

Ghana News - Gender Inequality: How it kills Widows in Northern Ghana #
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An African proverb has it that "Until the Story of the hunt is told by the Lion, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter". So it is, that when a widow dies, the hospital reports of the cause of her death would note things such as; "High blood pressure leading hypertension", "Severe anemia", etcetera. Some doctors would even say; "we tried to save her life but unfortunately she gave up". What the medics fail to know is that if they were to go down to the root causes of these women's death, they would hear tales such as this;

"My late husband's brother asked me to marry him after my husband died. But I refused because he was already married and I don't love him and I also want to continue to honor my late husband. My brother-in-law has since denied me access to farmland and has continually abused me verbally. He's called me a witch, a 'bad luck' woman and accused me of killing my husband. The abuses hurt me emotionally and I lost appetite for food. Then I fell ill..."

Running the Widows and Movement (WOM) and trying to champion the rights of widows and women in general has put me in a position where I am confronted with the most mind-blowing and heart-wrenching stories of what poor, innocent women go through once they lose their husbands.

That Ghanaian social construct which tells us that as a woman, you cannot own family land in our patriarchal society has led to the death of hundreds of widows.

In some ethnic groups, a woman cannot own family land. Others have said that a woman is property to be inherited by another man in the family when her husband dies. Even worst is when a society considers a woman who seeks redress on these issues a "bad luck woman".

Mma Atebiya, a widow once lamented; "It should have been such that, once you become a widow, you equally become financially stable. If a widow has money and is able to cater for her children, then none of her children will go to ask for food or fees from someone else and invite insult and witchcraft accusations for the family".

The tales told of these women by others are what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie refers to as "The Single Story". Interesting and rather ridiculous stories are told by a dead widow's in-laws about how the widow before her demise, was a home-breaker, how she was disrespectful, too-knowing, etcetera and some of the in-laws are bold enough to tell us that such a widow "deserved to die".

But if a dead widow were to be brought back to life and asked how she died, she would tell the agonizing tale of how she was denied farmland because she refused to undergo some primitive widowhood rite the in-laws wanted to perform, how she made a decision not go against her religious principles by subjecting herself to a voodoo-like ceremony and how her in-laws hated her for that.

Such a widow would tell you how her church elders and some government and non-government institutions tried to mediate to get her in-laws to be supportive and give her access to farmland, to no avail. She would then have no choice but to go to the big cities in southern Ghana to do menial work and raise money to feed her children.

This would lead to her rape by unscrupulous men at night because she slept in the open streets of the city. She would come home, infected with a strange disease which she would later be told by doctors was HIV/AIDS and spend her last days in agony, watching her children suffer and dying in silence.

We have archaic cultural practices that do not protect our women. Rather, these cultures victimize and intimidate these poor women until they can no longer bear – they die in misery. For what reason should a woman not be able to inherit farmland and other property that belonged to her late husband or father, if a man can?

Gender equality is gaining recognition and grounds now. But there is a lot more to do to make it work. Until we start having legislative interventions that do not only recognize, but ensure equality through equity, poverty among women can never be eradicated. Strong, beautiful women will suffer dejection, intimidation, abuse. They will age and ail fast. They will die in silent anguish, leaving behind them, innocent children whose future can only hang in the balance.