



Challenges Facing Muslim Widows and Divorcees in Sokoto State: An Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

Sokoto State, located in northwestern Nigeria, is a predominantly Muslim society whose religious, legal, and cultural life has been profoundly shaped by Islam, particularly following the nineteenth-century reform movement led by Shaykh Uthman bn Fodiyo, which sought to eradicate un-Islamic practices and restore society to the principles of the Qur'an and Sunnah (Last, 1967; Hiskett, 1973). Despite this strong Islamic heritage, Muslim widows and divorcees in Sokoto State continue to face persistent social, economic, and psychological challenges, largely driven by the survival of pre-Islamic customs, entrenched socio-cultural practices, and weak institutional support systems. Widows are often subjected to excessive mourning rituals, denial of rightful inheritance, social isolation, and coercive remarriage, while divorcees frequently experience abandonment, lack of child support, financial insecurity, stigma, and erosion of social networks. These lived realities stand in clear contradiction to Islamic injunctions that emphasize justice, dignity, maintenance, and protection for women, as articulated in the Qur'an, particularly in Sūrat al-Nisā' and Sūrat al-Baqarah, and elaborated in classical Sunni juristic literature. Drawing on the normative frameworks of Islamic law and ethics, this study examines the challenges facing widows and divorcees in Sokoto State by clarifying their legal status and rights concerning 'iddah, maintenance, inheritance, and remarriage, as articulated by leading Sunni fuqahā' such as Ibn Qudāmah, al-Nawawī, and Ibn Rushd, and as synthesized in al-Mawsū'ah al-Fiqhiyyah al-Kuwaitiyyah (Ibn Qudāmah, al-Mughnī; al-Nawawī, al-Majmū'; Ibn Rushd, Bidāyat al-Mujtahid; Ministry of Awqaf, Kuwait). Employing a qualitative and doctrinal approach, the paper also engages interdisciplinary empirical studies to highlight the psychological, social, and economic vulnerabilities of widows and divorcees, including depression, anxiety, poverty, social isolation, and diminished self-worth (Jacobs, 1997; Goodkin et al., 2002; Amato, 2000; Smock, 1994). The findings reveal a persistent gap between Islamic normative ideals and contemporary practices in Sokoto State. The paper therefore advocates for responsive, institution-based, and community-driven interventions grounded in Islamic principles of justice ('adl), compassion (rahmah), and social solidarity (takāful), positioning Islamic social policy as a viable framework for safeguarding dignity, promoting well-being, and fostering holistic human development among widows and divorcees in Sokoto State and Nigeria at large.

Keywords: Islamic law; women's rights; 'iddah; maintenance; inheritance; remarriage; Sharī'ah; social justice; gender and Islam; Uthman bn Fodiyo; socio-cultural practices; Islamic social policy; takāful; rahmah; 'adl; Nigeria; Muslim society.

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INTRODUCTION

A **widow** is a woman whose valid marriage has ended due to the death of her husband. The termination of the marital bond occurs automatically upon death, and the woman thereafter acquires the legal status of a widow, with specific rulings concerning *'iddah*, maintenance, inheritance, and remarriage. Ibn Qudāmah states that the death of the husband terminates the marriage contract without divorce, and the wife becomes subject to the rulings of widowhood, foremost among them the waiting period. (Ibn Qudāmah, *al-Mughnī*). This position is shared across the four Sunni schools.

Similarly, *al-Mawsū'ah al-Fiqhiyyah al-Kuwaitiyyah* defines the widow as a woman whose husband has died while she was lawfully married to him, thereby obligating her to observe the prescribed *'iddah* of death (*al-Mawsū'ah al-Fiqhiyyah*).

A divorcee (*al-muṭallaqah*), on the other hand, is a woman whose valid marriage contract has been lawfully dissolved by divorce (*ṭalāq*) or by a *Sharī'ah*-recognized form of marital dissolution (such as *khul'* or judicial annulment). Once divorce takes legal effect, the woman exits the marital bond and enters a distinct legal status regulated by Islamic law, particularly about *'iddah*, maintenance, and remarriage.

Ibn Qudāmah (Hanbalī school) defines divorce as the dissolution of the marriage bond. He explains that when divorce occurs, the woman becomes *muṭallaqah* and is subject to the legal rulings prescribed for divorced women (Ibn Qudāmah, *al-Mughnī*, n.d.).

Al-Nawawī similarly states that divorce is the lawful termination of marriage, and the woman upon whom divorce takes effect is legally classified as *al-muṭallaqah*, upon whom the waiting period (*'iddat al-ṭalāq*) becomes obligatory (al-Nawawī, *al-Majmū'* n.d.).

From the Mālikī perspectives, Ibn Rushd explains that divorce is a *Sharī'ah*-sanctioned means of ending marriage, and the woman after divorce assumes a new legal status distinct from marriage, governed by rulings on *'iddah* and post-divorce rights. (Ibn Rushd, *Bidāyat al-Mujtahid*, n.d.).

The *al-Mawsū'ah al-Fiqhiyyah al-Kuwaitiyyah* defines *al-muṭallaqah* as a woman whose marriage has been dissolved through divorce and who is therefore bound by the rulings of *'iddah* until she becomes lawfully eligible for remarriage (*al-Mawsū'ah al-Fiqhiyyah*) (Ministry of Awqaf, Kuwait, n.d.).

The hardships experienced by widows are a global and well-documented concern. Widowed women often endure multiple forms of disadvantage arising from systemic oppression, harmful widowhood practices, and long-standing exclusion from social, economic, and political participation (Dube, 2016; Pemunta & Alubafi, 2016). In recent years, widowhood rituals, negative community perceptions that assign widows a diminished social status, and other culturally embedded practices have attracted growing international attention, particularly through a human-rights lens. This increased focus aligns with broader recognition that gender-based violence is unacceptable and is reflected in numerous international, regional, and national legal and policy frameworks (Pemunta & Alubafi, 2016).

Widowhood constitutes a major turning point in women's lives, exposing them to a complex array of psychological, social, and economic challenges. Spousal loss is frequently accompanied by intensified emotional distress, most notably anxiety and depression, with the greatest severity typically occurring within the first two years of bereavement (Jacobs, 1997; Goodkin et al., 2002). Beyond mental health impacts, many widows experience marked reductions in household income, heightened social isolation, and persistent feelings of loneliness. These hardships often include the gradual breakdown of social support networks from the deceased's family members, including the loss of shared friendships and decreased interaction. Some widows also face the challenge of physical abuse and neglect, in addition to gender inequalities (Goodkin et al., 2002). Additionally, prolonged seclusion (in the Iddah (waiting period), which requires support from the deceased's family) led them to disengagement from social activities and restricted involvement in community life during bereavement. This can undermine self-worth and diminish self-esteem, further intensifying psychosocial vulnerability (Utz et al., 2002). To this end, there is an urgent need for comprehensive social and psychological interventions to promote the dignity, well-being, and social integration of widows from both the government and society.

Divorce, much like widowhood, constitutes another significant life upheaval that exposes women to substantial psychological, social, and economic difficulties. Women who were divorced often face heightened emotional distress, including anxiety, depression, and feelings of loss or personal failure following marital dissolution (Amato, 2000; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Divorce often brings financial insecurity, stemming from the loss of shared income, unequal access to marital assets, and increased economic responsibilities, burdens that tend to fall more heavily on divorced women. (Smock, 1994).

Beyond economic hardship, divorcees commonly confront social stigma, strained family relationships, and the erosion of social support networks. Friends and relatives of the husbands immediately distance themselves from the divorced

woman, resulting in social isolation and loneliness as experienced by some widows (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995). Research also indicates that divorce can undermine self-esteem and alter self-concept, as individuals are required to redefine their identities and social roles outside the institution of marriage (Kitson & Morgan, 1990). Patterns of social withdrawal and reduced engagement in community life during and after divorce have been associated with enduring declines in psychological well-being and overall life satisfaction (Williams & Umberson, 2004).

The imperative for responsive interventions aimed at addressing the multifaceted challenges and vulnerabilities confronting widows and divorcees, viewed through Islamic perspectives, constitutes the central motivation of this Institution-Based Research. Islam, through its legal, ethical, and social frameworks, places strong emphasis on the protection of vulnerable groups, including widows and divorced women, by guaranteeing their rights to dignity, maintenance, social security, and moral support. However, contemporary social realities reveal a widening gap between these normative Islamic ideals and the lived experiences of widows and divorcees, who often face economic deprivation, psychological distress, social marginalization, and weak institutional support. This trend is almost affecting women in Sokoto State in particular and Nigeria in general. Solutions to these challenges from Islamic principles as articulated in the Qur'an, Sunnah, and classical juristic discourses with Islamic values of justice (*'adl*), compassion (*rahmah*), and social solidarity (*takaful*) to mitigate these challenges. In doing so, it underscores the relevance of Islamic social policy as a viable tool for addressing contemporary vulnerabilities and promoting holistic human development.

Challenges Facing Muslim Widows and Divorcees in Sokoto State

Islam recognizes widows and divorcees as legally protected members of society whose rights and welfare are divinely guaranteed. The challenges faced by Muslim widows and divorcees in Sokoto State today reflect not deficiencies in Islamic law but rather the failure to properly implement Qur'anic injunctions, Prophetic guidance, and the rulings of classical jurists (*fuqahā'*).

1. Challenge of Maintenance (Nafaqah)

One of the gravest challenges confronting widows and divorcees is the absence of adequate maintenance. Under Islamic law, maintenance includes food, clothing, shelter, and other necessities appropriate to custom (*'urf*) and capacity. For divorced women in their waiting period (*'iddah*), Allah explicitly commands financial maintenance:

"Lodge them where you dwell, according to your means, and do not harm them so as to make life difficult for them." (Qur'an 65:6)

Classical jurists unanimously affirm that revocably divorced women are entitled to full maintenance, while irrevocably divorced women are entitled to accommodation during *'iddah* (Ibn Qudāmah, n.d./1997). Failure of former husbands in Sokoto State to uphold this obligation constitutes a clear violation of Sharī'ah.

For widows, although nafaqah from the deceased husband ceases upon death, maintenance becomes a collective obligation (*farḍ kifāyah*) upon heirs and close relatives, particularly when children are involved (Al-Qurṭubī, 2006).

2. Poverty and Economic Hardship

Islam recognizes poverty as a social trial and commands the Muslim community to protect vulnerable groups, including widows and divorcees. Allah warns against neglecting them:

"And give the relative his right, and the poor, and the traveler, and do not squander wastefully." (Qur'an 17:26)

The Prophet SAW emphasized communal responsibility toward widows:

"The one who strives to support widows and the poor is like the one who strives in the cause of Allah." (Bukhārī, 1987, Hadith no. 5353)

Classical scholars such as Al-Ghazālī explain that neglect of widows leads to moral corruption and social instability, as economic desperation often forces individuals into unlawful means of survival (Al-Ghazālī, 2004).

3. Inheritance Deprivation

Denial or delay of inheritance remains a significant challenge for widows in Sokoto State. The Qur'an decisively establishes women's inheritance rights:

"For men is a share of what parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of what parents and close relatives leave, be it little or much." (Qur'an 4:7)

A widow is entitled to one-quarter of the estate if there are no children and one-eighth if there are children (Qur'ān 4:12). Ibn Kathīr strongly condemns the pre-Islamic practice of depriving women of inheritance and regards its continuation as a form of jāhiliyyah (Ibn Kathīr, 1999).

Thus, none distribution of estates by male relatives under customary practices in Sokoto State directly contradicts explicit Qur'ānic rulings.

4. Childcare and Neglect of Offspring

Islam places primary responsibility for child maintenance on the father, even after divorce:

"Upon the father is the provision and clothing of the mothers according to what is acceptable."
(Qur'ān 2:233)

The Mālikī, Ḥanafī, Shāfi'ī, and Ḥanbalī schools agree that a father remains financially responsible for his children regardless of custody arrangements (Al-Nawawī, 1997). Neglect of children by divorced fathers, common in many communities, is therefore a serious sin. The Prophet SAW warned:

"It is sufficient sin for a man that he neglects those whom he is responsible to maintain." (Abū Dāwūd, 2009, Hadith no. 1692)

5. Remarriage and Social Stigmatization

Islam encourages the remarriage of widows and divorcees to protect dignity and chastity. Allah says:

"And marry off the unmarried among you and the righteous among your male and female servants." (Qur'ān 24:32)

The Prophet SAW himself married widows and encouraged their marriage, stating:

"A previously married woman has more right concerning herself than her guardian."
(Muslim, 2006, Hadith no. 1421)

Classical jurists affirm that stigmatizing widows and divorcees or discouraging their remarriage contradicts Islamic ethics and Prophetic practice (Ibn Taymiyyah, 2005).

6. Resort to Sorcery and Un-Islamic Practices

Economic desperation and emotional vulnerability sometimes drive widows and divorcees to seek solutions through sorcery or soothsayers. Islam strictly prohibits this:

"And they follow what the devils recited during the reign of Sulaymān... but the devils disbelieved, teaching people magic." (Qur'ān 2:102)

The Prophet SAW declared:

"Whoever goes to a soothsayer and believes him has disbelieved in what was revealed to Muhammad." (Aḥmad, 2001, Hadith no. 9532)

Classical scholars agree that belief in sorcery nullifies tawḥīd and exposes society to moral ruin (Ibn Ḥajar, 2004).

7. Moral Vulnerability and Social Pressure

Islam safeguards widows and divorcees through modesty regulations and communal care:

"And do not display yourselves as was the display of the former times of ignorance."
(Qur'ān 33:33)

Neglect by society exposes women to exploitation and moral danger, which Islam seeks to prevent through family responsibility, zakāh, ṣadaqah, and waqf systems (Al-Māwardī, 1996).

The challenges facing Muslim widows and divorcees in Sokoto State arise not from Islamic law but from its neglect in practice to some extent. The Qur'ān, Sunnah, and classical fiqh provide a comprehensive framework for maintenance, inheritance, child welfare, remarriage, and moral protection. Reviving these principles through Islamic institutions, courts, and social finance mechanisms remains essential for restoring justice and dignity to widows and divorcees.

Widowhood and Divorcees' Social Responsibility in Islam

Islam views widowhood and divorce as social realities that require structured moral, legal, and communal responses. The Qur'an establishes clear injunctions safeguarding the dignity and welfare of widows and divorcees, emphasizing justice, compassion, and material support. Allah commands that widows be provided for in a recognized and dignified manner,

stating: “And for those who die and leave wives behind, a bequest of maintenance for one year without expulsion” (Q. 2:240). Similarly, divorced women are protected from harm and exploitation, as Allah warns against injustice following separation (Q. 2:231).

Classical exegetes explain that these verses establish a binding moral obligation upon the Muslim community to ensure that women affected by marital dissolution are not abandoned socially or economically. Ibn Kathīr interprets Q. 2:240 as evidence of Islam’s insistence on post-marital welfare and continuity of care, even after the death of the husband.

Prophetic Emphasis on Supporting Widows and Vulnerable Women

The Sunnah further reinforces the obligation to care for widows and divorcees. The Prophet SAW equated striving for the welfare of widows and the poor with the highest acts of devotion, saying: “*The one who strives to support a widow or the poor is like the one who fights in the cause of Allah*” (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Kitāb al-Nafaqāt). This narration elevates social welfare from a charitable option to a religiously meritorious duty.

Imām al-Nawawī explains that this ḥadīth indicates communal responsibility (*farḍ kifāyah*) in addressing the needs of vulnerable groups, particularly women without marital protection. Therefore, any structured effort aimed at alleviating the suffering of widows and divorcees aligns with Prophetic guidance.

Juristic Foundations: Rights of Widows and Divorcees in Fiqh

Classical jurists comprehensively addressed the legal rights of widows and divorcees within Islamic family law. Ibn Qudāmah details the widow’s entitlement to inheritance, housing, and maintenance during *‘iddah*, emphasizing that denial of these rights constitutes injustice (*ẓulm*) (*Al-Mughnī*). Likewise, al-Sarakhsī affirms that divorced women retain enforceable financial rights, including deferred mahr and maintenance, particularly where vulnerability is evident (*Al-Mabsūṭ*).

These juristic rulings illustrate that Islamic law does not merely dissolve marriages but actively structures post-divorce and post-death welfare systems. Consequently, applying these mechanisms enhances access to these rights in the State and serves the intent of the Sharī‘ah.

Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah as the Basis for Solving Some of the Challenges

Although Artificial Intelligence is a modern phenomenon, Islamic jurisprudence allows the adoption of new tools through the doctrine of *maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah*. Al-Ghazālī defines *maṣlaḥah* as anything that preserves religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property (*Al-Mustasfā*). Widows and divorcees often face threats to property, dignity, and psychological well-being, placing their protection squarely within these objectives.

Al-Shātibī further argues that any means that effectively realizes public welfare and removes hardship is legally acceptable, even if unprecedented, provided it does not contradict explicit texts (*Al-Muwāfaqāt*). From this standpoint, AI functions as a *wasīlah* (instrument), not an independent source of law.

Means of Raf‘ al-Ḥaraj (Removal of Hardship)

One of the established maxims of Islamic law is *al-mashaqqah tajlib al-taysīr* (hardship necessitates facilitation). Widows and divorcees in Sokoto State often experience difficulty accessing legal knowledge, welfare institutions, and community support. These hardships can be reduced by simplifying access to information regarding inheritance, maintenance, and zakāt eligibility.

Ibn Taymiyyah asserts that administrative measures adopted by authorities are valid if they prevent harm and facilitate justice (*Al-Siyāsah al-Shar‘iyyah*). Accordingly, good welfare administration in the State aligns with Islamic governance principles when deployed to improve efficiency and equity.

Nafyu al-Ḍarar (Prevention of Harm)

Islamic law strictly prohibits harm, as expressed in the Prophetic maxim: “*There should be neither harm nor reciprocating harm*” (Sunan Abī Dāwūd). Social neglect, economic deprivation, and legal ignorance constitute forms of harm suffered by widows and divorcees. Identifying vulnerable individuals, ensuring timely intervention, and preventing exploitation. When framed within Sharī‘ah guidelines, such technological use fulfills the obligation of *daf‘ al-ḍarar* (warding off harm), a principle widely affirmed by jurists such as al-Nawawī in *Al-Majmū‘*.

Sharī‘ah-Based Recommendations for the Government and People of Sokoto State

1. Establish a Supervisory committee on all welfare Departments and Units in the State

The Sokoto State government, in collaboration with Islamic scholars, should establish a supervisory committee on all welfare departments and units in the local governments to provide widows and divorcees with social amenities and

ensure their rights on inheritance, maintenance, zakāt, and waqf entitlements are safeguarded. This aligns with the Qur'anic command to administer justice and fulfill rights (Q. 4:58).

2. Integrate Apps into Zakāt and Waqf Administration

App systems should be deployed to improve the identification and prioritization of poor widows and divorcees as eligible recipients of zakāt and welfare support. Classical jurists affirm that zakāt distribution must target the genuinely needy, including women without financial protection (Al-Sarakhsī, *Al-Mabsūṭ*). AI can enhance accuracy while fulfilling this Sharī'ah obligation.

3. Capacity Building for Zakat and welfare Administrators

Zakat and welfare administrators in Sokoto State should be trained on the conceptual interface between Islamic jurisprudence and its contemporary application. Ibn Taymiyyah emphasizes that administrative tools and training are valid when they promote justice and prevent harm (*Al-Siyāsah al-Shar'iyyah*).

5. Community Based Digital Support Networks

Digital Support platforms should be developed to link widows and divorcees with community support, vocational training, and counseling services. This recommendation reflects the Prophetic ethic of communal solidarity and compassion toward vulnerable women (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim).

6. Continuous Sharī'ah Audit and Accountability

A standing Sharī'ah advisory committee should periodically audit Zakat and welfare initiatives in the State to ensure compliance with Islamic legal maxims, particularly *al-ḍarar yuzāl* (harm must be removed). This principle is affirmed in classical fiqh works such as al-Nawawī's *Al-Majmū'*.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the persistent challenges facing Muslim widows and divorcees in Sokoto State are not rooted in deficiencies within Islamic law, but rather in the continued gap between Islamic normative ideals and their practical implementation in social, legal, and institutional contexts. Despite Sokoto State's deep Islamic heritage, shaped profoundly by the Sokoto Jihād and its reformist vision, harmful customary practices, weak enforcement of Sharī'ah-based rights, and fragile welfare structures continue to expose widows and divorcees to economic deprivation, psychological distress, social marginalization, and moral vulnerability. These realities stand in direct contradiction to the Qur'anic and Prophetic framework that prioritizes justice, dignity, protection, and communal responsibility for vulnerable members of society (Qur'ān 4:7; 2:233; 65:6).

From an Islamic perspective, the rights of widows and divorcees to maintenance, inheritance, childcare support, remarriage, and social inclusion are unequivocally established in the Qur'ān, Sunnah, and classical fiqh. The consensus of the Sunni jurists, articulated by authorities such as Ibn Qudāmah, al-Nawawī, Ibn Rushd, and al-Sarakhsī, confirms that neglecting these rights constitutes injustice (*ẓulm*) and a reversion to jāhiliyyah practices repudiated by Islam. The denial of inheritance, abandonment after divorce, neglect of children, and stigmatization of remarriage observed in some parts of the State therefore represent social failures.

Importantly, this research has argued that contemporary tools and administrative innovations, when properly regulated, can be harmonized with Islamic jurisprudence through the lens of *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*. Classical theorists such as al-Ghazālī and al-Shāṭibī affirm that any means that preserves life, dignity, property, and social order, while removing hardship and preventing harm, is legally valid provided it does not contradict explicit revelation (*Al-Mustasfā; Al-Muwāfaqāt*). Within this framework, structured welfare administration and modern technologies may serve as permissible instruments (*wasā'il*) for realizing Sharī'ah objectives, particularly in enhancing access to zakāt, waqf, welfare awareness, and social support for widows and divorcees.

In conclusion, addressing the challenges facing Muslim widows and divorcees in Sokoto State requires a deliberate revival of Islamic social ethics alongside effective institutional mechanisms. The Qur'ān, Sunnah, and classical fiqh already provide a robust and humane framework capable of restoring dignity, ensuring material security, and safeguarding moral well-being. What remains is the collective responsibility of government, religious institutions, families, and communities to translate these principles into lived reality. By grounding policy interventions in Sharī'ah values and aligning them with contemporary administrative capacities, Sokoto State can reaffirm its Islamic legacy and offer a model of compassionate, just, and inclusive social development for widows and divorcees in the State and beyond.

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