

2.3.2. Situation of unmarried, widowed, divorced women and women without support network

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Within the phenomenon of so-called ‘baby-factories’, teenage girls or unmarried young women have been forced into sex-slavery and trafficked as ‘baby-making machines’ across the country.[312] For more information see 2.2.4. Women victims of trafficking.

A 2024 study indicated a high incidence of poverty among unemployed and unmarried women in North Central Nigeria, due to limited access to education and training, and difficulties supporting themselves.[313] The director of WOCON told the EUAA that single women often face severe barriers to accessing housing, employment, education, healthcare, and other essential services. Most belong to low-income backgrounds, have not attended school and have limited awareness of their rights or available support systems. There is also a clear urban-rural divide: in urban centres, even if people are unaware of their rights, they might still receive information or guidance from neighbours. In rural areas, by contrast, overall awareness is lower, and communities often lack such information or support. Further, single women who lack support network, including divorced women and victims of trafficking, are often perceived by society and even their families as ‘morally questionable’ or ‘loose.’ This perception leads to deep stigma and social exclusion.[314] Landlords often view single women as financially unreliable,[315] or assume they are sex workers.[316] For more information see 2.2.8. Social attitude towards returnee victims of trafficking.

Divorced women face significant challenges due to limited economic independence and the stigma associated with being single. This combination often leaves them vulnerable to isolation, financial hardship, and emotional strain. As reported by the Guardian, ‘Nigerian society often views a woman who is no longer in her husband’s home as unworthy of marriage, regardless of the circumstances.’[317]

Widows may face abuse,[318] social exclusion, and accusations after their husbands’ deaths.[319] Deprived of spousal income, many descend into poverty and struggle to secure basic needs such as food and shelters.[320] Moreover, disposal of the estate in Nigeria is governed by customary law,[321] which often forbid widows from inheriting their late husband's assets. [322] This may leave them in extreme poverty, isolated from friends and family, and vulnerable to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Customs and traditions have continued to ‘encourage

gender-based violence against widows'. Traditional leaders, church groups, and government agencies enable these abuses through inaction and a lack of political will, while victims' silence further reinforced their vulnerability.323 Widowhood cultural practices were described as 'inhumane or unfair'. Examples included 'shaving of hair including private parts, wearing only black clothing throughout the mourning period from six months to one year, isolation/alienation, drinking water used to bathe the corpse, levirate marriage,324 dispossession from husband's property, and ritualised weeping325'.326

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  Levirate marriage is a custom or law requiring a widow to marry her deceased husband's brother or a close male relative to ensure the deceased's lineage and property continue. See Encyclopaedia Britannica, Levirate, n.d., url

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  In some Yoruba communities, widows are expected to keep vigils and demonstrate intense sorrow through ritualised wailing and profuse crying; failure to do so is believed to risk mental illness or loss of entitlements. See Dijeh A. E. et al., Cultural Challenges of Widows and Widowers' Coping Strategies in SouthSouth Geo Political Zone, Nigeria, 2 February 2025, url, p. 551

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