the women who enforced mourning rituals. Yet the findings also reveal spaces of resistance and solidarity, including the VSLA groups and informal networks through which women supported each other. Patriarchy is thus shown to be contested terrain, with women positioned simultaneously as enforcers and resisters, depending on context and circumstance.

Comparison with Existing Research

The findings align closely with previous phenomenological research on widowhood practices in Nigeria. Aborisade and colleagues' (2025) IPA study identified themes including "nature and length of widowhood rites, level of violence, hostilities, and intimidation" and found "ideological patriarchy" relevant to explaining women's involvement in inflicting violence on widows. This study extends those findings by connecting them specifically to the domain of economic activity, revealing how the violence, hostilities, and intimidation documented in previous research have material consequences for women's livelihoods.

The study also aligns with Ajayi et al.'s (2019) finding that widows' acceptance of harmful practices persists regardless of educational or financial status. The women in this study, who ranged from no formal education to tertiary qualifications, all described similar experiences of dispossession and surveillance, suggesting that

education alone does not protect against these practices. This underscores the deep cultural embeddedness of widowhood rites and the limitations of individual-level interventions.

The findings resonate with broader African scholarship on widowhood. Research from Kenya has documented "sexual cleansing rituals" and their ongoing violation of widows; studies from Cameroon have examined the "social logic of superstitious beliefs" sustaining dehumanizing practices; work from South Africa has explored how "women mourn and men carry on," revealing gendered patterns of grieving and social expectation (Kotzé et al., 2012,). This study adds a specifically Nigerian and Delta State perspective, while also contributing the novel focus on entrepreneurship as a site where the consequences of widowhood practices are lived and contested.

Recommendations

The findings have several implications for policy and practice, legal reform, community engagement, health and psychosocial. On the strength of the foregoing therefore, the study recommends as follows:

Implications for Policy and Practice

For empowerment programmes: Interventions supporting widows' entrepreneurship must attend to more than capital and skills training. The women in this study described psychological barriers (fear, self-doubt, trauma responses), social barriers (surveillance, gossip, extraction by family members), and material barriers (complete dispossession) that cannot be addressed through grants alone. Holistic programmes should incorporate psychosocial support, peer mentoring, and strategies for navigating community relations.

For legal reform: While Nigeria has enacted laws and ratified international instruments protecting women's rights, implementation remains weak. Participants described ongoing property confiscation and economic extraction with no legal recourse. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms, providing legal aid to widows, and ensuring that inheritance rights are protected in practice as well as principle are essential.

For community engagement: The finding that women themselves enforce harmful practices suggests that interventions cannot target only men or only perpetrators. Community-wide dialogue, including with women's groups, religious leaders, and traditional institutions, is needed to challenge the normalization of widowhood violence and build support for alternative practices. The concept of "vernacularisation" translating human rights discourse into locally meaningful terms may be particularly relevant.

For health and psychosocial services: The psychological impacts described by participants intrusive memories, hyper-vigilance, avoidance, eroded confidence suggest that many widows may be experiencing trauma-related conditions requiring mental health support. Thus widows should not only be provided with mental support services in addition to other to other regular ones.

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