

Levirate Obligation and Widowhood in Dialogue: Deuteronomy 25:5–10 and Contemporary Practices in Amike Aba, Nigeria

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Abstract: This study examines the relationship between levirate obligation in Deuteronomy 25:5–10 and lived widowhood practices in Amike Aba (Izzi, Ebonyi State, Nigeria), where mourning rites, kin authority, and land-based inheritance shape widows' post-bereavement security. Using a qualitative design that integrates textual analysis and field inquiry, the research conducts a close reading of Deuteronomy 25:5–10 (its casuistic structure, conditions, actors, purposes, and refusal procedure). It analyzes primary interview data from 25 participants (17 widows and 8 male community members) through thematic analysis. The findings indicate that the biblical text frames levirate as a kin-based obligation aimed at name/estate continuity, coordinated through the widow–levir–elders triad and regulated by a public refusal procedure marked by supervised shame. Field accounts show that widowhood in Amike Aba is organized through a sequenced ritual regime (public wailing, visible status markers such as hair shaving and mourning attire, selective restrictions of movement, and reintegration tied to second burial), which intersects with post-bereavement vulnerabilities including exclusion from decision-making, insecurity around land/inheritance, exposure to harassment, and stigma surrounding remarriage. The study's implications highlight the need for context-sensitive community practices and local safeguarding mechanisms that mitigate prolonged liminality resulting from delayed ritual closure, enhance widows' access to use rights and mediation in inheritance processes, and reduce exposure to harassment and stigma. The originality of this study lies in bringing the normative–procedural logic of Deuteronomy's levirate law into a sustained dialogue with a micro-contextual ethnographic account of Amike Aba, showing how kin obligation can function as both social protection and social regulation, thereby clarifying why "choice" may exist yet remain materially and relationally constrained.

Keywords: widowhood rites; levirate marriage; Deuteronomy 25:5–10; kinship obligation; inheritance and land; Amike Aba (Izzi); liminality and ritual closure.

1. Introduction

Widowhood in many communities does not only involve personal loss; it also marks a socially regulated transition shaped by prescribed rites and norms that shape a widow's public standing and everyday life. In contexts such as Amike Aba, mourning often involves public wailing, ritual hair shaving, wearing mourning clothing, and selective restrictions on movement, as well as a second-burial threshold that signals social reintegration. These practices shape participation in communal life and can directly affect day-to-day survival strategies. Mourning regimes also intersect with post-bereavement vulnerabilities, including access to land and inheritance, the presence or absence of kin-based support, heightened exposure to harassment, and stigma around remarriage or new partnerships in settings where women's economic options and property rights remain constrained (Adebayo, 2021;

Holm, Berland, & Severinsson, 2019; Pike, 2019). Within this landscape, levirate marriage, understood as the marriage of a widow to a deceased husband's brother or another close male relative, has historically served as a kinship-based mechanism of social and economic protection, preserving lineage and property within the family. Scholars also commonly discuss the practice in relation to biblical levirate traditions (Ademiluka, 2023; Olanisebe & Oladosu, 2014; Weisberg, 2004, 2009). Yet many authors report that levirate is declining or taking modified forms under pressures such as Western influence, Christianity, and public-health concerns, including HIV/AIDS, which simultaneously reshape widow support structures and raise legal-ethical tensions about protection and coercion (Agbadou, 2017; Kudo, 2021; Nkwi, 2005; Prince, 2011).

In Amike Aba (Ebonyi State, Nigeria), these dynamics unfold within a predominantly rural, agrarian setting on the periphery of Abakaliki. Kinship institutions and customary authority have a significant influence on community life, and they also shape how people perceive widowhood obligations (P. U. Echiegu, 2007). The community is associated with the Izzi, an Igbo-speaking group whose socio-cultural patterns, despite dialectal distinctiveness, retain broad affinities with wider Igbo kinship expectations, particularly around lineage continuity and women's location within the husband's patriline (A. O. U. Echiegu, 1998; Steensel, 2009). In this setting, widowhood is rarely a private matter. Families and lineages negotiate it publicly through household structures that manage mourning rites and set conditions for reintegration into social life. Land intensifies the material stakes of widowhood in agrarian economies because it underwrites livelihood and dignity, and many Igbo settings still reflect patterns of male-coded control over landed property and inheritance that can place widows in precarious positions after bereavement (Korieh, 1996; Madumelu, 2014). As a result, a widow's security often depends less on her individual resources than on how the husband's kin interpret obligation, belonging, and legitimacy, particularly in relation to farming land, household authority, and the social acceptability of remarriage or alternative partnerships. Amike Aba, therefore, offers an instructive site for examining how mourning rites and kinship expectations, including ideas linked to levirate, intersect with survival strategies and women's negotiated agency in a changing rural Nigerian milieu.

Existing scholarship on widowhood and levirate can be grouped into three broad strands. First, a textual-biblical strand treats levirate marriage as a socio-legal institution embedded in Deuteronomy's casuistic law, with particular attention to the structured roles of the widow, the levir (brother-in-law), and the elders, the stated aim of preserving the deceased man's "name" (and, by implication, estate), and the legally recognized possibility of refusal accompanied by a public procedure of shame (often read through the lens of duty versus choice) (Seidler, 2018; Weisberg, 2004). This strand is frequently extended by rabbinic and reception-historical studies, which trace how levirate reconfigures family units and women's status within kinship, and how later legal cultures (e.g., late antique Christian traditions) reinterpret or reframe the institution through different legal grammars of marriage and inheritance (Monnickendam, 2019; Weisberg, 2009). Comparative work also situates Deuteronomy's levirate logic within broader ancient Near Eastern family-law environments, highlighting continuities and divergences across legal traditions (Knollová, 2025). While this literature clarifies key components of the law, a recurrent analytical gap is that discussions do not always integrate, as one coherent legal-logical package, (i) the restriction of exogamy, (ii) the protective incorporation implied in the levir's obligation to "come upon" the widow and "take her as wife," and (iii) the enforcement mechanism involving elders and public shaming—an integration that becomes especially important when the text is brought into dialogue with contemporary contextual-theological readings (Ademiluka, 2023).

An ethnographic and sociological strand examines widowhood and related kinship practices in Igbo and broader African settings by foregrounding how patriarchal lineage systems shape women's status after bereavement, particularly where inheritance follows the male line and widow security depends on male-coded kin authority (Urama, 2019). This literature often treats widowhood as a site where social control and vulnerability become visible through family and community dynamics, including exposure to gender-based violence and coercion that can involve not only intimate relations but also wider kin networks and customary-religious legitimation (Ekwueme, 2025). In this strand,

scholars frequently describe levirate marriage as a kin-based welfare mechanism that aims to keep widows within the husband's lineage and stabilise household continuity, even as they debate it as a potentially coercive arrangement that raises ethical and rights-based concerns under modern legal norms (Kudo, 2021). Studies of shifting marriage patterns among Igbo subgroups also highlight both continuity and change, demonstrating how Western influence, Christianity, education, and broader socio-economic transformations reshape and often weaken customary frameworks that once mediated widow security, resulting in hybrid arrangements rather than wholesale abandonment (Nwagbara, 2007; Nwoko, 2020). Despite the richness of this strand in mapping lived practice, it does not always connect ethnographic observation to the normative structure and procedural logic of biblical levirate, such as enforcement actors and refusal procedures. It also does not consistently foreground micro-contexts such as Amike Aba and Izzi settings, where mourning rites, kin authority, and survival strategies intersect in distinctive ways.

Second, an ethnographic/sociological strand examines widowhood and related kinship practices in Igbo and broader African settings by foregrounding how patriarchal lineage systems shape women's status after bereavement, especially where inheritance is strongly organized along the male line and widow security becomes contingent on male-coded kin authority (Urama, 2019). Within this literature, widowhood is frequently approached as a site where social control and vulnerability become visible through family and community dynamics, including exposure to forms of gender-based violence and coercion that may involve not only intimate relations but also wider kin networks and customary-religious legitimation (Ekwueme, 2025). Levirate marriage appears in this strand primarily as a kin-based welfare mechanism, a practice intended to keep widows within the husband's lineage and to stabilize household continuity while simultaneously being debated as a potentially coercive arrangement that raises ethical and rights-based concerns, especially under modern legal norms (Kudo, 2021). A further emphasis concerns continuity and change: studies of shifting marriage patterns among Igbo subgroups highlight how Western influence, Christianity, education, and wider socio-economic transformations reshape (and often weaken) customary frameworks that once mediated widow security, producing hybrid arrangements rather than wholesale abandonment (Nwagbara, 2007; Nwoko, 2020). However, despite the richness of this strand in mapping lived practice, a recurring gap is that it does not always connect these ethnographic observations to the normative structure and procedural logic of biblical levirate (e.g., enforcement actors, refusal procedures), nor does it consistently center highly localized micro-contexts such as Amike Aba/Izzi where mourning rites, kin authority, and survival strategies intersect in distinctive ways.

Third, a strand on inheritance/disinheritance, widow vulnerability, and agency centers on the material and relational consequences of bereavement, especially how widowhood often triggers struggles over property, land, and livelihood security when kinship structures and customary norms privilege patrilineal transfer. Across contexts, studies show that even where formal prohibitions exist, widows can still experience "soft" or indirect dispossession through withdrawal of support, exclusion from family decision-making, and pressure to leave land or assets, dynamics that expose them to sustained economic and social insecurity (Ajayi & Olotuah, 2005; Thomas, 2008). This literature also frames widowhood as a multi-dimensional vulnerability economic, social, and health-related where isolation, dependency, and exposure to abuse can intensify over time, and where shocks such as disease burdens (including HIV/AIDS-related contexts in parts of Africa) further compound risk (Luginaah, Elkins, Maticka-Tyndale, Landry, & Mathui, 2005; Mohindra, Haddad, & Narayana, 2012; Ude & Njoku, 2017). Importantly, the same strand documents widows' agency and adaptive strategies, ranging from everyday resistance and negotiation within kin structures to reliance on community networks, religious coping, and empowerment-oriented interventions that widen access to legal support, training, psychosocial assistance, and income opportunities (Goswami, 2025; Ude & Njoku, 2017). Yet a recurring gap is that these analyses are often pursued in relative isolation from the ritual architecture of mourning and from levirate (as a kin mechanism or expectation), even though, in many lived settings, inheritance security, ritual regulation, and levirate-related pressures can operate together as a mutually reinforcing system that shapes widows' vulnerability and the limits of their choice.

This study examines how kin obligation toward widows is articulated in a normative tradition and negotiated in lived social practice, utilising two complementary lines of evidence. First, it undertakes a close reading of Deuteronomy 25:5–10 to clarify the casuistic structure of the levirate injunction, including its conditions, key actors (the widow, the levir, and the elders), stated purposes in relation to “name/estate,” and the refusal procedure that formalizes non-compliance. Second, it draws on primary field data, including semi-structured interviews and descriptive accounts from Amike Aba, to document the community’s widowhood rites, such as public wailing, ritual hair shaving, mourning attire, restrictions on movement, and the threshold of the second burial. Building on these two strands, the study also maps the main post-bereavement challenges that shape widow security and choice in Amike Aba, including inheritance/disinheritance pressures, levirate in transition, and experiences of abandonment, harassment, and stigma around remarriage. By integrating textual analysis and qualitative field evidence within a single analytical framework, the article contributes an empirically grounded and conceptually coherent account of levirate, not only as a scripturally framed ideal of kin responsibility, but also as a set of contested social negotiations that structure widowhood outcomes.

This article proceeds from a guiding proposition that Deuteronomy 25:5–10 frames levirate marriage as a kin-based legal obligation aimed at safeguarding continuity of the deceased man’s name and estate, and that this obligation is not merely moral but is supported by a recognizable enforcement logic involving communal adjudication (elders) and a formal refusal procedure that publicly marks non-compliance. At the same time, it advances a complementary proposition that widowhood in Amike Aba is structured by ritual regulation and kin negotiation, where mourning rites and selective restrictions—culminating in the second-burial threshold intersect with material pressures around land access, inheritance, and household security in ways that can narrow widows’ practical options. The connecting claim, therefore, is that contemporary widowhood dynamics are best understood through the tension between “choice” and “constraint”: even where levirate is declining or taking modified forms, kinship authority and economic vulnerability can still shape the range of “available” decisions and survival strategies. The analysis will demonstrate this argument by placing the legal-textual logic of Deuteronomy’s levirate injunction in dialogue with field-based descriptions of mourning regulation and post-bereavement pressures, clarifying how kin obligation functions simultaneously as a social-security rationale and as a mechanism with boundary-setting force.

This study employs a qualitative research design that integrates two complementary components: a close textual reading of Deuteronomy 25:5–10 and a descriptive field-based inquiry into widowhood practices in Amike Aba, Ebonyi State. The combined design aims to examine how a normative levirate framework is articulated within a biblical legal text and how widowhood realities are negotiated within a specific local community context.

For the biblical component, the study employs a literary/grammatical-critical close reading of Deuteronomy 25:5–10, treating it as a unit of casuistic law. The analysis proceeds by (i) identifying the conditional structure of the law and its legal logic (conditions, obligation, purpose, and sanction/procedure), (ii) mapping key actors and roles within the text (widow, levir/brother-in-law, and elders), (iii) attending to significant lexical and syntactic elements that carry normative force (e.g., the conditions for contracting levirate union, the purpose of preserving “name/estate,” and the language of incorporation and protection), and (iv) outlining the refusal procedure and its social-legal implications (the elders’ intervention and the halitzah ritual). Bible software resources, Hebrew lexicons, and standard exegetical commentaries were consulted as interpretive aids to clarify textual and linguistic features.

The field-based component adopts a descriptive qualitative approach to explore widowhood rites, the status of levirate marriage in transition, and the post-bereavement challenges faced by widows in Amike Aba. This component focuses on practices that structure mourning and social reintegration as well as the socio-economic arrangements that shape widows’ security and vulnerability within kinship networks. This focus allows the study to connect ritual regulation and material pressures rather than treating them as separate domains.

The study was conducted in Amike Aba community, a rural settlement located in Ebonyi Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, situated on the periphery of Abakaliki city. The community is associated with the Izzi people, an Igbo-speaking group whose livelihood is largely agrarian. This setting provides an important context for examining how kinship obligations, land-based inheritance, and social norms surrounding widowhood are negotiated within everyday communal life.

Primary data were generated through semi-structured interviews with twenty-five respondents drawn from Amike Aba. The participant pool consisted of seventeen widows and eight male community members, all of whom were identified as having considerable knowledge of widowhood rites, kinship expectations, and traditional practices. The inclusion of male informants served to triangulate accounts of communal norms, enforcement mechanisms, and kin-based obligations surrounding widowhood and levirate practices.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling guided by the following criteria: widows aged 30 years and above, with a minimum of two years of widowhood experience, residing in Amike Aba, and either aware of or directly involved in widowhood and levirate-related practices. Male participants were selected based on recognized familiarity with community customs and decision-making patterns relating to widowhood, inheritance, and kin obligations. A snowball technique was used to support recruitment, whereby initial respondents referred other eligible participants who met the stated criteria.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face using a flexible interview guide that allowed participants to narrate experiences and perspectives in their own terms while ensuring coverage of core topics. Each interview session lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Interview prompts explored (i) experiences and perceptions of widowhood rites (e.g., wailing, shaving, mourning attire, restrictions of movement, and second burial), (ii) kinship relations and post-bereavement support structures, (iii) access to land and inheritance-related arrangements, (iv) perceptions and changes surrounding levirate marriage, and (v) experiences of vulnerability, stigma, and everyday coping strategies.

All interviews were recorded electronically with participants' consent, supplemented with field notes where necessary. Recordings were manually transcribed, and transcripts were reviewed for accuracy before analysis. To protect confidentiality, names and identifying details were removed at the transcription stage, and pseudonyms were used throughout the study.

Data analysis followed a thematic procedure. Transcripts were coded to identify recurring patterns and meaning units related to widowhood rites, enforcement dynamics, inheritance/disinheritance, perceptions of levirate marriage, modern influences on traditional practices, and socio-economic challenges. Codes were subsequently clustered into broader themes and subthemes that structure the Results section. For the presentation of quotations in the Results, widows and male informants are referenced through anonymized labels (W1–W17 for widows; M1–M8 for male informants), with minimal contextual identifiers (e.g., age range or duration of widowhood) provided where relevant and non-identifying.

To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed methodological triangulation by comparing insights across widows' narratives, male informants' accounts, and relevant documentary/secondary sources. Member checking was conducted by verifying interpretive summaries with participants to ensure that qualitative interpretations accurately reflected their intended meanings. In addition, two researchers conducted independent coding and compared code applications to assess thematic reliability, yielding an inter-rater agreement of 91%.

Ethical considerations guided the study throughout. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, with clear communication of the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through pseudonymization and secure storage of recordings and transcripts with restricted access. Given the sensitivity of widowhood-related experiences, interview procedures were conducted with attention to participants' comfort, privacy, and emotional well-being.

As a qualitative case study, the findings are intended to provide depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization. The purposive and snowball sampling strategies may privilege

participants with stronger social visibility or access to networks, and interview narratives may be shaped by recall and social desirability dynamics. These limitations were mitigated through triangulation, systematic coding procedures, and participant verification of interpretive summaries.

2. Close Reading of Deuteronomy 25:5–10

Deuteronomy 25:5–10 establishes a casuistic legal framework for levirate marriage by specifying the conditions under which it applies, namely, when brothers live together, and a man dies without a son, thereby defining when the obligation is triggered. The text also identifies the key actors involved: the widow, the husband's brother (the *levir*), who is expected to perform the duty, and the elders of the city, who function as the communal legal authority. Its stated purpose is to perpetuate the name and estate of the deceased through the firstborn son produced in the levirate union, while also providing a formal procedure for refusal in which the widow petitions the elders, and the *halitzah* rite publicly marks and shames the man who declines the obligation.

The clause כִּי־יָשְׁבוּ אָחִים יָחַד ("when brothers live together") introduces the basic case of the levirate law, with *ki* functioning as a casuistic marker that frames the obligation conditionally. The verb יָשַׁב (*qal* imperfect from יָשַׁב, "to dwell/sit") together with the adverb יָחַד ("togetherness") indicates that the legislation presumes a shared living arrangement rather than merely a biological relationship. This "togetherness" has been interpreted as residence on the same family estate (Driver, 1896). Yet, it may also be read more broadly as co-residence or belonging within a clan-based socio-economic unit, given that אָחִים can denote not only blood brothers but also fellow citizens or tribespeople (Olugbemi & Atoyebi, 2016). In this way, the opening condition situates levirate duty within an integrated kinship setting where family continuity and property remain anchored in the same social unit.

The condition וְבֶן אֵין לוֹ ("and he has no son") functions as the legal trigger for the levirate obligation, indicating that the arrangement applies when a man dies without a male heir. The text's use of בֶּן ("son"), rather than a gender-inclusive term for "child," foregrounds the priority given to male lineage within the inheritance logic presupposed by the law. While the LXX renders the expression with σπέρμα ("seed") and the Vulgate follows this usage, the Hebrew diction remains specific in its emphasis on a son. Given that Hebrew lacks a neuter gender and has available terms such as יֶלֶד ("child") or זֶרַע ("seed") that could be read more inclusively, the selection of בֶּן appears intended to avoid ambiguity and to keep the condition narrowly focused on the absence of a male heir. On this reading, the provision would be inapplicable where a son exists (even through another wife), whereas the presence of daughters alone may still leave the legal condition unmet. In sum, the "no son" requirement frames levirate marriage as an instrument for securing name and estate continuity within a patrilineal horizon.

The text explicitly prohibits the widow from contracting marriage "outside" the kin group, stating וְלֹא־תֵהְיֶה אִשְׁת־הַמֵּת הַזֶּה לְאִישׁ זָר—literally, "she shall not become ... outside ... to a strange man." The prohibition is expressed through the negation לֹא attached to the verb תֵּהְיֶה ("she shall not become"), which frames the restriction as a direct legal constraint. In this formulation, the widow is designated אִשְׁת־הַמֵּת ("wife of the dead") in a construct relationship that signals belongingness to the deceased, a usage that also appears in Ruth 4:5. As noted in the data, the label "wife of the dead" may carry a derogatory sense and suggest a vulnerable, lower-status social positioning (Olugbemi & Atoyebi, 2016). Within this legal logic, the ban on marriage to a "strange man" operates to keep responsibility for the widow within the deceased man's kin group, so long as a qualified *levir* remains available to perform the duty. The restriction functions as a control against the transfer of the deceased's name, estate, and related obligations beyond the family or clan. In this way, the deceased is not treated as "totally dead" insofar as there remains a possibility of "raising seed" on his behalf, and the widow is not to be left destitute through exclusion from kin-based support.

The term יְבָמָה (*yübamāh*), from the root *ybm*, denotes the husband's brother or a near relative who is in a position and is obliged to carry out the levirate duty. In relation to the widow, it identifies the brother-in-law specifically as the responsible actor who is expected to perform the required obligation toward her. The same verbal root appears in Genesis 38:8, where it denotes fulfilling "the duty of a

brother-in-law,” thereby confirming the formalized nature of this kin obligation. Read within Deuteronomy 25:5, the levir is presented not as an optional participant but as a designated agent whose duty is oriented toward raising seed and maintaining the deceased brother’s name and patrimony. This identification of the levir as an obligated kin actor provides the basis for the ensuing description of what the duty entails in practice.

The phrase *בָּאָהָּ עָלֶיהָ* (“come upon her”) denotes the levir’s required act of union and consummation as part of fulfilling the levirate duty. At the same time, as framed in the draft data, the expression carries a protective nuance; “coming upon” can also suggest covering and sheltering, not merely sexual contact. On this reading, the prescribed action is not primarily to “enjoy sexual intimacy with the widow” but, by implication, to provide the social security that her deceased husband would have supplied (Olugbemiro & Atoyebi, 2016). A comparable protective idiom is reflected in Ruth 3:9 (“Spread your wings over your maidservant”), which reinforces the association between intimate union and the language of covering. The obligation is further specified by the phrase *וְלָקַחְתָּהּ לְאִשָּׁה* (“take her as wife”), which moves beyond consummation to the conferral of marital status. In this formulation, taking the widow “as wife” indicates that she is to be treated as a wife within the household, so that the levir’s duty extends to care and protection for her and her children, rather than remaining confined to a sexual act. Together, “come upon her” and “take her as wife” frame levirate practice as a kin-based mechanism that regulates consummation while simultaneously securing the widow’s social and economic protection within the family unit.

Building on the levir’s dual obligation of consummation and the assumption of marital status (v.5), v.6 articulates the law’s primary end: the perpetuation of the deceased brother’s name and estate through a specifically defined heir. The provision focuses on *הַבְּכוֹר אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵד* (“the firstborn which she shall bear”), with the masculine form underscoring that the envisaged firstborn is a first male child, consistent with the earlier “no son” trigger. This firstborn is not treated merely as the biological issue of the levirate union but is assigned a juridical identity in relation to the deceased. The expression *יָקִים עָלֵי־שֵׁם* (“shall stand upon the name”) indicates that he is to be reckoned as the dead man’s son, thereby preserving the deceased’s memory among his people. Accordingly, the child functions as the heir to the deceased’s estate, securing patrimonial continuity within the kin group. The text does not require that the child bear the deceased’s personal name; rather, the key point is the legal attribution of sonship and inheritance that sustains the deceased’s “name” and property line.

Where the obligated relative refuses to perform this duty, vv.7–10 supply a structured communal procedure that moves from complaint to adjudication and, if necessary, to formal release and public censure. The process begins with the widow bringing the matter to the elders of the city (*hazzūqēnīm*), who function as the competent communal authority rather than merely older men. The legislation thus recognizes that a *levir* may decline the arrangement, yet it simultaneously grants the widow an avenue to pursue her claim by petitioning the elders (Obiorah, 2013). Upon receiving the complaint, the elders summon the man and “speak with him” in a repeated or intensive manner, indicating an attempt at communal persuasion before any ritual resolution. If he persists in refusal, the law prescribes the *halitzah* rite as the formal mechanism by which the *levir* is released from the obligation and the widow becomes free to marry whomever she desires (Greenstone, 1906). The rite is enacted publicly: the widow removes the man’s sandal, a gesture associated with the renunciation or transfer of rights. She follows it with spitting and a declarative formula that identifies his failure to “build up” his brother’s house. In this way, refusal is not treated as a private choice but is publicly marked as a breach of kin duty. The concluding designation of his household as that of the “barefooted” man encapsulates the intended public shame that functions as the social sanction attached to refusal.

Table 1 summarizes the principal actors identified in Deuteronomy 25:5–10, specifying their textual locations and legally defined functions within the levirate framework, including obligation, adjudication, and the refusal procedure (*halitzah*).

Table 1 Key Actors and Their Roles in Deuteronomy 25:5–10 (Levirate Law)

Actor	Where in the Text	Role as Stated by the Text
Widow	vv. 5, 7–10	The legally restricted subject (“not ... outside ... to a strange man”); the recipient of the levir’s duty; and the petitioner who brings a complaint to the elders when the levir refuses.
Levir / Brother-in-law	v. 5, vv. 7–10	The designated obligated relative who must “come upon her” and “take her as wife”; may refuse, but is then drawn into the formal halitzah procedure and its public marking/shaming.
Elders (hazzūqēnīm)	vv. 7–10	The communal legal authority that receives the widow’s complaint summons the man, “speak with him” intensively, and oversees/validates the public procedure that follows refusal.

Table 1 highlights that Deuteronomy 25:5–10 structures levirate marriage as a kin-based legal process by assigning distinct and coordinated roles to three actors: the widow, the levir (brother-in-law), and the elders. As shown in Table 1, the widow is both the subject of restriction (she is barred from marrying “outside” to a “strange man”) and the recipient of the levir’s mandated duty, yet she also exercises procedural agency by petitioning the elders when the obligation is refused (vv. 5, 7–10). The levir is presented as the designated obligated kinsman who must enact the duty through union and the assumption of marital status (“come upon her” and “take her as wife”), while the text simultaneously acknowledges the possibility of refusal and channels it into a formal, publicly marked process (v. 5; vv. 7–10). The elders, in turn, function as the competent communal legal authority: they receive the widow’s complaint, summon the man, “speak with him” intensively, and oversee the legitimating public procedure that culminates in halitzah and its associated social sanction (vv. 7–10).

In sum, Deuteronomy 25:5–10 frames levirate marriage as a kin-based legal obligation triggered by a sonless death within a shared “togetherness” setting, restricting the widow from marrying “outside” to a “strange man”. At the same time, a qualified levir remains available, requires the levir’s protective marital incorporation through union and the taking of the widow as wife, and enforces compliance through the elders’ adjudicatory role and a publicly enacted halitzah ritual that marks refusal with social shame.

3. Widowhood rites in Amike Aba

Public wailing as announcement of death

In the immediate aftermath of a husband’s death in Amike Aba, widowhood rites begin with a public performance of mourning that is socially expected and closely monitored. Interview data show that loud wailing functions not simply as a private expression of grief but as an initial communicative act that signals death to the surrounding community and draws collective attention to the bereavement. The practice operates within a social script that treats mourning as visible, audible, and publicly accountable rather than purely personal.

At the death of a married man in Amike Aba, the widow is expected to cry loudly and bitterly, a prescribed response that frames mourning as a socially required act rather than a purely private reaction. In the field data, this wailing is described as serving a dual function in a single gesture: it both expresses grief. It informs others that the husband is dead, operating as an immediate public announcement of the loss. In this connection, Janet Nwigo reported that she wailed loudly at her husband’s death in keeping with the demands of tradition, and that her crying attracted neighbours and passersby as a customary means of announcing the death (Janet Nwigo, personal communication, April 3, 2024).

Janet Nwigo’s account provides a concrete illustration of how wailing functions as a public signal within the widowhood rite (personal communication, April 3, 2024). She reported that, at the time of her husband’s death, she wailed loudly in accordance with the expected practice. This loud wailing,

she noted, immediately attracted neighbours and passersby, indicating that the act operates in a socially visible and mobilizing way. Janet further explained that tradition demands such crying precisely as a means of announcing that the husband has died (Janet Nwigo, personal communication, April 3, 2024).

The interview data indicate that widow wailing in Amike Aba operates as an immediate social signalling device. By being performed loudly in a public register, it attracts neighbours and passersby, thereby rapidly broadcasting that a death has occurred. In this sense, the practice functions less as a private expression alone and more as a communicative mechanism that mobilizes community attention in the earliest moments following a husband's death.

Hair shaving and mourning attire as entry into the mourning period

Field accounts indicate that ritual hair shaving, followed by the adoption of mourning attire, marks the widow's formal entry into the mourning period in Amike Aba. Performed immediately after the husband's burial, these acts signal that mourning has begun and that the widow has moved into a distinct social phase associated with bereavement. In this way, hair shaving functions as an entry marker into mourning, while the change of clothing provides a visible sign of the transition. Together, the two practices operate as public markers of altered status, making the widow's shift into mourning legible to others in the community.

In Amike Aba, widows undergo ritual hair shaving immediately after the interment of their husbands, and the timing of the act is presented as part of the prescribed sequence that follows burial. In the field description, this shaving explicitly marks the beginning of the mourning period, functioning as a formal entry point into mourning rather than an incidental personal choice. This timing and framing provide the context for informant accounts that describe how the rite is carried out in practice and what immediately follows it.

Ogbonne Nwabali (personal communication, April 4, 2024) described the rite as taking place once the husband's body is "committed to mother earth," locating the practice directly after interment. She explained that the widow's hair is shaved at this point, and that the shaving is then followed by a change of clothing into mourning attire. The account presents a clear ritual sequence—shaving followed by mourning clothes—rather than two disconnected gestures. In this way, the ordering of acts functions as an empirically observed "entry marker," linking the beginning of mourning to a visible shift in appearance and status.

This sequence was not presented as an isolated account, as many interviewees reported the same pattern of hair shaving followed by the adoption of mourning clothes at the outset of bereavement. Within the community's own explanations, the practice is framed less as an arbitrary change in appearance than as a culturally meaningful act directed toward the deceased. Chijioke Ofoke (personal communication, April 3, 2024), for example, described these mourning observances as a mark of respect and honour for the departed husband. In this way, the reported rationale attaches an internal meaning to the ritual sequence, embedding it as a recognized component of the widow's formal entry into the mourning period.

By combining ritual hair shaving with the immediate adoption of mourning attire, the widow's entry into the mourning period is made visibly explicit in Amike Aba. In this sense, the practices serve as an observable transition marker, marking the beginning of mourning rather than a private or hidden change. The shaved hair and altered clothing together produce a visible change that distinguishes the widow's appearance from ordinary social presentation. As a result, her bereavement status becomes publicly recognizable through outward signs that can be read by others in the community. In the field accounts, this visibility is integral to how the onset of mourning is formally signaled and socially noticed.

Restriction of movement until the second burial

Field accounts indicate that during the mourning period in Amike Aba, widows experience a restriction on movement, where they are not allowed to attend social gatherings or visit friends, marking the boundary between permissible and prohibited forms of public presence. This restriction is

framed as a normative expectation that limits the widow's participation in communal social life rather than simply reflecting an individual preference. In the data, the duration of this limitation is commonly tied to ritual completion, as it typically remains in force until the second burial is performed. At the same time, the restriction is presented as selective rather than absolute, since it does not fully suspend economic activity. Still, it primarily constrains social engagements that signal full reintegration into community life.

During the mourning period in Amike Aba, widows are not allowed to attend social gatherings or visit friends, a restriction presented in the field accounts as a customary rule rather than an optional practice. This prohibition is described as applying specifically to forms of social participation that would place the widow in ordinary communal interaction while her mourning status remains in force. In the data, the restriction is framed as a tradition-based boundary that regulates where the widow may appear and whom she may visit during the bereavement period. The rule defines a socially enforced limitation on mobility within the community's relational spaces, not merely a private expression of grief. This general pattern is illustrated more concretely in the subsequent testimony of the informants.

Evelyn Nwamgbada (personal communication, April 4, 2024) provided a concrete illustration of how the restriction operates in everyday life during widowhood. She reported that she could not visit a close friend who had lost a child, not because of personal reluctance, but because tradition forbids widows from making such social visits during the mourning period. In her account, the prohibition is treated as a taboo attached to her bereaved status, limiting where she may appear and whom she may accompany at sensitive communal moments. This case demonstrates that the restriction is not merely an abstract norm, but a practical constraint that can disrupt ordinary social ties and obligations.

The duration of this restriction period is not always specified in fixed terms, as the field accounts indicate that its length may vary from case to case. Nevertheless, it is usually said to last until the second burial is performed, which functions as the expected endpoint of the widow's socially restricted status. Ogbonna Nwiboko (personal communication, April 4, 2024) explained that a widow is not expected to appear in any social gathering until the mourning period is over and the second burial rites have been performed. In this sense, the second burial operates as a practical threshold that marks the termination of social restrictions, even where the precise duration of mourning is not otherwise clearly defined.

Although widows in Amike Aba experience a restriction of movement during the mourning period, the field data indicate that the limitation is not total. They are allowed to buy and sell in the local market and to go to the farm, so economic routines remain permissible within the restricted period. At the same time, the restriction draws a clear boundary around communal participation, as widows are not allowed to attend funerals or other social events in the community. In this way, the constraint operates selectively by maintaining minimal economic mobility while closing access to the social and ritual spaces through which community life is ordinarily enacted. This selective pattern also aligns with the rationale presented in the data, where social exclusion is associated with the widow's status as "unclean" before the second burial.

As stated in the field data, the restriction is rationalized through the widow's temporary status as "unclean" until the second burial rites are performed. Within this account, the widow is understood to remain in a liminal condition in which the spirit of her deceased husband is believed to hover around her during the mourning period. The data further note that this hovering presence is thought to pose a risk, such that the spirit could harm her if she attends social events. Framed in these terms, the restriction is directed most sharply toward communal and ritual gatherings because these are the contexts in which the widow's "unclean" status is considered consequential. This rationale explains, within the local logic reported, why the prohibition targets social participation rather than everyday economic activity.

The restriction of movement produces a pattern of partial social isolation, in which the widow is separated from key arenas of communal life such as visiting friends, attending social gatherings, and participating in funerals or other social events. At the same time, the field data indicate that the restriction does not amount to total confinement, since the widow may still buy and sell in the local market and visit the farm. This combination means that social participation is curtailed while a

minimum space for livelihood is preserved through continued economic activity. Read as a set of outcomes, the practice functions as a selective mobility regime that limits public-social engagement more sharply than everyday subsistence routines.

Second burial as a reintegration threshold and the problem of delay

Field accounts indicate that the second burial rite in Amike Aba serves as a decisive communal threshold, enabling the widow's full reintegration after the initial mourning restrictions. The rite is described not only as a ritual moment but also as a public marker that signals the deceased's transition into the ancestral sphere, after which the widow's restricted status is understood to be lifted. At the same time, the timing of the second burial is not fixed, since its performance depends on the family's financial capacity and willingness to undertake the required rites and public hospitality. Consequently, delays in performing the second burial can prolong the widow's restricted condition and extend her liminal social position within the community.

The second burial rite in Amike Aba is presented in the field data as a communal event marked by a "time of feasting," during which the deceased's transition is publicly acknowledged. Nkwuda Nworie (personal communication, April 5, 2024) described this occasion as one in which the family performs specific rites and entertains friends and well-wishers to signal that their brother and husband has successfully joined the "guild of ancestors." In this description, the public hospitality is not incidental but integral to the ritual messaging that the deceased has reached the appropriate ancestral status. Within the same logic, the second burial functions as a closing ritual event that finalizes the deceased's status and, by extension, provides the communal context in which the widow's reintegration becomes possible.

The field description further indicates that the second burial rite involves a diviner who determines whether the deceased man's spirit has finally joined his ancestors. If this determination is negative, the account notes the possibility that further rites may still be required to "send him home," signaling that the ritual process can remain open-ended until the appropriate status is confirmed. When the diviner confirms that the spirit has joined the ancestors, lavish entertainment follows as the culminating public expression of closure. This sequence presents the second burial not only as communal feasting but also as a structured ritual procedure that resolves uncertainty about the deceased's spiritual status and brings the rite to completion.

The field data indicate that the timing of the second burial is determined largely by the family's financial strength and willingness to perform the required rites. As a consequence, the widow's period of restriction is not fixed but may extend significantly, with restrictions reported as lasting "a couple of years" when the rites are delayed. This extended duration is described as particularly "disturbing for poor widows," who have fewer resources and less capacity to hasten the ritual's completion. In such cases, widows may remain "somewhat social outcasts" until the family can carry out the second burial and remove the associated taboos. In effect, the delay of the second burial prolongs the widow's liminal status within the community's social sphere, not by introducing new prohibitions but by extending the timeframe in which existing restrictions remain operative.

Until the second burial is performed, several domains of the widow's social life remain formally constrained within the mourning regime. James Nwite (personal communication, May 4, 2024) stated explicitly that unless the second burial rites are completed, the widow is not allowed to socialise, remarry, or have sexual relations. In this sense, the restrictions function most strongly in relation to social interaction and intimate or marital re-entry rather than constituting a total prohibition on daily subsistence. As an internal point of comparison, the field description clarifies that these restrictions primarily relate to social/remarriage/sexual activities, and do not extend to a ban on trading in the local market (Madumelu, 2014). Accordingly, second burial operates as the decisive social-ritual condition for terminating these constraints and restoring the widow's full participation in communal life.

The second burial serves as a communal closure, ending the taboo and restoring the widow's full social standing, thereby functioning as the recognized threshold for reintegration after bereavement. Because its timing depends on the family's financial strength and willingness to perform the rites, this

reintegration point is not fixed and may be postponed. Where delay occurs, the widow's restricted status can persist for a prolonged period, with constraints on social participation remaining in force. In such cases, the widow may remain in a liminal position in which she is only partially integrated into communal life and may be regarded as "somewhat" an outcast until the rites are completed. Thus, second burial simultaneously marks the endpoint of mourning restrictions and, when deferred, becomes the mechanism through which those restrictions are extended.

4. Disinheritance, shifting levirate, and everyday insecurity in Amike Aba

Field findings indicate that widowhood in Amike Aba is shaped not only by mourning rites but also by post-bereavement arrangements that determine access to land, family support, and social protection. In the accounts presented in the draft, inheritance practices and the exclusion of women from family decision-making frequently expose widows to material insecurity. In contrast, family responses after the funeral often range from minimal support to active dispossession. At the same time, levirate marriage appears in transition—less publicly enforced yet still present in constrained and sometimes strategic forms—so that widows' options are negotiated within overlapping pressures of livelihood, stigma, and kin authority. Accordingly, this research reports how disinheritance, shifting levirate expectations, and everyday vulnerabilities converge to structure the main challenges widows face in sustaining household survival and social standing in Amike Aba.

patterns of disinheritance and exclusion of women from decision-making

Inheritance in Amike Aba is predominantly land-based and follows a patrilineal pattern in which farmland constitutes the core estate passed through male lines. Within this arrangement, women do not own landed property, meaning that a widow's access to farmland does not operate as an enforceable right of ownership. The established rule is that sons inherit a deceased man's land, securing the continuity of the estate within the male lineage. Where there are no sons, the deceased man's brothers take over and divide the farmland among themselves, effectively transferring control away from the widow. Consequently, this inheritance structure places widows—especially those without a male child—in a heightened position of vulnerability to dispossession and the loss of their primary means of livelihood.

Field evidence further indicates that dispossession is intertwined with women's exclusion from the family and community decision-making spaces where inheritance distribution and related determinations are negotiated. Florence Nwamba (personal communication, May 4, 2024) explained that women are not factored into family deliberations when inheritance is shared and when other important decisions are made. In this setting, the authority to decide and allocate resources remains concentrated in male hands, leaving widows with limited capacity to contest outcomes or secure continued access to farmland. As a result, the widow's position is structurally weakened at precisely the moment when inheritance decisions are enacted, increasing the likelihood that land and related resources are reassigned away from her following the husband's death.

Field data further suggest that, following a husband's death, widows may become more exposed to actions by individuals who hold greater status or leverage within the family and community setting. Nwovuljeoma (personal communication, June 8, 2024) stated that once the husband is gone, "evil men" may use their position and status to "deal with the widow" for reasons that are not always made explicit. In this context, vulnerability is reported to intensify in the wake of the husband's absence, as the widow's bargaining position weakens within kin-based structures that regulate resources and authority. It reported exposure provides a contextual bridge to the material hardships described by other informants in the aftermath of dispossession and reduced support.

The field data indicate that constrained access to farmland and limited support after the funeral period can translate into acute economic pressure for widows. Nne Ogbo (personal communication, May 31, 2024) recounted experiencing severe hunger alongside her children following her husband's death, describing the hardship that emerged once she was left to fend largely on her own. Such reported deprivation, in turn, corresponds with the livelihood strategies documented in the draft, in which

widows seek income outside the household's inherited land base. These strategies include engaging in manual labour—often at quarry and construction sites—as well as turning to street hawking to secure daily necessities. Taken together, the economic hardship and survival labour recorded here follow directly from the inheritance pattern and decision-making exclusions outlined in the preceding paragraphs.

The condition of levirate marriage—declining, secretive, and involving 'subtle coercion'

Field data indicate that levirate marriage in Amike Aba has not disappeared. Yet, it appears to be declining, practiced on a small scale, and often conducted secretly rather than as an openly visible communal norm. Within these reports, widows are generally described as having an apparent ability to accept or refuse a levirate arrangement; however, the data also suggest that “choice exists, but choice is constrained.” In practice, acceptance or refusal is portrayed as shaped by socio-economic pressures and the widow's vulnerable position within kinship networks, where access to land, shelter, or support may be at stake. At the same time, the evidential base for this subtheme remains cautious, since only two resource persons explicitly indicated that they were currently in such unions, reinforcing the impression that the practice is not prominently acknowledged in public.

Levirate marriage in Amike Aba is still reported in the field data. Yet, it no longer appears as a dominant or widely visible pattern and is instead described as occurring on a small scale. Nne Ogbo noted that some men may still insist that a widow marry a relative of her late husband. Still, she also emphasized that the practice is no longer widespread as it once was and is increasingly carried out discreetly (personal communication, May 31, 2024). This reduced visibility is reinforced by the fact that only two resource persons indicated that they are currently in such a union, suggesting that participation is not commonly disclosed in public settings. Taken together, these accounts present levirate as a residual practice that persists in limited, often unspoken forms rather than as an openly affirmed communal expectation.

In the field data, acceptance of a levirate arrangement is at times presented less as a preferred marital choice than as a strategy for securing economic access, particularly to farmland. Nwaobiara Alagu reported that she agreed to the arrangement to retain access to farmland that would otherwise be difficult to obtain (personal communication, May 31, 2024). In the same account, she indicated that the levir contributes little toward the upkeep of her children, suggesting that the expected material support associated with the arrangement is not experienced as substantial. She further interpreted the levir's interest as being primarily oriented toward gaining access to her late husband's property, rather than assuming sustained responsibility for the household. As a result, the case illustrates how economic necessity can shape the decision to accept levirate while simultaneously highlighting perceptions of uneven material obligation within the relationship.

Beyond economic access, the field data also indicate that anxieties about children's future well-being may drive acceptance of levirate arrangements after a husband's death. Nwite Ngozi, who had two daughters before her husband's demise, reported that fear about what would become of her children strongly influenced her decision to accept the arrangement (personal communication, June 21, 2024). In this framing, the levirate union is presented as a protective option undertaken in response to perceived post-bereavement insecurity rather than as an unconditioned preference. The account thus supports a limited generalization that “choice” may exist in principle, yet the choice is shaped by anticipated social and economic risks in the widow's immediate environment.

Although the field accounts indicate that widows in contemporary Amike Aba are not always *directly forced* into levirate unions, the draft data also point to forms of “subtle coercion” that narrow the practical space for refusal. In this sense, the presence of apparent choice does not remove the structural pressures surrounding widowhood decisions. As recorded in the draft, threats of ejection from the late husband's family, forceful takeover of landed property, and abandonment without assistance function as concrete pressures that can make opting out materially risky. Under such conditions, refusal is not simply a personal preference but is weighed against foreseeable losses tied to livelihood and social standing within the kin network. Consequently, the data support the key result

that *choice exists, but choice is constrained*, and the levirate option may be accepted under duress shaped by anticipated consequences rather than free selection.

Informants also described pragmatic “benefits” or services that can make levirate arrangements appear as a form of kin-based support in the aftermath of bereavement. Nworie Mbam (personal communication, June 26, 2024), for instance, emphasized forms of practical assistance such as help with farm work and the harvesting of palm fruits—tasks he linked to local gendered prohibitions that discourage women from carrying hoes or climbing palm trees—and he further noted the perceived need for “a man to speak for her” when matters arise within the community. In a related account, Nwabunike Joshua (personal communication, June 28, 2024) framed the levir’s role in terms of guardianship for the children and advocacy for the widow within gatherings of relatives, alongside other forms of support tied to household continuity. Taken together, these descriptions present levirate not only as a marital arrangement but also as a mechanism through which labour support, protection, and social representation are routed through the kin network. At the same time, the field data register shifting perceptions: Nwabunike Joshua (personal communication, June 28, 2024) associated the decline of levirate practice with the influence of Christianity, Western education, and broader exposure to alternative social norms. In this way, the reported contraction of the practice coexists with instances where levirate remains a considered option when material pressures or the demand for kin-mediated services is experienced as high.

Key challenges—abandonment, harassment, and stigma of remarriage

Field data indicate that the major challenges widows report in Amike Aba cluster around three interconnected domains: limited post-ritual family support, heightened vulnerability to harassment or social disturbance, and constraints on remarriage that shape everyday coping strategies. Accounts, such as Uguru Felicia’s, often present minimal support after funeral rites, which can sometimes be redirected into demands for contributions toward burial obligations, only to be abandoned once those expectations are met. Vulnerability is also articulated in spatial and social terms—for example, the imagery of a “house without a fence,” together with experiences of harassment noted by Chinyere Nwankpu, frames widowhood as exposure to unwanted intrusions after the husband’s death. In the same thematic register, remarriage emerges as socially stigmatised—captured in the question “Who wants to marry a widow?” and the preference to merely “befriend” expressed by John Nwakpa—thereby narrowing formal marital options. Consequently, widows describe survival-oriented responses that include remaining in the husband’s household, entering informal relationships, and weighing decisions against concern for children and the risk of their neglect if a woman relocates to another family (Ogonna Nwanku).

Field accounts indicate that, following a husband’s death, support from the husband’s family is often described as minimal and quickly dissipating once the ritual phase is underway or completed. Uguru Felicia, for example, characterized the assistance she received from her husband’s relatives as little more than the daily greeting “good morning” (personal communication, May 17, 2024). Within the same period, the data also record expectations placed on widows to meet costs and practical requirements associated with funeral rites. After the rites have been performed, the widow is portrayed as being left to “face the world” largely on her own, bearing ongoing responsibilities of livelihood and care with limited kin backing. In this way, the post-funeral interval emerges in the data as a particularly vulnerable stage in which family-based support becomes thin while obligations and demands remain salient.

Field data frame widowhood vulnerability in Amike Aba through the local idiom of “a house without a fence,” an expression that signals perceived openness and the absence of the social protection commonly associated with a male household head. Within this idiom, the widow is portrayed as more exposed to unwanted approaches and forms of harassment. Chinyere Nwankpu reported experiencing harassment in the community, including sexual harassment, after her husband’s death (personal communication, June 7, 2024). As part of her account, she described a male visitor who came to her home at night and attempted to persuade her to accept his advances. In this way, the idiom functions

not merely as symbolic language but as a locally legible shorthand for vulnerabilities that, in the data, materialize in concrete everyday interactions.

Field data indicate that remarriage for widows is constrained by a stigma that is sometimes voiced bluntly in the question, “Who wants to marry a widow?” John Nwakpa reported that marrying a widow is “not fashionable” in the community. He added that men more often prefer to “befriend” a widow rather than enter a formal marriage arrangement (personal communication, April 13, 2024). Within this framework, informal relationships emerge in the data as a more feasible relational option than remarriage, a publicly recognized institution. Ogbonna Nwaobasi further explained that widowhood does not automatically dissolve the husband–wife bond in social terms, emphasizing that certain rites must be fulfilled before a widow can remarry (personal communication, April 6, 2024). In the same account, he expressed disapproval of widows having multiple lovers, which he described as “debasement,” a judgment presented here as the informant’s own evaluative stance rather than the author’s. Taken together, these statements portray remarriage as an option limited by social stigma and ritual prerequisites, with “befriending” functioning as a pragmatic response when formal remarriage is perceived as difficult to secure.

As a downstream effect of remarriage stigma and the limited feasibility of formal remarriage, the field data indicate that some widows choose not to remarry and instead remain in their late husband’s house or within his kin setting as a practical strategy of stability. Where formal remarriage is perceived as difficult to secure, the draft data also note that some widows enter informal relationships as a coping arrangement for sustaining everyday life, presented here descriptively rather than evaluatively. Ogonna Nwanku explained that she is reluctant to leave her children and move into a new family because she fears that if she does, her children will be neglected or abandoned (personal communication, June 8, 2024). In this account, concern for children’s welfare functions as a decisive constraint on the widow’s relational and residential choices after bereavement. Thus, the survival strategies reported in the data reflect an ongoing negotiation between social stigma, childcare security, and a narrowed set of viable options for post-widowhood life.

5. Kin obligation, ritual regulation, and constrained choice: Deuteronomy 25:5–10 in dialogue with widowhood practices in Amike Aba

The textual analysis indicates that Deuteronomy 25:5–10 frames levirate marriage as a casuistic kin obligation activated when “brothers live together” and one dies without a son. Within this legal scenario, the widow, the designated levir (brother-in-law/near relative within the kin unit), and the elders function as coordinated actors: the widow is positioned as a legitimate claimant of kin duty, the *levir* is obligated to perform an incorporating marital act, and the elders serve as public guarantors of procedure and communal order. The stated purpose of the obligation is continuity of the deceased’s name and estate through the firstborn, who will be reckoned to the dead brother, thereby securing lineage and patrimony within the kin group. At the same time, the text anticipates refusal. It regulates it through a socially visible, legally supervised process in which the elders intervene, and the widow enacts a public *halitzah* ritual that simultaneously releases her from the obligation’s orbit and marks the refuser with communal shame.

The field findings indicate that widowhood in Amike Aba is organised through a sequenced ritual regime that structures a widow’s transition in public and domestic life—from public wailing that signals bereavement, to hair shaving and mourning attire as visible entry markers, to selective restrictions of movement, and finally to a reintegration threshold often tied to the performance (and timing) of second burial rites. These ritual arrangements do not stand alone; they intersect with post-bereavement kinship and economic realities, particularly land-based inheritance patterns and women’s limited leverage in decision-making arenas. Within this broader landscape, levirate marriage persists largely as an idea and occasional practice, albeit in modified and sometimes discreet forms, shaped by shifting religious and modern influences, as well as constrained choices under kin and livelihood pressures. The findings further suggest that, beyond the ritual phase, widows’ everyday lives may be marked by vulnerabilities such as limited kin support, dispossession risks, exposure to harassment,

and social stigma surrounding remarriage—dynamics that collectively condition the strategies through which widows seek security and continuity in the aftermath of spousal death.

Rituals regulate a widow's public presence in Amike Aba because they serve as a form of social communication and visible status-coding during a morally charged transition. Drawing on Van Gennep's rites-of-passage framework, widowhood can be understood as a process in which a person is first separated from an established social role, then passes through a liminal (in-between) phase marked by ambiguity and heightened regulation, and is eventually reintegrated into social life through recognized markers of return (Van Gennep, 1960). In this logic, wailing functions less as private emotion than as a public announcement that mobilizes kin and neighbors, activates obligations, and authorizes communal attention at the threshold of loss. Meanwhile, hair shaving and mourning attire serve as durable, publicly legible markers that render the widow's liminal status readable in everyday life—organizing how others may approach, include, restrict, or “protect” her until reintegration is ritually completed. Turner's account of liminality as being “betwixt and between” ordinary social roles sharpens this point: visible markers stabilize social ambiguity by signalling how a liminal person should be treated and what boundaries apply during the transition (Turner, 1969). Together, wailing communicates the transition, while visible markers sustain it—forming a public grammar through which widowhood is socially regulated rather than left as a purely individual experience.

Selective restriction in Amike Aba—and its explicit linkage to the second burial—can be interpreted as a means of managing the widow's liminal status while maintaining a minimal path for household survival. In Van Gennep's rites-of-passage logic, the widow's transition is socially “unfinished” until a culturally recognized reintegration moment occurs; restrictions therefore function as boundary-management during the threshold period, limiting participation in high-visibility social and ritual arenas (e.g., visits, ceremonies, remarriage/sexual relations) while still permitting necessary economic circulation through farming and market activities (Van Gennep, 1960). Turner's account of liminality helps explain why these restrictions are not total: liminal persons are treated as socially “ambiguous,” so communities regulate contact and participation to prevent moral/ritual disorder, yet they also cannot suspend subsistence without risking further vulnerability (Turner, 1969). The second burial, in this sense, operates as a culturally authoritative “closure mechanism” that ends the taboo and authorizes full social re-entry. When limited resources delay the rite, the liminal phase is effectively prolonged, and the accompanying restrictions and exclusions can persist far longer than the initial mourning moment would suggest. Douglas's classic analysis of pollution and taboo further clarifies the internal logic of such restriction regimes: liminal states are often construed as “matter out of place,” requiring visible boundaries and controlled interactions until proper reclassification is completed (Douglas, 1966).

“Choice exists, but choice is constrained” captures why levirate and post-bereavement arrangements in Amike Aba can appear voluntary at the level of formal consent yet remain tightly shaped by kinship power and material dependence. Read through a capabilities lens, what matters is not merely whether a widow is *permitted* to refuse, but whether she has *effective opportunities*—real freedoms backed by resources—to sustain livelihood, retain housing/land access, and secure protection for herself and her children (Sen, as discussed in Robeyns, 2003). In the same vein, Kabeer's empowerment framework clarifies how “agency” is inseparable from the “resources” that make strategic life choices feasible; where resources are controlled by the husband's kin (e.g., land, residence, inheritance decisions), a widow's room to opt out of levirate can shrink into a narrow band of practicable options even without overt coercion (Kabeer, 1999). Within that narrowed space, levirate is often framed pragmatically as a bundle of kin-based support services—such as farm labour access, household representation in public affairs, and guardianship/advocacy—so the decision is negotiated under the shadow of potential ejection, property takeover, or abandonment, rather than under conditions of equal bargaining power. It is why the key analytic point is not to label the practice simply as “forced” or “free,” but to show how kin obligation operates as social security while simultaneously reproducing constraint, with widows navigating survival within the limits set by customary authority and resource control (Kabeer, 1999; Robeyns, 2003).

A careful dialogue between Deuteronomy 25:5–10 and the Amike Aba accounts reveals a clear resonance at the level of *patrilineal continuity* and the moral grammar of *kin obligation*, even though the two contexts are not formally equivalent. In the text, the levirate duty is oriented toward preserving the deceased man's "name" and, by implication, the stability of his estate within the kin group through the firstborn, who is reckoned to the dead brother (Seidler, 2018; Weisberg, 2004). In Amike Aba, the same continuity logic is expressed less through a codified casuistic procedure and more through land-based patrilineal inheritance patterns and kin authority over access, representation, and post-bereavement decision-making—arrangements that effectively tie a widow's security to the husband's lineage and its control of resources (Ajayi & Olotuah, 2005; Thomas, 2008). The text's restriction of exogamy likewise finds a social analogue in the field context: while Deuteronomy presumes the widow should not be "given outside" when a qualifying relative is available, Amike Aba widowhood is shaped by stigma surrounding remarriage and by ritual prerequisites that regulate reintegration—wailing and visible markers, selective restrictions, and the second burial threshold—thereby enabling kin and community to monitor the widow's public presence and limit "premature" re-entry into social and marital life (Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, 1960). Read together, these parallels suggest that, in both normative and lived registers, kin obligation functions as a mechanism for maintaining lineage continuity and managing widows' relational options, though the means of regulation differ in form: legal-procedural enforcement in the text, and ritual-social control embedded in mourning and reintegration regimes in the field.

At the same time, the comparison *contrasts sharply* in how enforcement is structured and how (or whether) widows can activate a recognized route of agency. Deuteronomy 25:5–10 embeds levirate within a formal refusal procedure: the widow may petition the elders, the elders convene and question the obligated relative, and refusal is concluded through a public, ritualized act (*halitzah*) that both releases the widow and marks the refuser with communal shame (Seidler, 2018; Weisberg, 2004). In Amike Aba, by contrast, the field material suggests that coercion tends to be indirect and dispersed rather than adjudicated—operating through stigma, kin pressure, and material threats (such as withdrawal of support, ejection risks, or property takeover) without an equivalent, publicly supervised mechanism that can compel accountability or formally arbitrate refusal and release (Ajayi & Olotuah, 2005; Kabeer, 1999; Thomas, 2008). This divergence matters because the biblical scenario—however patriarchal—still allocates the widow a procedurally legible role as a claimant who can bring the matter before elders, whereas in Amike Aba women's voices are often not structurally "factored" into inheritance and household decision arenas, so agency is exercised more through everyday negotiation, compliance-with-conditions, or strategic exit under constraint rather than through a clear institutional pathway (Kabeer, 1999; Robeyns, 2003).

Existing textual-biblical scholarship has mapped levirate marriage in Deuteronomy 25:5–10 as a socio-legal institution embedded in casuistic law, highlighting the coordinated actors (widow, levir, and elders), the stated aim of continuity of the deceased man's name (and, by implication, estate), and the possibility of refusal regulated through a public procedure that foregrounds the tension between duty and choice (Seidler, 2018; Weisberg, 2004). Related rabbinic/reception-historical and comparative studies further trace how the institution reconfigures family units and women's status, and how later legal cultures reframe levirate through different "legal grammars" of marriage and inheritance across traditions (Knollová, 2025; Monnickendam, 2019; Weisberg, 2009). Building on this literature, the present close reading affirms the text's casuistic and procedural architecture, but argues that its internal logic is best read as a single legal-logical package that integrates restriction of exogamy, a form of protective incorporation implied in the levir's mandated marital act, and an enforcement regime anchored in elder supervision and public shame. Put differently, rather than treating these elements as discrete motifs, the analysis reads them as mutually reinforcing components that work together to secure patrilineal continuity and regulate non-compliance. The novelty, therefore, is not a restatement of familiar legal features, but an integrated framing of these often-separate components in a way that makes the text analytically portable for dialogue with contemporary contextual, theological, and socio-cultural readings of levirate and widow security (Ademiluka, 2023).

Ethnographic and sociological studies of widowhood and related kinship practices in Igbo and wider African settings consistently emphasize how patrilineal lineage systems and kin authority structure a widow's post-bereavement status, often intensifying economic and social vulnerability and exposing widows to gender-based violence that can involve not only intimate relations but also broader family and community networks (Ekwueme, 2025; Urama, 2019). Within this strand, levirate is frequently interpreted as a kin-based welfare mechanism intended to stabilize household continuity while also being ethically contested under modern rights-based frameworks (Kudo, 2021), and scholars further note that Christianity, education, and socio-economic change have reshaped customary marriage practices into hybrid arrangements rather than producing uniform abandonment (Nwagbara, 2007; Nwoko, 2020). In line with these emphases, the present field findings indicate that widowhood in Amike Aba is organized through a sequenced ritual regime and selective restrictions that regulate public presence and reintegration. At the same time, levirate persists largely in modified forms—neither fully normative nor fully absent—within a negotiated space of kinship expectations and livelihood pressures. At the same time, the findings highlight how the social work of mourning rites, reintegration thresholds, and kin-mediated security cannot be read as “culture” alone, but as practices embedded in concrete authority and resource relations. The added value of this study is that it centers the micro-context of Amike Aba/Izzi and explicitly brings these ethnographic patterns into dialogue with the normative-procedural logic of biblical levirate (including enforcement actors and refusal dynamics), a linkage that is often under-developed in this strand's otherwise rich mapping of lived practice.

Inheritance/disinheritance scholarship shows that bereavement frequently triggers resource conflicts—especially over land and assets—and that widows often experience “soft dispossession” through withdrawal of support, exclusion from family decision-making, and pressure to vacate property, dynamics that can sustain long-term vulnerability (Ajayi & Olotuah, 2005; Thomas, 2008). This strand also frames widowhood as a multidimensional vulnerability—where economic precarity intersects with social and health shocks—while documenting widows' agency and adaptive strategies, including everyday negotiation, resistance, and empowerment-oriented supports (Goswami, 2025; Luginaah et al., 2005; Mohindra et al., 2012; Ude & Njoku, 2017). Consistent with these insights, the present findings suggest that post-bereavement challenges in Amike Aba cannot be read as “economic issues” alone, because they are interwoven with ritual regulation and kin configuration: authority over representation, guardianship, and decision control shapes whether a widow can access land, secure protection, and remain socially legible after mourning. In this setting, kin-based “support” and kin-based “pressure” can coexist, allowing assistance (labour access, advocacy, household continuity) to operate alongside constraints (dispossession risks, exclusion, stigma) within the same relational field. The novelty, therefore, is to show how inheritance security, ritual regulation, and levirate-related pressures function as a mutually reinforcing system, requiring “choice” to be interpreted as materially and relationally constrained—an analytic move that prepares the discussion's guiding claim that choice may exist at the level of consent while being narrowed in practice.

Across the three strands, prior scholarship offers indispensable but often segmented lenses: textual studies clarify the normative architecture of levirate, ethnographic work illuminates lived widowhood and kin practice, and inheritance-focused research maps the material consequences of bereavement—yet these insights frequently run in parallel rather than being analytically integrated. It leaves a recurring gap in explaining how script-like normative logics, ritual regulation of transition, and land-based property politics co-produce the concrete constraints within which widows navigate post-bereavement life. By contrast, this study deliberately synthesizes these registers within a single coherent frame, reading the legal logic of Deuteronomy 25:5–10 in dialogue with the sequenced widowhood rites and the political economy of inheritance in Amike Aba. The result is a more integrated account of kin obligation as both a normatively articulated duty (including mechanisms of enforcement) and a lived field of social negotiation that actively shapes the limits of choice and the survival strategies available to widows after a husband's death.

Kin obligation in this study emerges not merely as “tradition” but as a post-bereavement social architecture that organizes widows’ security, status, and access to resources through kin-based authority. Across anthropological and livelihood-focused accounts, widowhood is repeatedly shown to be embedded in kinship systems that can provide essential support while simultaneously regulating women’s options and public legitimacy (Cattell, 2003; Thomas, 2008). In this protective register, kin obligation—including the possibility of levirate as a lineage-preserving welfare mechanism—can function as a family-based form of social security, stabilising household continuity and keeping property and care responsibilities within the patriline (Ademiluka, 2023; Olanisebe & Oladosu, 2014). Yet the same arrangement often carries a regulatory edge: support is frequently coupled with the authority to decide who represents the household, how resources are allocated, and which social relationships are permissible, so that protection and constraint can be produced by the same kin framework (Cattell, 2003; Chaudry, 2021). This duality is especially visible when control operates less through formal adjudication and more through a pressure field of land access, withdrawal of support, exclusion from family decision-making, and culturally sanctioned threats of dispossession—dynamics widely documented in studies of widow property rights and “soft” forms of disinheritance (Ajayi & Olotuah, 2005; Thomas, 2008). Read in dialogue with Deuteronomy 25:5–10, this ambivalence clarifies why levirate can be framed both as obligation-for-care and as obligation-with-enforcement, while contemporary debates also note that legal prohibition or moral condemnation does not automatically resolve the welfare–constraint dilemma if alternative safety nets are absent (Kudo, 2021; Seidler, 2018). In that sense, the guiding claim that “choice exists, but choice is constrained” is best understood as a structural condition of kin obligation rather than an individualized preference story.

The findings suggest that the widowhood regime in Amike Aba serves several socially functional roles, helping a community manage bereavement as a public transition, rather than just a private loss. Wailing operates as a communicative mechanism that signals death, mobilizes kin and neighbors, and activates shared obligations at the onset of mourning. Hair shaving and mourning attire serve as visible status markers, making the widow’s changed position publicly legible and thereby reducing ambiguity, while organizing appropriate forms of approach, restraint, and support. Selective restrictions appear to serve boundary management: they limit participation in certain high-visibility social or ritual spaces while still leaving a minimum corridor open for subsistence activities, such as farming or market engagement. Finally, the second burial serves as an authoritative closure device, publicly ending the transitional period and authorising reintegration, thereby providing a culturally recognised endpoint to mourning-related boundaries. Together, these elements can be interpreted as a practical system of social order that coordinates communication, recognition, and reintegration in the context of widowhood.

At the same time, the same architecture can become dysfunctional when the conditions that enable timely closure and fair support are weak or uneven. When a second burial is delayed due to limited resources, the transitional period can be extended far beyond the initial mourning moment, and restrictions that are meant to be temporary may persist for years, effectively producing prolonged liminality and episodes of social marginalization. Post-bereavement insecurity is further intensified when widows are excluded from decision-making arenas. At the same time, land and inheritance remain strongly patrilineal, since withdrawal of support and “soft” dispossession can translate ritual vulnerability into material risk. In this context, exposure to harassment and stigma surrounding remarriage can narrow the practical range of survival strategies, making some choices formally “available” but substantively costly or unsafe. The overall consequence is an ambivalent pattern: practices that stabilize communal order and coordinate care at the start of widowhood can, under resource constraints and unequal kin authority, also reproduce extended restriction, heightened dependency, and limited autonomy in the longer post-bereavement phase.

The findings point to actionable implications at the level of community practice, kin-based support systems, and local governance, especially where delayed ritual closure prolongs restrictions, inheritance processes expose widows to land insecurity, and harassment and stigma narrow viable post-widowhood options. A pragmatic first step is to mitigate second-burial delays through pooled

family or community contributions, ensuring that resource constraints do not indefinitely postpone reintegration. In parallel, inheritance safeguarding can be strengthened by introducing a mediation stage—anchored in existing kin and elder structures—that explicitly protects widows’ minimum land-use rights and housing access during the transition, preventing “automatic” dispossession while disputes are being resolved. Because decision exclusion amplifies vulnerability, community forums that handle inheritance and household representation can formalize the widow’s participation (or allow a trusted female advocate to speak on her behalf) so that key decisions are not made entirely without her. Where post-bereavement life is marked by exposure to harassment, locally credible protection measures—such as a clear reporting pathway and elder- or church-leader-supported deterrence routines—can reduce night intrusions and normalize rapid communal response without criminalizing culture. Finally, because remarriage stigma and constrained options often compound economic and social insecurity, carefully facilitated dialogue that distinguishes ritual prerequisites from blanket moral stigma can widen viable life choices. At the same time, targeted livelihood support (small-capital access, skills, and market linkages) can reduce dependency pressures that make “consent” functionally narrow after spousal death.

6. Conclusions

This study shows that kin obligation in the levirate-widowhood nexus operates as a post-bereavement social architecture that simultaneously orders protection and produces constraint, both in the normative logic of the text and in lived practice. The close reading of Deuteronomy 25:5–10 frames levirate as a casuistic kin duty triggered by a sonless death within a co-resident kin unit, assigning coordinated roles to the widow, the obligated relative, and the elders, and orienting the obligation toward the continuity of the deceased man’s name and estate through the firstborn; refusal is anticipated and managed through a publicly supervised procedure that releases the widow while marking the refuser through communal shame. In Amike Aba, the field accounts indicate that widowhood is structured through a sequenced ritual regime—public wailing, visible entry markers (hair shaving and mourning attire), selective restrictions, and reintegration tied to second burial—whose effects extend beyond ritual time into land-based inheritance realities, women’s limited leverage in family decision-making, exposure to harassment, and stigma surrounding remarriage. Across these domains, “choice” is not absent. Still, it is materially and relationally narrowed, so that post-widowhood arrangements (including levirate in modified forms) are negotiated within a tight space of feasible options rather than under conditions of equal bargaining power.

The central contribution of this research lies in integrating domains that are often treated in parallel: the normative-procedural logic of biblical levirate law and the socio-ritual and material conditions of contemporary widowhood in a localized setting. Conceptually, the study reads Deuteronomy’s levirate as a coherent legal-logical package that combines restriction of exogamy, protective incorporation, and enforcement through elders and public shame, and then brings this package into dialogue with the Amike Aba case, where regulation and pressure operate more subtly through ritual governance, kin authority, and resource control. Empirically, it provides thematically mapped primary data on mourning rites and post-bereavement challenges—especially around land/inheritance, everyday security, and constrained remarriage trajectories—in the micro-context of Amike Aba/Izzi, thereby refining broader ethnographic and sociological accounts of Igbo/African widowhood. By holding text and field together, the study clarifies how kin obligation can function as a family-based form of social security while simultaneously reproducing social regulation that sets the boundaries of widows’ agency.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the field evidence is qualitative and context-specific; it does not claim statistical generalizability to all Igbo communities or to Nigeria as a whole, but rather offers an analytically grounded account of Amike Aba with potential resonances elsewhere. Second, the study does not measure prevalence or causal effects, nor does it provide a longitudinal tracking of how ritual timing, inheritance disputes, and remarriage options evolve over years or across generations. Third, while kin structures are foregrounded, the research does not fully examine how

formal and semi-formal institutions (local governance, customary courts, church leadership, or state legal mechanisms) mediate inheritance security, harassment reporting, or dispute resolution in practice. Future work could extend the comparison across multiple Izzi/Igbo sites, incorporate longitudinal or life-history approaches to capture post-ritual trajectories over time, and include institutional analysis of local mediation pathways to understand better how protective and regulatory dimensions of kin obligation are negotiated, reinforced, or transformed.

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