

Widow's Empowerment: A Study of Ruth 2:1-23 and its Relevance to Catholic Diocese of Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Widowhood is a significant socio-cultural issue that impacts the lives of many women, especially in patriarchal societies. In Nigeria, particularly in Kogi State, widows face challenges such as economic hardship, social exclusion and legal marginalization. Despite these challenges, faith-based communities, such as the Catholic Diocese of Lokoja, have been instrumental in providing support through widow empowerment programs. This study explores the empowerment of widows as depicted in Ruth 2:1-23, highlighting its relevance and application within the Catholic Diocese of Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria. The Book of Ruth, specifically Ruth 2:1-23, offers a powerful narrative of resilience, faith and divine providence. Through the story of Ruth, a Moabite widow, the Bible presents a model of empowerment that emphasizes the role of community support, divine provision and personal agency in overcoming adversity. This study draws on these biblical themes to examine how widow empowerment can be realized in contemporary settings, especially within the Catholic Diocese of Lokoja. The study specifically aims to explore the biblical concept of widow empowerment in Ruth 2:1-23 and its relevance to the socio-cultural context of the Catholic Diocese of Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria among others. It is expected that the study will suggest a comprehensive understanding of widow empowerment through the lens of Ruth 2:1-23 and its theological implications for the Catholic Diocese of Lokoja. Practical recommendations for enhancing widow empowerment programs within the Diocese, focusing on social, economic and spiritual support.

Keywords: Catholic Diocese, Empowerment, Kogi State, Ruth, Widowhood

Introduction

Christian literature has become a crucial resource for understanding human existence, providing insight into the challenges individuals face in their lives. The Bible, in particular, holds a sacred and transformative role in the African Christian community. It remains an essential source of religious knowledge, offering moral and ethical guidelines to millions of people across the continent. The Bible has the potential to be a powerful tool for social change, helping individuals and communities navigate issues of empowerment, liberation and survival. However, while significant scholarly attention has been given to themes such as liberation and decolonization, the Bible's capacity for empowerment, especially for marginalized groups such as widows, has not received the same level of focus. This study seeks to address this gap by focusing on the empowerment of widows, particularly in the context of the book of Ruth.

Omotoye (2001) provides a critical exploration of the book of Ruth, particularly Ruth 2:1–23, emphasizing the importance of this text for understanding the roles of women in the

Old Testament. In his examination, Omotoye (2001) highlights the contrast between Naomi and Ruth, who is initially presented as a secondary character in the narrative. As the story unfolds, Ruth, a Moabite widow, takes center stage, representing resilience, faith and divine favor. In a patriarchal society where male figures dominate, the book of Ruth stands out as it bears a woman's name, recognizing female agency within the narrative. Omotoye (2001) argues that Ruth's story presents a compelling case for the empowerment of widows, offering valuable insights into how marginalized individuals can find strength, hope and transformation.

Ruth's story provides a profound case for examining widows' empowerment, especially within the socio-cultural and theological context of ancient Israel. Ruth, as a foreign widow, faced considerable challenges, including economic hardship, social exclusion and oppression based on her ethnicity and gender. As Omotoye (2001) notes, the biblical injunction in Deuteronomy 23:3–4 “No Ammonite nor Moabite may enter the sanctuary, even after the tenth generation, for they did not welcome you with food and water” reflects the historical and religious divide between the Israelites and the Moabites. Despite these challenges, Ruth's narrative is one of resilience, devotion and faith. Ruth's unwavering loyalty to her mother-in-law, Naomi and her commitment to Yahweh, the God of Israel, make her a powerful figure within the biblical narrative.

The character of Boaz also plays a pivotal role in Ruth's story. Boaz's generosity and uprightness reflect the biblical ideals of justice, generosity and social responsibility. By offering Ruth protection, sustenance and social validation, Boaz demonstrates how divine blessings can be used to support and empower vulnerable individuals and families. The relationship between Ruth and Boaz in Ruth 2:1–23 provides an important theological and social model for empowerment, showing how faith, divine provision and community support can work together to uplift individuals from vulnerable positions.

This study proposes that Ruth 2:1–23 offers a rich narrative that can inform contemporary discussions of widow empowerment. While most scholarly engagements with the book of Ruth have focused on themes of redemption, restoration and genealogy particularly its role as a link to King David this study seeks to fill a gap in the literature by examining the theme of widow empowerment in Ruth. There is a notable lack of sustained scholarly attention on this aspect of the book, despite its significance for understanding how marginalized individuals, particularly widows, can be empowered through faith, resilience and community support.

Stockton (2015) offers further sociological justification for this study, noting the persistent marginalization of women, especially in patriarchal societies like those found in many parts of Africa. Women's contributions to society, particularly in economic and domestic spheres, are often undervalued. Stockton argues that widows, as one of the most marginalized groups in many cultures, face particularly harsh conditions, including social

isolation, economic hardship and cultural stigmatization. The narratives of Ruth and Naomi provide a powerful counter-narrative, where faith, determination and community support enable women to transcend adversity and reshape their communities. Stockton's work emphasizes the importance of examining the ways in which faith-based narratives can be used to empower women and challenge the structures that marginalize them.

Oguntoyinbo-Atere (1998) further adds a critical gender perspective by highlighting the disproportionate economic and social burdens that women, especially African women, bear. Oguntoyinbo-Atere (1998) presents striking statistics, noting that African women perform two-thirds of the continent's labor, produce (70%) of its food, yet earn only (10%) of its income and own less than 1% of its property. These figures underscore the systemic inequalities faced by women in general and widows in particular, especially in African societies. The lack of economic empowerment and access to resources leaves many widows vulnerable to exploitation and marginalization. This study will explore how the empowerment model presented in Ruth's story can inform strategies to address these inequalities.

Widowhood, as a global phenomenon, has far-reaching consequences, particularly in regions like Africa, where cultural traditions and prevailing socioeconomic conditions often exacerbate the challenges widows face. In Nigeria, for example, widowhood often comes with stigmatization, economic hardship and legal exclusion. Nigeria's low life expectancy, driven by poverty, disease, road traffic accidents and violence, results in a high rate of premature male mortality. According to the Global Burden of Diseases, Injuries and Risk Factor Study (GBD, 2015), diseases such as malaria, diarrheal diseases and HIV/AIDS were among the leading causes of death in Nigeria in 2015. Furthermore, Nigeria has faced pervasive security crises, including communal clashes, ethnic conflicts, insurgencies and terrorism. These crises have claimed numerous lives and dramatically increased the number of widows in the country. The loss of security personnel in military operations further exacerbates this situation. In Kogi State specifically, available health statistics confirm a comparable pattern of widowhood and its associated socio-economic burden (Kogi State Ministry of Health, 2016). Despite the efforts of governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international communities and religious organizations to address the plight of widows, these interventions have often been insufficient. Many widows continue to face sexual harassment, food insecurity, financial deprivation and mistreatment by their deceased husbands' families. As noted by widowed healthcare professionals, no woman can be fully prepared for the psychological, emotional, sexual and financial burdens that widowhood entails (GBD, 2015). This study proposes that the empowerment model in Ruth 2:1–23 offers a theological framework that can address the multidimensional needs of widows in Nigeria.

This study seeks to critically examine widows' empowerment as a dominant motif in the book of Ruth, with particular focus on Ruth 2:1–23. The study will draw from the themes of faith, resilience, divine providence and community support present in the narrative to propose a model for empowering widows within the Roman Catholic Church in Kogi State,

Nigeria. It is expected that the study will offer practical theological insights into how widows can be supported, empowered and integrated into the social and economic life of their communities, ultimately contributing to their well-being and flourishing.

Statement of the Problem

Widowhood remains one of the most severe forms of social vulnerability experienced by women in many African societies, particularly in Nigeria. Unlike in many developed nations where widows benefit from structured legal protections and social welfare systems such as pensions and social security, Nigerian widows often face abandonment, discrimination and hostility. Instead of receiving institutional support, they are frequently subjected to oppressive cultural practices that intensify their emotional, economic and social suffering. These include stigmatization through accusations of causing their husbands' deaths, forced remarriage (often to a deceased husband's relative), confiscation of property and degrading mourning rituals. Such practices not only violate their dignity but also expose them to psychological trauma, economic instability and social isolation.

Beyond individual experiences, the plight of widows reflects a broader pattern of gender-based discrimination in society. Harmful traditional practices, domestic violence and systemic marginalization of women create an environment where widows are particularly vulnerable. Their children may also suffer exploitation, further deepening the cycle of poverty and exclusion. Despite the seriousness of these challenges, there has been insufficient scholarly engagement with widow empowerment from a biblical and theological perspective.

Although the book of Ruth presents a powerful narrative of resilience, dignity and restoration for widows, much biblical scholarship has focused primarily on themes such as redemption, genealogy and historical context, leaving the empowerment dimension underexplored. Similarly, while the Roman Catholic Church in the Diocese of Lokoja has undertaken welfare initiatives for widows, these efforts remain largely informal and lack a systematic theological framework.

This study therefore seeks to address this gap by critically examining widow empowerment as a central motif in the book of Ruth and proposing a biblically grounded and contextually relevant model for empowering widows within the Church and Nigerian society.

Objectives of the Study

This study primarily aims to undertake a critical examination of widows' empowerment as a dominant motif in Ruth 2:1–23 and to explore its theological relevance and practical applicability to the empowerment of widows within the Catholic Diocese of Lokoja, Kogi State. By evaluating the biblical narrative of Ruth alongside the current practices of the Catholic Church in Lokoja, the study seeks to propose a biblically informed framework for widows' empowerment, contributing both to academic scholarship and pastoral practice. To achieve this overarching aim, the study sets out the following specific objectives:



1. To examine the theological understanding and significance of Ruth 2:1–23 within its biblical and historical context;
2. To assess the relationship between the empowerment principles embedded in Ruth 2:1–23 and the practice of widows' empowerment within the Catholic Diocese of Lokoja;
3. To evaluate the socio-cultural and pastoral challenges facing widows, with particular reference to those within the Catholic Diocese of Lokoja;
4. To investigate the extent to which widows within the Catholic Diocese of Lokoja have been assisted and empowered through existing Church-based programmes and interventions; and
5. To propose concrete and biblically informed recommendations for improving widows' empowerment programmes within the Catholic Diocese of Lokoja and, by extension, for the broader welfare of widows in Nigerian society.

Literature Review

This literature review critically examines the intersections between widowhood and empowerment within the biblical narrative, with particular focus on Ruth 2:1–23, while addressing the socio-cultural and theological dimensions of widowhood in African societies, especially within the context of the Catholic Diocese of Lokoja. The literature draws on a variety of sources ranging from theological commentaries to socio-cultural studies, presenting a multidimensional analysis of widowhood as a significant issue of gendered vulnerability. The primary objective is to identify the theoretical and theological frameworks within which widows' empowerment can be contextualized, alongside the application of these frameworks to the Nigerian socio-cultural setting.

Theological Insights from the Book of Ruth

The book of Ruth offers a theological narrative that has been examined extensively in biblical scholarship, but its focus on the empowerment of widows has remained relatively underexplored. Scholars like Philips (1976) in *Exploring People of the Old Testament* provide an essential starting point for understanding the narrative of Ruth. Philips asserts that Ruth's story exemplifies God's providence in the lives of the vulnerable, particularly women and underscores the theological tenets of faith, loyalty and redemption. He contends that Ruth's willingness to leave her homeland and commit herself to Naomi speaks volumes about the agency of women within biblical narratives, asserting that Ruth exemplifies resilience and divine favor despite the limitations imposed by her widowhood. This narrative, according to Philips (1976), serves as a model for understanding how women, even within patriarchal systems, can navigate adversity with faith and emerge empowered. Davidson (2004) similarly contends that theological reflection on widowhood within African Christianity must take seriously the voices and lived experiences of widows themselves, arguing that biblical narratives such as Ruth's offer a framework through which the Church can affirm the dignity and agency of widowed women rather than treating them merely as objects of charity.

Ulrich (2008), in his contribution to *The Dictionary of the Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, furthers this idea by positioning Ruth as an archetype of the marginalized



finding empowerment through God's provision. Ulrich focuses on Ruth's journey within the context of Israel's socio-religious order, emphasizing that Ruth, despite her status as a foreigner and widow, becomes a central figure in the genealogy of Israel's greatest king, David. This placement within the lineage of David reinforces the theological argument that God's justice is not limited by ethnic boundaries and that divine empowerment transcends socio-cultural divisions. Ruth's empowerment thus provides a theological framework for understanding how marginalized individuals can be divinely chosen for inclusion in God's broader redemptive narrative.

Moreover, Fuller (1999) in *Ruth: The Significance of the Gleaning Laws* highlights the social justice dimensions of Ruth's empowerment. Fuller draws attention to the legal provisions in Leviticus 19:9-10 and Deuteronomy 24:19-21, which allowed widows to glean in the fields as a form of economic sustenance. He argues that these laws reflect a biblical ethos of justice, where the vulnerable are not only provided for but are also offered the opportunity to contribute to the community. For Fuller, Ruth's engagement with the gleaning system is not merely an act of survival but an embodiment of God's justice and mercy.

Gendering the Text: Female Agency in Ruth

Feminist biblical scholarship has significantly contributed to the understanding of Ruth as a text that highlights female agency. Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes (1993), in *On Gendering Texts*, explore the gender dynamics within Ruth, arguing that the book presents a compelling case for the active agency of women, particularly in contrast to the passive roles often attributed to women in patriarchal texts. According to their analysis, Ruth's narrative not only subverts traditional gender norms but also emphasizes the capacity of women to shape their own destinies, even in the face of societal oppression. Ruth's decision to leave Moab and her proactive role in securing her and Naomi's survival position her as a model of female empowerment, challenging the patriarchal structures that limit women's social, economic and spiritual agency.

In addition, Oxley (1979) in *New International Bible Commentary* discusses Ruth in the context of the broader biblical canon, noting that the text emphasizes both her personal initiative and the divine reward she receives for her faithfulness. Oxley observes that Ruth's story showcases how women can actively engage with social structures, such as gleaning laws, to improve their status, thereby framing widowhood as an opportunity for women to exercise agency within God's redemptive plan.

The book of Ruth, as interpreted by feminist scholars, offers a platform for the exploration of how women, specifically widows, can transcend their societal marginalization. These scholars argue that Ruth's narrative not only highlights the subjugation of women but also illuminates the possibilities for female agency, providing an interpretive lens through which contemporary issues of widowhood and women's empowerment can be re-examined.

Socio-Cultural Context of Widowhood in African Societies

The socio-cultural and economic challenges faced by widows in African societies have been the subject of extensive scholarly investigation. In the Nigerian context, Olanisebe (2015) explores the oppressive customs and rituals that define widowhood, arguing that widowhood is often marked by a series of socially sanctioned practices that deepen the vulnerability of widows. These practices include forced remarriage, the dispossession of property and dehumanizing mourning rituals. Olanisebe suggests that these harmful customs are rooted in patriarchal ideologies that prioritize male authority and control, often at the expense of women's autonomy and rights. The oppressive nature of these practices is exacerbated by the legal and social systems, which fail to provide adequate protection or support for widows. Lola (2017) corroborates this position, observing that across West Africa, and in Nigeria in particular, widows are routinely confronted with overlapping cultural and economic burdens that limit their access to inheritance, land and sustainable livelihoods, thereby trapping many in cycles of poverty long after the loss of a spouse.

Similarly, Oguntinyinbo-Atere (1998), in *The Gospel Poverty and the Displaced in Africa*, examines the intersection of poverty, gender and widowhood, asserting that African women, particularly widows, are disproportionately affected by economic and social inequality. She provides data that highlights the systemic inequalities faced by African women: they perform two-thirds of the continent's labor, produce (70%) of its food, yet earn only (10%) of its income and own less than (1%) of its property. This economic marginalization, Oguntinyinbo-Atere (1998) argues, is deeply intertwined with cultural and religious practices that reinforce the subjugation of women. Her work underscores the need for structural changes that address both the legal and cultural dimensions of widowhood in African societies.

The socio-cultural oppression of widows is compounded by the lack of legal frameworks to protect their rights. As Kieffer (2006) highlights in *Widows Without Rights: Challenging Marginalization and Dispossession*, widows often face not only cultural exclusion but also legal dispossession of property and inheritance rights. This systemic injustice leaves widows in precarious financial and social situations, making empowerment interventions essential.

The Role of the Church in Widows' Empowerment

The Church plays a crucial role in addressing the socio-economic and spiritual needs of widows, particularly within the African context. McCain (2016) emphasizes that the Church's pastoral care can serve as a powerful vehicle for social transformation, especially in providing support for marginalized individuals, including widows. The Church's moral authority and community reach position it as a key institution for fostering social justice and empowering women. Anderson (2009) reinforces this view, arguing that empowerment within African Christianity is most effective when faith communities move beyond rhetorical sympathy to deliberate structures of inclusion that restore agency to marginalized members, widows among them. Similarly, Bier (2018) highlights the role of faith-based organizations

in Nigeria as critical, often under-recognized, agents of women's empowerment, noting that churches frequently possess the trust, reach and moral legitimacy needed to mobilize resources and community support on behalf of vulnerable women in ways that secular institutions struggle to replicate.

Adeyemo (2006), in the *African Bible Commentary*, argues that the Church is biblically mandated to care for widows, emphasizing the scriptural imperative for the Church to address the needs of the vulnerable. Drawing on biblical texts such as James 1:27 and 1 Timothy 5:3-16, Adeyemo underscores that the Church's role extends beyond charitable assistance to a more robust framework of empowerment, including advocacy for legal and social rights.

The Catholic Church's role in widow empowerment, as noted by Olanisebe (2015), should not be limited to ad hoc welfare interventions but should involve the development of long-term empowerment strategies that address both the spiritual and socio-economic challenges faced by widows. Bassey (2019) lends further support to this position, presenting evidence specific to Kogi State that the Roman Catholic approach to widow empowerment, while well-intentioned, often remains fragmented and would benefit from a more coordinated, theologically grounded strategy. Kofi and Opoku (2010) extend this argument by situating widow empowerment within a broader theology of social justice, contending that the Church's mandate to champion the marginalized obliges it to take an active, rather than merely charitable, role in advancing the rights and welfare of widows. This study proposes that the book of Ruth provides a theological and practical framework for such empowerment programs, demonstrating how faith-based initiatives can be designed to support widows in their journey toward restoration and empowerment.

The existing literature provides a rich foundation for understanding the theological, social and cultural dimensions of widowhood and empowerment, particularly within the context of the book of Ruth. However, there remains a significant gap in the literature with regard to the specific theme of widows' empowerment as a dominant motif in Ruth 2:1–23. While scholars have explored various aspects of Ruth's narrative, including redemption, restoration and genealogical significance, the empowerment of widows has received insufficient attention. This study seeks to address this gap by critically examining Ruth's story through the lens of widow empowerment and applying the lessons from Ruth to the practical challenges faced by widows in the Catholic Diocese of Lokoja, Nigeria. By doing so, this study will contribute both to the academic understanding of widowhood in biblical texts and to the practical development of empowerment programs for widows in contemporary African contexts.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is a qualitative approach. In addition, this research used historical, descriptive and biblical exposition methods. The historical method was used to obtain available information and materials about the church under consideration (i.e. Catholic Diocese in Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria). As stated above, the Catholic Diocese of Lokoja has three deaneries: Lokoja, Okene and Kabba deaneries. Data collected were

objectively interpreted and analyzed. During the descriptive exposition, premium was placed on primary sources, especially oral traditions such as oral interviews, among others. The efficacy of oral traditions as a source of history in any society cannot be overemphasized. Twenty (20) participants were selected randomly from members of the Catholic Church Lokoja Diocese, who have participated in widow empowerment programs organized by the church. A random selection is a form of sampling where a representative group of research respondents is selected from a larger group by chance.

The archival sources from the Catholic Church Lokoja Diocese were also used for this study and explored, as the Catholic Church Lokoja Diocese was established in 1884, during pre-colonial Nigeria, when the British Colonial Administration was still in charge of the Nigerian government. The Biblical exposition method was also used in this study to analyze the biblical text and see how the church and widows could learn from it. Additionally, secondary sources such as published and unpublished texts like textbooks and journals were consulted. The internet also proved to be an important source of relevant data for this research. As for the secondary sources, relevant textbooks, journals and unpublished materials were consulted at the libraries of the University of Ilorin, University of Ibadan, Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso, United Missionary Church of Africa Theological Seminary (UMCATS), Ilorin and others.

Results (Expected Outputs/Results)

The study expects to find that widow empowerment, when framed through the theological lens of Ruth 2:1-23, has a significant positive impact on the socio-economic and spiritual well-being of widows within the Catholic Diocese of Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria. It anticipates identifying the key factors that contribute to effective widow empowerment, such as community support, faith-based initiatives and the role of the Church in providing economic assistance, social inclusion and legal advocacy.

Additionally, the study aims to highlight several challenges faced by widows in the Diocese, including social stigmatization, economic hardship and legal exclusion. It will also identify the gaps in existing widow empowerment programs within the Diocese and provide actionable recommendations to improve these programs through targeted interventions. These interventions may include training for clergy and lay leaders on widow advocacy, greater integration of widow support within the Church's social programs and more active involvement of the community in supporting widows' needs.

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