

## **Widowhood Rite: An Infringement on the Rights of Widows in Bongo**

Fiasorgbor A. Doris

*Department of Rural and Community Development, Faculty of Development Studies, Presbyterian University College, Ghana*

Some traditional societies tend to believe that when a man dies, it is because his wife is an unlucky woman whose ill-luck has caused her husband's death (source). In some communities in Ghana, it is this belief that underlines the treatment that a woman goes through when her husband dies. In these communities, there is a strong belief that such a woman is likely to bury a second and a third husband that is if she can find one. Women's complex roles in the socio-economic sector contribute greatly to the growth of the economy. Widowhood rites are not only practiced in Ghana but everywhere in Africa. Studies have also shown that the tenets of the rites differ from one area to another. However, in all cases, it is the widow who bears the brunt and brutalities associated with the practices. The main aim of this study, therefore, is to assess the effects of widowhood in Bongo and how it infringes on the rights of women/widows. The study was conducted in the Bongo District in the Upper East Region. The District is a multi-ethnic one with two (2) major ethnic groups dominating, that is, the Bosis who are from Bongo central and some part of the District while the Frafras are at the outskirts of Bongo. The study used a mixed method where both qualitative and quantitative techniques were employed. A sample of ninety-five (95) widows/widowers and non-widows/widower in the Bongo community formed the population of the study. Snowball and simple random sampling techniques were employed to select the widows/widowers and the non-widows/ Data were collected from mid-October to early November 2018. Generally, most of the various rites identified by this study widows unquestionably constitute an infringement on the human rights and freedom of the widows. As a result, these recommendations are made that the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) should educate women on their rights and Government should effectively implement existing gender equality policies.

*Key Words:* Widow, widowhood rites, rights, infringement, Bongo


### **Introduction**

In some parts of Asia and Africa, widowhood is associated with negativity. Women in Africa suffer stressful situations when their husband dies. This situation affects women mentally, emotionally, physically, psychologically and spiritually. Widowhood rites which are described as one of the most dehumanising, uncivilized, barbaric and negative cultural practices in the world; due to its associated violation of the human rights of women (Chronicle, 2010).

Widows are essentially married women with/without children who lose their husbands as a result of death. In a similar manner, widowhood refers to the loss of a husband, companion, breadwinner and a supporter. One of the events of life which many women go through is widowhood. According to Dei (1995) for most widows, the death of the husband is not only a time for emotional grief but also a time that severe torture and humiliation would be meted out to them by their in-laws, family members and the society as a whole. It is a time for scores to be settled with the deceased's extended family. Under normal circumstances, a widow is to

be pitied and helped out of the emotional valley which she finds herself. Unfortunately, this is never the case. In most African societies, she is stigmatized as the killer of her husband, oppressed, suppressed, afflicted, neglected, accused, openly insulted and consequently made to submit to widowhood rites on account of customs and traditions (source). Usually, the widow's suffering begins the very moment her husband/spouse breathes his last. African widowhood rites are widely believed to be practices that any bereaved spouse has to go through upon becoming a widow or widower. It must be noted that, though the practice is not gender bias, it is usually women who go through this practice. In the unlikely event where a man has to go through it, the conditions are usually different. In Ghana, this practice is observed by nearly all the ethnic groups; though there might be some differences in the form this takes though (Tei-Ahontu, 2008).

---

 This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Some traditional societies tend to believe that when a man dies, it is because his wife is an unlucky woman whose ill-luck has caused her husband's death (source). In some communities in Ghana, it is this belief that underlines the treatment that a woman goes through when her husband dies. In these communities, there is a strong belief that such a woman is likely to bury a second and a third husband that is if she can find one (Agboli, 2007). To prevent this calamity, a widow must eradicate herself of the ill-luck that has befallen her. The period for such eradication differs from one society to another, but what runs through most of the widowhood rites is that the woman must be put through a certain amount of discomfort (Oduro, 2007 and Sossou, 2002). If she is not liked by her in-laws, the sisters-in-law, in particular, make it their business to generally make life miserable for her, especially if they believe their brother had been extremely good to her and as a result had neglected them. In some cultures, she is normally not supposed to sleep in the bed until after the fortieth day of the death of her husband, and so she sleeps on a mat on the floor (Dolphyne, 2005).

During the first forty days, the widow is confined to the house, usually that of the husband's family, unless special permission is given for her to continue with the widowhood rites in her own house. She cannot engage in any economic activity for a considerable length of time, and she may have to wait for six months or even a year before going about her normal business, especially if she is self-employed (Akujobi, 2009).

On the first anniversary of the husband's death, she discards her mourning clothes and starts a normal life again. In some communities, there is an end of widowhood ceremony at this time involving the slaughtering of a sheep and feasting. A widow in such a community cannot discard her mourning clothes until she has performed this ceremony. If she cannot afford a sheep, drinks and other things needed for the ceremony on the anniversary of her husband's death, she continues in mourning clothes until she is able to do so (Dolphyne, 2005).

### **The Problem**

Even though there exist international human rights conventions, many biased and inhuman treatments such as widowhood rites, female genital mutilation

(FGM), trokosi system and betrothal are still practiced in many parts of the world including Ghana. For instance, nations that are signatories to international human rights conventions have taken on obligations to respect, protect and fulfill these conventions. The Convention on the *Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, which Ghana is a signatory to, (in Article 2 clause (f) ) obliges States to "take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs, and practices which constitute discrimination against women" (UN Women, 2000-2009).

Women's complex roles in the socio-economic sector contribute greatly to the growth of the economy. Widowhood rites are not only practiced in Ghana but everywhere in Africa. Studies have also shown that the tenets of the rites differ from one area to another. However, in all cases, it is the widow who bears the brunt and brutalities associated with the practices. The main aim of this study, therefore, is to assess the effects of widowhood in Bongo and how it infringes on the rights of women/widows.

### **Materials and Methods**

#### **Area of study**

The study was conducted in the Bongo District in the Upper East Region. Bongo is the capital town where most social and economic activities meant to supply the entire district population is located. The people of Bongo trace their roots to the Mamprugu kingdom in the Northern region of Ghana especially those entitled to the Royal Skin, which is the paramount seat. The District is a multi-ethnic one with two (2) major ethnic groups dominating, that is, the Bosis who are from the Bongo central and some part of the District while the Frafras are at the outskirts of Bongo. Bongo abounds with some negative cultural practices that impede development in the area especially for women and children, particularly the girl-child. There are negative practices such as child betrothal, early marriages and dehumanising widowhood rites that infringe on the rights and freedoms of women. Bongo was selected as the area of study because it is known for practicing and adhering to these negative practices of widowhood rites (Bongo District Assembly, 2006).

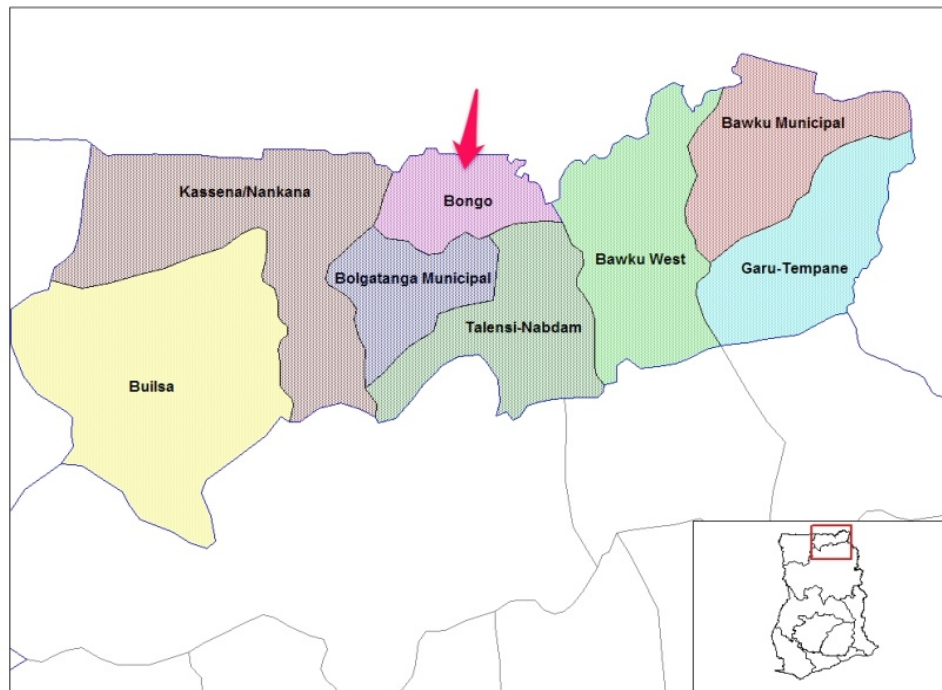


Figure 1: Map of Upper East Region showing Bongo/Source: Bongo District Assembly, 2006

The study used a mixed method where both qualitative and quantitative techniques were employed. A sample of ninety-five (95) widows/widowers and non-widows/widower in the Bongo community formed the population of the study (see Table 1). Snowball and simple random sampling techniques were employed to select the widows/widowers and the non-widows/widowers but this was with regards to their ability and willingness to provide the type of information that was sought through each research instrument. Using the snowball, a widow/widower was identified and he/she, in turn, directed the researcher to the next interviewed widow/widower. Data was collected from mid-October to early November 2018.

There were about 210 dwellings in the study community; each residence contained an average of two households. To obtain a representative sample of the residents, half (50%) of the residences were considered for the study. The sample frame of 210 was divided by the sample size of 60 and every 2<sup>nd</sup> dwelling was subsequently selected. But because of

the need to randomly start any systematic sampling, 1 and 2 were randomly selected. The selected number was 2. Thus, the second house was chosen on the sample frame, and subsequently every first house. Therefore, the procedure was followed till sixty-three (63) houses were selected.

In each of the sixty-three (63) dwellings for the non-widows/widowers, an adult who was at least 24 years old and above took part in the study. For all the sixty-three (63) dwellings selected for the study, there was at least one adult who had knowledge about widowhood rites. Thus, sixty-three (63) participants were covered in this category; forty-two (42) women and twenty-one (21) men. Thirty-two (32) widows/widowers were covered in this study using the snowball sampling technique. Focus group discussions, structured and semi-structured interview questions and observation were employed to collect data. The Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) software was helpful in analysing the data gathered through structured and semi-structured interview questions.

Table 1: Distribution of study participants

Category	Male	Female	Total
Widows/Widowers	10	22	32
Non-Widows	21	42	63
Total	31	64	95

The widows were involved in the study because they are victims who are alleged to be denied of their right to dignity and life and non-widows were involved in the study because even though they are not victims, their relatives or friends have gone through the widowhood rites, the non-widows have also witnessed the rites and they may become widows/widowers one day.

### 3.2 Ethical issues

Informed consent was sought from community leaders and study participants. Great care was taken to include only those who consented and the

information part of the informed consent was taken very seriously. All the study participants were repeatedly told the purpose and methods of the study. Care was taken to exclude those who either failed to understand the purpose of the study or did not consent to the study.

### 3.3 Conceptual framework

Infringement on the human rights of Bongo widows/widowers is discussed using the variables presented in the conceptual framework in figure 2 below;

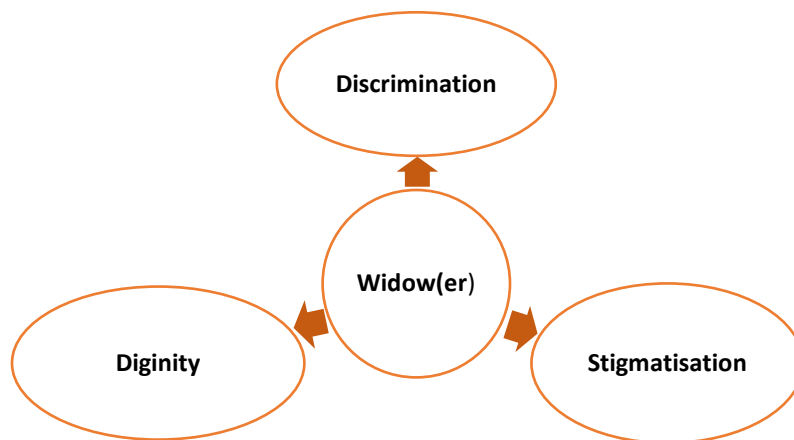


Figure 2: Conceptual framework

### Results

All the study participants have some kind of knowledge about the practice of widowhood rites in the Bongo community.

#### Description of the practice

From the figure 3 below, three (9) participants said widows are forced to remarry their late husband's brother against their will, nineteen (19) participants

representing 20% of the total participants also said the widows are made to shave their hair and to weep during the entire rites and the remaining respondents described the practice of widowhood rites differently and their views are as follows; the widows are made to drink some black concoctions and also strip naked in public, the widows are made to strip naked and sleep on the floor. The widows are stripped naked and are made to wear ropes, holding a calabash, a knife and a stalk. They are also made to go through some purification rites, where they are made to strip naked and drink some concoctions.

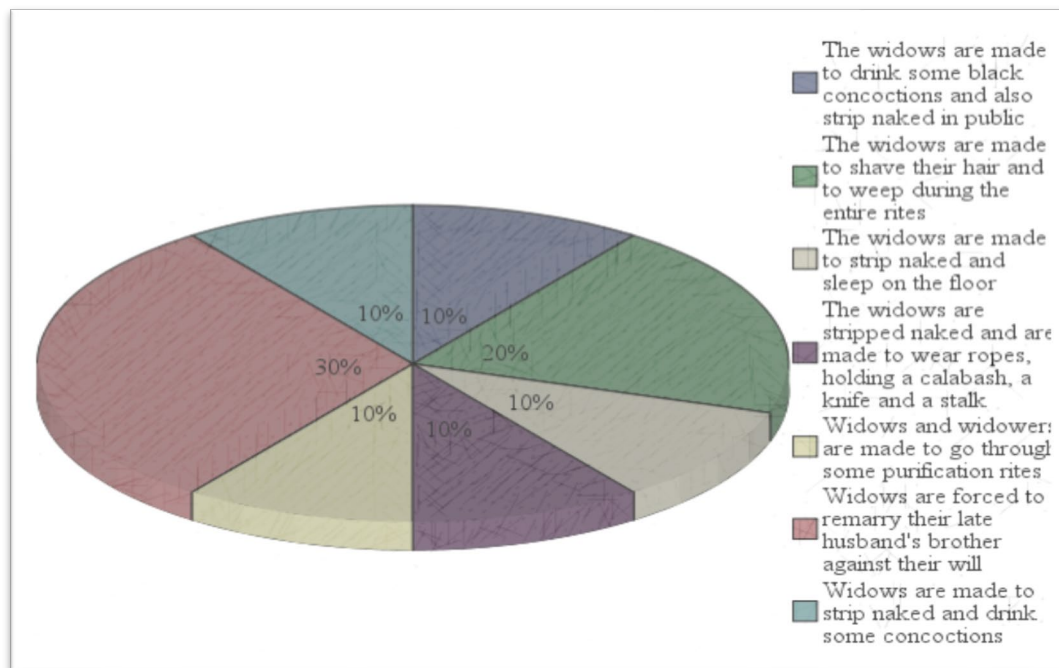


Figure 3: Description of the practice

**Brief description of the rite in Bongo**

All participants said women are made to strip naked in public and drink some concoctions. Purification rites (bathing in a river) are performed to separate them from their dead spouses and to enable the widows to remarry. The participants said that they (the widows) were forced to remarry their late husbands' brothers against their will. Widows are asked to drink some concoctions and eat Tuo-Zaafi (a maize meal) with some black substances in it. Wearing of leaves around the waist and sent outside naked when their husband's relatives wanted to consult a soothe-sayer to know the cause of death. They were also made to strip naked and made to wear ropes, holding a calabash, a knife, and a stalk. Widows also walk around a hot pot of boiling pito three times and are forced to weep all in the name of tradition and culture and lastly they went through a rite to put the spirit of the dead spouse at rest.

**Involvement of only the female gender in widowhood rites**

Eighty-five (85) participants, representing 89% of the total respondents said that widowhood rites in the area only apply to women and ten (10)

participant indicating 11% said that the practice applies to only women.

**Importance of the practice**

With reference to the table below, thirty percent (30%) representing 3 participants interviewed said to break the covenant between the living and the dead, twenty percent (20%) indicating 2 participants said to separate the living from the dead, twenty percent (20%) representing 2 participants also said the practice has no importance and the rest of the respondents gave their views on the importance of the practice as; to help the spirit of the dead to rest in peace, to purify the widow/widower and the last respondent said that the rites have no importance and that nothing will happen if the practice is abolished.

**Reason for going through the rite**

The table 2 below shows the reason why people decide to through the widowhood rites in the Bongo community. A majority (52%) of the participants revealed that it is part of their tradition; that is it was passed down to them by their forefathers so it should be observed and 43% said they had to go through the rites for fear of being haunted by their dead spouses.

Table 2: Reason for going through the rite

Reason	Frequency	Percent (%)
It is part of the tradition	49	52
Fear of being haunted by the dead	41	43
N/A	5	5
Total	95	100

### Violation of fundamental human rights through the practice

This section of the data collected indicates that most (66%) of the total respondents indicated that the practice violates the human rights of widows. However, 31% indicated 30% said that the practice

does not violate the widows' human rights in any way. The widows were of the view that what the widowers went through was a rite of purification which some of the widowers did not even go through but the rites which the widows go through are inhuman and therefore violates their human rights.

Table 3: Violation of fundamental human rights through the practice

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	63	66
No	29	31
N/A	3	3
Total	30	100

### How widowhood rites violate human rights

A majority (90%) of the participants interviewed (especially the widows) revealed that some rituals in the performance of the rites violated their human rights. The widows said they were basically forced to do things against their will. They were made to expose their nakedness to the public during the rites, which they revealed was very much demeaning. Participants further indicated that it is an infringement on their human rights when they were forced to marry the deceased spouse's relative against their will and lastly they drunk some concoctions and ate Tuo-Zaafi (maize meal) with some black substances in it. The widows find all these aspects of the rite as a violation of their rights.

### Effects of the practice on women

Most (92%) of participants indicated widows go through painful rites which makes them lack the will to marry again, some widows fell sick after going through the rites, that the practice affects the health of the widows and others gave their views on the effects of the practice as it affects the widows emotionally; people do not want to associate with widows, it makes widows inactive and timid and lastly, the practice violates the rights of the widows.

### Consequences of not performing the rites

Figure 4 below shows the consequences of not performing the widowhood rites. 33% said that the spirit of their spouses will be restless. 37% said that they feared they will be haunted by their dead spouses' ghosts. 10% said that they will not be respected in the community if they did not perform the rites. Another 10% indicated that the people in the community will look down on them if they did not go through the rites. A minority of 3% said the gods will be angry with them if they did not go through the rites and lastly, 7% said that nothing will happen if they decide not to go through with the rites.

### Discussion

The African woman remains a victim of harmful traditional rites that are associated with the passing away of their spouses. Deaths, even in circumstances in which the causes are natural and explicable are never perceived as such. In Africa, death is attributed to magical-religious influences and the widow is a target of indictments of bewitchment and is thus blamed for the death of the partner (Ayagiba, 2010).

The study has shown that widowhood rites are those rites that a surviving spouse has to go through at the demise of a partner. The fact that all the

respondents expressed virtually the same view about widowhood rites means that they all have substantial knowledge about the practice. It also means that the practice has gained roots in the study area, therefore become common knowledge among the people. Several researchers (Nukunya, 1969; Nwosu, 2007; Tonah, 2009 and Fiasorgbor & Sackyuah, 2018), emphasized this point when they noted that widowhood rites are ceremonies performed by a living spouse at the death of his/her partner. It is also believed to ensure the smooth transition of the spirit of the deceased spouse.

The study found that with regard to discrimination, men and women in the Bongo do not go through the same rites. Men in the study community basically do not perform any rite at the death of their wives. This is in line with findings of Matiea, (2010) in her study in rural Uganda which revealed that men were not even seen as widowers at the death of their wives, especially if they were from polygynous homes.

Also, Ghanaian widows are routinely accused by the community of causing the death of their husbands. The widowhood rites in many cases harbour practices that involve a widow proving her innocence. The study found that widows are stigmatised in the Bongo community as they are dreaded to have evil omen around them; community members, therefore, avoid them. Some community members would not want to mingle with widows. There is the myth that if you are a married woman and you mingle with widows your husband will die. Some husbands also prevent their wives from associating widows in any form. This is consistent with the findings of Tei-Ahontu (2008) that some people even refuse to be at same gatherings with widows; they may not even patronise their businesses if they were traders.

Furthermore, it is clear that widowhood practices in Bongo have implications for women's fundamental rights and freedom. In particular, these practices may likely infringe women's rights to dignity. For instance, Bongo widows being made to go through rites like stripping naked publicly when the husband's relatives are consulting a soothe-sayer to know the cause of death. Oyeniya and Ayodeji, (2010) also supported the views expressed by the respondents that the horrifying and degrading experience women often undergo as a result of widowhood practices in many parts of Nigeria will no doubt constitute a violation of their right to dignity. These practices are demeaning of women and erode their fundamental worth as human beings.

### Conclusion and Policy Recommendation

The study found that widows and widowers in Bongo do not go through the same rites. Men in the study community mostly do not perform any rite at the death of their wives. Also, Bongo widows are

typically accused by the community members of causing the death of their husbands. The study also found that widows are stigmatised in the Bongo community as they are dreaded to have evil omen around them. Furthermore, it is clear that widowhood practices in Bongo have implications for women's fundamental rights and freedom. In particular, practices such as widows being made to go through rites like stripping naked publicly undoubtedly constitute a violation of their right to dignity. Based on the results of the study, the following policy recommendations are made:

- The Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) should project educative and practical programmes to the Ghanaian public on women's rights. These programmes should basically convey the message that women are very important in society and as such, they should be respected and treated with dignity and this should be done in the various local languages.
- The government should effectively implement existing gender equality policies and frameworks that positively affect women adversely, especially widows to guide existing cultural widowhood practices that infringe on the fundamental human rights of widows.

### Acknowledgement

The author is grateful to the people of Bongo and the Presbyterian University College, Ghana. Thanks to Ms. Comfort Adombire who collected and organized the data.

### References

- Agboli, M. (2007). Gender and economic growth assessment for Ghana 2007. International Finance Corporation /World Bank & Ministry for Women and Children Affairs, Ghana.
- Akujobi, R. (2009). Yesterday you were Divorced. Today I am a Widow: An appraisal of widowhood Practices and the Effects on the Psyche of widows in Africa (Un-published).
- Ayagiba, B. (2010). Negative Cultural Practices. A paper presented on widowhood Rites in Northern Ghana in Bolgatanga to promote culture of human rights.
- Bongo District Assembly (2006). *Cultural Heritage and Customs*. Retrieved from [http://ghanadistricts.com/districts1on1/bongo/?arrow=atd&\\_id=103&sa=1231](http://ghanadistricts.com/districts1on1/bongo/?arrow=atd&_id=103&sa=1231)
- Dei, B. (1995). Widows of Sorrows. *Women's Rights Monitor: A Journal of Women JusticeProgram*. Lagos, Vol. 1 p4.
- Dolphyne, F. A. (2005). *The Emancipation of Women: An African Perspective*. Accra: University Press.
- Fiasorgbor DAF and Sackeyuah AC (2018). Widowhood: The Concept and Right to Remarry in the Kassena Culture. *The International Journal of Humanities and Social Studies*, Vol. 6 Issue 2, 91-97
- Matiea, V. M. (2010). Widows and the right to remarriage in Lesotho: A right at the crossroads a Masters

- Dissertation submitted to the Southern and Eastern African Regional Centre for Women's Law. University of Zimbabwe. Unpublished
- Nukunya, G. K. (1969). *Kingship and Marriage Among the Anlo-Ewe*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Oduro, A. (2007). *The practice of Widowhood Rites in the Kumawu Traditional Area: Winneba*. MA Dissertation presented to the Department of Social Studies (Unpublished).
- Oyeniya, A. & Ayodeji, I. (2010). 'Widowhood practices among the Yorubas of south west Nigeria: are there differences in what women experience due to their status?', *Gender and Behaviour* 8, 3152–67.
- Sossou, M. A. (2002). *Widowhood Practices in West Africa: The silent Victims*.
- Tei-Ahontu, M. M. (2008). *Widowhood rites in the Ga Traditional Area. A review of Ghana*, Research Unit Department of Sociology. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, Vol. 11, Issue 3.
- Tonah, S. (2009). *Contemporary Social Problems in Ghana*. Accra: University of Traditional Practices against Human Rights. Norwegian University of life
- United Nations Women (2000-2009). *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. Retrieved on November 3, 2014, from <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/> University Press.