

WIDOWHOOD AND POST-WAR AGONIES: UNDERSTANDING THE NEW DIMENSION OF ARMISTICE DAY

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Abstract

Armistice Day traditionally commemorates the cessation of hostilities and celebrates the end of conflict. However, amidst the valorization of heroism and sacrifice lies a less explored aspect: the experiences of widows and the enduring agonies they faced in the aftermath of war. This research aims to illuminate this neglected dimension of Armistice Day by examining the profound impacts of widowhood and post-war trauma on individuals and communities. Through a qualitative approach involving in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, this study explores the narratives of widows whose lives have been shaped by the loss of their partners in war. It seeks to understand the multifaceted challenges they encounter, including emotional distress, economic hardships, and social isolation, exacerbated by societal expectations and institutional support systems. By unpacking these complexities, the research contributes to a nuanced understanding of the broader implications of war beyond the battlefield, emphasizing the need for recognition and support for widows within post-conflict societies. The findings underscore the importance of integrating the voices and experiences of widows into the discourse surrounding Armistice Day, advocating for inclusive commemoration that acknowledges their sacrifices and struggles. Ultimately, this study offers insights into the enduring impacts of armed conflict on those left behind, challenging prevailing narratives of war commemoration and advocating for a more comprehensive approach to honoring the legacies of all affected by war.

Introduction

World War 1 made a huge impact in the lives of people especially women and children. It altered history and changed many lives.¹ The Remembrance Day that is celebrated annually in many countries provided relief and addressed the feelings of loss on the part of the bereaved families. It

accorded honor to those who sacrificed their lives in the battle. Women whose husbands, fiancés or boyfriends died in the First World War believed that they also served the nation, because they sacrificed their men and as such, deserve recognition.² The honor and recognition given to the heroes through the Remembrance Day provided a sense of pride not only for the nation, but also for the bereaved families who felt that by losing their loved ones, they have sacrificed for the nation.³ That feeling of sacrifice helped to facilitate the emotional healing of war widows. Indeed, the Armistice Day celebration which began on 11th November, 1918 resonated the spirit of nationalism, unity, victory and pride, which was an acknowledgement of the fact that the sacrifices of the heroes were not in vain.⁴

While the recognition given to the heroes contributed to console the bereaved families, however, it did not entirely take away the agonies that war widows go through. For instance, Kitty Eckersley's husband Percy was killed in 1916, few months to the delivery of their son. Some years after, when she documented her experience with the Imperial War Museum, Kitty narrated the agonies and pains her husband's death caused her. According to Kitty she felt like dying too, since she had lost the only person that gave her life a meaning.⁵

Emotional agony was not the only challenge that faced widows at the time. The 1900s social construct was patriarchal in nature, which implied that men were mostly the breadwinners of the home. Also at that time, men were paid higher wages than women and when the man dies the finances of the family were badly affected.⁶ Not just the widows that suffered the hurt, other dependents like children and extended family members felt the impact of such loss. To remedy widows' sufferings in United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe, a non-contributory pension policy was adopted by the government to support widows whose husbands were killed in the World War I.

The memo signed by Mable F. Empoon from the Ministry of Pensions (Widows and Dependents Branch) London on the 19th day of March, 1919 showed an award of pension to a widow and her child in London to cushion the effect of their hardship.⁷ Charity organizations such as the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association and the British Legion supported the effort of the government by providing help to widows, but unfortunately not all the war widows that got such support.⁸ Many women lost the pension because they were found drunk or shown irresponsibility in taking care of their children. Also, the public complained that giving women free fund would make them lazy and unproductive.

The forgoing sets the pace for the analysis of widowhood and post-war agonies that will be explored in this study. It aims to understand how widowhood was perceived by the public and the factors that shaped widows' experiences in the post-World War 1 years. In addition, the study seeks to understand the extent to which Remembrance Day celebration ameliorated the hurt caused by the loss of loved ones.

For the purpose of clarity, this paper considered three fundamental questions that guided the study. The questions include: What were the impacts of the Remembrance Day in the lives of WW1 widows? How did the perception of widowhood by the society affect the way widows were treated? When a hero is honored, does it change the feeling of hurt and loss among the loved ones?

In order to provide answers to the above questions, the study utilizes historical analysis technique to interpret data, while data used were gathered through primary sources such as memos, letters, videos, archival materials, testimonies, photos, etc. Some relevant secondary sources were also explored during the analysis. The research is structured into four parts. The first part is made up of introduction which provides the overview and background of the study. Part two examines the evolution of widowhood recognition in post war society, this helps in understanding the societal perception of the concept of widowhood and how that general perception shaped widowhood experience in the post WWI society. Part three attempts an in-depth analysis of the significance of the Remembrance Day in the life of widows. Finally, in part four, the various rituals used during memorials to honor war heroes are analyzed to determine whether it has an effect in the feeling of hurt and loss amongst widows. This part also includes the conclusion of the study.

Perception and the evolution of widowhood recognition in post war society

Going by the Britannica Dictionary definition, a widow is someone whose husband has died.⁹ Marie Cappart described widowhood in relation to war when she argued that widows are spouses of men killed in combat or civilians who at the instance of their dead, became the symbol of collective pain and witness to the barbarity of war, which brings perpetual mourning to the society. During the First World War like no other war in history, the number of widows multiplied proportionately with the heroes killed in the war front. By 1914 -1919 that the First World War lasted, communication was not easy then when compared to today's world. Cappart observed that a woman's status as a wife changed to widow following arrival of a letter or telegram reporting the dead of a soldier.¹⁰ In the same vein, Erika Kuhlman corroborated Cappart by noting that 'the history of World War I widowhood in Germany begins and ends with the post office'.¹¹ In many occasions, the information gets to the families of the deceased weeks or months after they were killed. In Fact, many women learnt about the dead of their loved ones after the armistice that brought the war to an end, while some husbands that sustained injuries during the war could not survive the pain inflicted on them and died after the armistice was signed.

World War 1 came with so many challenges in the magnitude that have never been experienced since the history of man. During the war, the number of casualties on both sides surpassed any other war prior to the First World War. The volunteers were enthused and motivated by their patriotism. In fact, Manchester Guardian of August 4, 1916, captured the unprecedented selflessness of the Allied soldiers as presented by John Hill, who noted that the dominant thoughts in the mind of soldiers in the second year of the war was not their safety, but what becomes of their wives and family members should they be killed in the war front.¹² It was on this basis that Hill suggested that war widows and orphans be given one day's pay from the Allied industries of shipbuilding and engineering to help meet their needs.

Generally, the public perception of widowhood during and after the First World War was that of grief, petty, helplessness and agony, which was why government and institutions designed policies to address the need of widows and orphans. A good example was the pension policy in England in 1919, which provided opportunity for widows to earn pension twice a month to support their families.¹³ Stephen Bates also pointed out how government cooperated with the parliament to enforce legislations that allowed war widows who remarried to re-qualify for pension if there are

divorced or bereaved.¹⁴ By 1941, the government had extended the pension support to mercantile marine and fishing fleets and their dependents who suffered from the enemy attacks during the war.¹⁵ The foregoing therefore, suggests that the welfare of widows has always been a major concern to both the public and government, especially in developed nations.

Despite government's efforts to attend to the needs of war widows' welfare and the recognitions accorded the heroes, there are those who think that these efforts are not enough for such a pain as losing a husband or father. For instance, Marie Cappart argued that while pensions of dead heroes go to their widows and children, however, it cannot equate the lives lost, because the recognitions and honor accorded, only goes to the heroes and not to the grieving widows, which implies that the agonies of war widows are inadequately considered and not directly addressed. Erika Kuhlman opined that 'analyzing the narratives of these war widows' experiences changes, the temporality of the war by focusing on the aftermath of the conflict, since widows were forced to deal with the consequences of their husbands' deaths long after the official cease-fire that ended the fighting in 1918'.¹⁶ Although the armistice ended the First World War, however, widows continued to bear the consequences of the war many years after it ended. Widowhood saddles the victims with the responsibility of raising the children alone and in doing so, she is subjected to emotional agonies that are often not recognized as sacrifice to the nation.

It can be argued here that the First World War changed the perception of war widowhood in many ways. For instance, in many societies before the war, mourning was a private affair whereas relatives rallied round the widow and assisted with the funeral of the deceased. Also, widows were expected to behave and dress in a certain way that expresses and convinces people of their commitment, depth of emotions and strong attachment to their husbands. Maggie Andrews and Janis Lomas argued that "before the First World War, there was very little financial help for the vast majority of widows of soldiers. This began to change in the first two years of the war, as financial provision for war widows gradually moved from charitable support underpinned by a tiny amount of state provision to a fully regulated system. This was provided by an entirely new government department: the Ministry of Pensions. Founded in December 1916, the Ministry was created specifically to deal with claims for war disability and war widows' pensions".¹⁷ The war also made the plight of widows known to the public as historians, press and policy experts began to analyze widowhood from different perspective and campaigned for widows' welfare.

Widowhood and the Significance of the Remembrance Day

The significance of Remembrance Day can be weighed in relation to the value of the sacrifices made by fallen heroes of war by giving their lives for the peace and freedom of their nation. In the work *Offering: The Story of Widow's Mite and Remembrance Day*, the author likened the loss of lives in the First World War as the ultimate sacrifices by both the dead and the living. Thus, "the soldiers offered their lives – all that they had. Likewise, their parents and wives offered all they had".¹⁸ Life is generally regarded as the highest price one can pay for any course and those who volunteered to die for others deserved the honor that comes with Remembrance Day. What is now important to consider is whether the Remembrance Day actually impacts the lives of war widows.

In the preceding sections, it was argued that although the Remembrance Day may have accorded the fallen heroes honor, however, it does seem that attentions are primarily directed to the sacrifices of dead soldiers to the extent that some societies fail to acknowledge that widows whose husbands were killed also sacrificed for the nation. Hence, they neglect widows and the agonies they go through in many countries of the world, particularly in developing nations. A typical example could be drawn from Nigeria where war widows undergo unprecedented agonies after losing their husbands. Daily Trust in 2021 during the Arm Forces Remembrance Day as it is called in Nigeria, which holds every 15 January, the date the Civil War in the country ended and found that many widows of dead soldiers are in despair and disappointment.¹⁹ For instance, a 28-year-old widow, Victoria Elijah, narrated how she was abandoned by the government after the death of her husband who was killed in the war front. Other war widows such as Juliet Onwuzuruike, Patience Adojoh, Margret Tsebee, Elder Agnes Etukudo, Mrs. Esther Edem, Mrs. Philomena Etim. Mrs. Sunday Amos and Samira Ali reported that their husbands' allowances and entitlements were not released to them and the absence of their husbands have made life unbearable for them and their children.²⁰ Samira Ali stated that "When people hear that I am paying my children's school fees, they are very surprised because of the sacrifice my husband made and the way he was mourned".²¹ In these circumstances, the Remembrance Day celebrations would be insignificant and meaningless to the widows whose lives have been characterized by anguish by the loss of their loved ones.



A cross section of some widows during the Armed Forces Remembrance Day in Uyo, Nigeria, 2021. (Source: Daily Trust).

Nigeria's Vice-President, Yemi Osinbanjo in his speech during the 2022 Remembrance Day commemoration emphasized doubt over the little importance the society attached to the memorials of heroes when he questioned whether we as a people are worthy of their sacrifices.²² By this, he implied that the poor treatments meted on the widows and families of war heroes are indication that little or no values were placed on the lives of those who died in the battle front. He pointed out that "the only way to truly repay those that paid the supreme sacrifice or price in service of the rest of us, is to commit ourselves to live for the ends for which they have given their lives".²³ It therefore means that, the true honor one can give to the heroes is not ceremonies, but a better attitude from those they sacrificed for. Mike Mchugh captured the feeling of Amelia Zerinque, a war widow in the United Kingdom, whose first husband was killed in war. 'Zerinque said she gets upset when people say, "Happy Memorial Day," when it should be a day of somber reflection of

those who paid the ultimate sacrifices.²⁴ If people understand the significance of the Remembrance Day and the emotional pain widows go through for losing their loved ones, they would not be saying Happy Memorial Day, because such words portray the insensitivity of some members of the public.

Beside lack of material support, there are other factors that infuriates the agonies of war widows. In England and most part of the world, war widows are often been subjected to social convention of mourning and political control. They are expected to appear in mourning garments and maintain a certain posture and social conduct. Failure to observe these social conventions, a widow could be regarded as unfaithful. Peggy Bette argued that the concept of unfaithful widow existed before the First World War, however it gained wide acceptance after the war due to soldiers who feared being betrayed or forgotten and moralists who perceived widowed women as source of social disorder that could somewhat contribute to military defeat in many countries.²⁵ Bette added that conventions of mourning were also transformed by different types of legislation regulating military burials in different countries, which in many ways affected mourning and [commemoration](#) rituals. In Britain for instance, where a strict policy concerning burying fallen soldiers *in situ* exist, widows had to travel abroad, however, in Italy, France or [United States](#), the remains of the soldiers could be recovered at the end of the conflict.²⁶ Sometimes, the burial rituals of fallen soldiers who went missing in the battle are conducted without their remains being present, which according to testimonies of war widows, such circumstance is more traumatic.

A study conducted by the International Committee of the Red Cross found that ‘women whose husbands have “disappeared ” or are missing have many of the same problems as widows but without official recognition of their status. In addition, they have to deal with the psychological effects and insecurity that stem from not knowing their husband's fate, and with direct consequences such as not being able to bury their loved ones and not being able to remarry’.²⁷ Other challenges include that war widowed women were restricted by social and political constraints that made their situation more agonizing. Due to war propaganda, many countries do not publicly disclose or publish the exact number of war casualties during conflicts and sometimes dead soldiers can be buried secretly in a mass grave before informing the families. This was the strategies adopted by many countries in the First World War to retain public support, maintain soldiers’ courage and justify continuation of the war.

Widows for Peace Through Democracy in their 2015 report argued that discrimination against and abuse of widows, takes place in a wide spectrum of cultures, religions, ethnic groups, regions, irrespective of the widows’ social status or academic qualification.²⁸ From the legal context, they noted that widows generally are often unable to attain modern statutes, and as a result may be ‘unable to access the modern justice system in their countries’.²⁹ It suffices to infer that Remembrance Day and the memorial rituals that accompanies it do not adequately address the plight of widows of war, which often worsens in the aftermath of conflicts.

In many societies across the globe, the devastating impact of the dead of a husband is worsened by the length of time it takes to fight for their rights and entitlements. Although the United Nations report estimated the number of widows worldwide to be over 258 million, however, history indicate that widows have not received enough support to guarantee a better future.³⁰ Over the years, efforts have been made to address the situations. The first ever attempt to ameliorate widows suffering was the establishment of War Widows Association (WWA) in the United Kingdom in 1971 by a war widow

Laura Connelly, who campaigned against government 50 percent tax cut on war widows' pension and improvement in the welfare package of widows.³¹ Her organization complimented the supportive role of many already existing organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, Ministry of Pension created by some countries after the war to oversee the affairs of widows and orphans etc.

Following these were the emergence of other Associations and Non-Governmental Organization that focused on making life better for war widows in many countries. For instance, The Legion being an association of war veterans emerged in different parts of the world. Their primary objective is to advance the welfare of retired soldiers and war veterans. In some places like Nigeria, their role has expanded to include providing support for widows of fallen heroes. At the international level, 'the United Nations has slated 23 June every year as International Widows Day captured in ([resolution A/RES/65/189](#)) since 2011, to draw attention to the voices and experiences of widows and to galvanize the unique support that they need'.³² Jesupemi Are writing on the goodwill gesture extended to war widows in Nigeria by SASCARE Foundation in the last Remembrance Day, noted the passionate appeal by the founder, Akin Rotimi who called for the support of well-meaning individuals and civic organizations in the country to do more to help government in its efforts to improve the welfare of troops and families of fallen heroes.³³ This, he implied, will make the Remembrance Day more meaningful to the widows.

Widowhood, Complexities and the New Dimension of Armistice Day

Armistice Day, initially commemorated to mark the end of World War I, has evolved into a global observance honoring veterans and celebrating peace. However, amidst the parades, speeches, and wreath-laying that symbolize valor and sacrifice, there exists a poignant yet often overlooked aspect of war's aftermath: the experiences of widows. This part delves into the complexities of widowhood in the context of Armistice Day, highlighting the profound and enduring agonies faced by women who lose their partners to war.

Widowhood in wartime transcends mere personal loss; it embodies a myriad of challenges that extend far beyond the cessation of hostilities. Emotionally, widows navigate grief compounded by the sudden and often violent nature of their partner's death. Psychologically, the trauma of loss can manifest in prolonged states of mourning and profound psychological distress.³⁴ Socially, widows may encounter isolation and stigmatization, particularly in cultures where a woman's identity and security are closely tied to her husband.

Economically, the impact can be devastating. Many widows face sudden financial insecurity, having relied on their husbands for income or support. In conflict-affected regions, where infrastructure and livelihoods are disrupted, widows are left particularly vulnerable, often struggling to provide for their families amidst economic hardship and limited access to resources.³⁵

Historically, the plight of widows has received sporadic attention in the discourse surrounding war commemoration. The focus has largely been on soldiers' heroism and the collective sacrifice of nations rather than the individual and often invisible suffering of those left behind. This oversight perpetuates a narrative that marginalizes the experiences of widows, obscuring their contributions and sacrifices in supporting the war effort and rebuilding communities in its aftermath.³⁶

To address this gap, recent scholarship and advocacy have sought to amplify the voices of widows, advocating for their inclusion in narratives of war remembrance. Initiatives such as the International Widows Day, established by the United Nations, aim to raise awareness about the rights and challenges faced by widows worldwide, including those affected by armed conflict.

The acknowledgment of widowhood as a significant dimension of Armistice Day enriches our understanding of the broader impacts of war. It calls for a more inclusive commemoration that recognizes the sacrifices and resilience of women who endure profound loss amid the upheaval of conflict.³⁷ By unpacking the complexities of widowhood and post-war agonies, we honor not only the fallen soldiers but also those who continue to bear the burdens of war long after the guns have fallen silent.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis explored widowhood experiences in post-war societies and found that the agonies war widows go through in the aftermath of conflicts never really ends. However, the Remembrance Day serves as moment of somber reflection and a day to honor their fallen husbands together with other widows, government and members of the public. Studies show that while war widows may desire material support to help ameliorate their sufferings after the demise of their husbands, however, the honor given to the fallen heroes on the Memorial Day provides emotional relief for widows, in that it helps to reduce the excruciating pain the loss of their loved ones brought to them. Audri Begueldijk who lost her husband 10 weeks after wedding, explained her agonies and noted that ‘one never truly forgets those emotionally searing moments’ of transiting from a wife to widow.³⁸ Drawing from the old Irish blessing, which stated thus: “Let us never forget what is worth remembering... or remember what is worth forgetting”.³⁹ According to Begueldijk, what is worth remembering about the war heroes on Remembrance Day are their good works and the sacrifices they made for the nation.

In many countries of the world, the Remembrance Day is a day set aside to pay respect, honor and celebrate those that died in the war front. It is also a special day to honor veterans that are still alive. Nasir Ayitogo noted that in places like Nigeria, the Armed Forces Remembrance Day as it is called in the country is also used as a platform to solicit for financial, moral and material support for the widows and families of dead soldiers.⁴⁰ This is, however, an acknowledgement of the pains of widows and the agonies they go through after losing their husbands. Also, it highlights the fact that many countries around the world especially in the developing regions are yet to promulgate policies and pursue programs that can effectively address the plight of war widows. As argued above, the memorial rituals and celebrations on Memorial Days cannot completely take away the pains and agonies of war widows, however, moral and material supports can help to alleviate their sufferings.

On the other hand, the study also notes that the relevance of Remembrance Day lies in the recognition of the sacrifices of our fallen heroes and that of their loved ones, because both the dead and the living equally sacrificed for the nation. It is this understanding that gives meaning to the losses incurred in the First World War. Empirical evidences indicate that mere celebration of dead soldiers is not sufficiently satisfactory if the society fails to recognize the fact that widowed women

and orphans also made sacrifices by losing their loved ones. And by this, they deserve to be recognized as those that served the nation. This acknowledgement, therefore, can manifest by fostering positive reaction on the part of government and the society to change their narrowly constructed perception of Armistice Day which primarily focuses on honoring the fallen, but should be broadened to include family members, especially widowed women, orphans and living veterans.

Adrea Hetherigton's work titled *British Widows of the First World War* while contributing to the historiography of the Great War corroborated the assertion of other social historians who held that the First World War brought the concept of war widowhood into prominence and changed the characteristics of state aid and led to the emergence of Welfare State.⁴¹ It also provided the description of how the Great War changed the fanatical Victorian conventions regarding death – such as the rules on how long widowed women can wear black.⁴² Similarly, the First World War not only changed how widowed women are viewed and treated, but also saw the emergence of new cultural practices and memorial rituals like the laying of wreath and flowers on the cenotaph and wearing of poppies as part of the Remembrance Day commemoration. Other rituals adopted in honor of the fallen heroes include the minutes silence and 21-gun salutes in some countries. All of these signifies respect and recognition of the sacrifices of war heroes, which many scholars argue that, it unifies the country and raises nationalist consciousness.

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