



Message from the Chair



**Patsy Robertson,
Chair, WRI**

After a decade of advocacy, by WRI and many other organisations worldwide to end the cultural practices which are so harmful to women in general and widows in particular, we highlight in this issue the tough actions being taken in many countries to put a stop to them.

There has been an extraordinary upsurge of activities designed to bring an end to these practices, and in particular the reports from Nigeria where Government Ministers, high officials such as Chiefs and other community leaders are campaigning to change their societies and their support for age old rituals.

There is now pressure on many Governments in Africa to live up to their commitments made to support international human rights instruments.

RAISING WIDOWS' RIGHTS

The international campaign to end the unjust cultural practices which surround widowhood in many countries is becoming increasingly successful in Africa.

Recent reports have highlighted the vigorous campaign being waged by the wives of Governors in several Nigerian states as well as local leaders such as Chiefs and high Government officials.

This issue of the newsletter highlights reports of the number and variety of events which have been organised to address the issue of widows rights. These events have also sent a message to Governments to honour their commitments to the many global and regional charters on fundamental human rights which they have signed over the years.

There was also an appeal to Governments to formulate new policies on widows rights, stressing that the legislative arms of Governments need to urgently review current laws protecting widows.

In addition, activists also called for the establishment of safe houses for

maltreated widows and their children. In addition the importance for the provision of opportunities for widows to train, enabling them to gain employment so they can support themselves and their families has also stressed.



Image from <http://www.thenigerianvoice.com/nvnews/119602/1/write-your-wills-wives-of-governors-advise-spouses.html>

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CALL FOR INCREASED ADVOCACY, AND INTERVENTION ON BEHALF OF WIDOWS

A two day summit in Nigeria's Cross River State, enabled state and local leaders to issue a strong plea to the Nigerian Government to honour its international human rights commitments. The meeting was attended by the Governor of Okwa Ibom State, Chief Godswill Akpabio, and he joined with Mrs Obioma Lyell-Imoke, wife of the Cross River State Governor, and other leaders to remind the Nigerian Government that it was a signatory to global charters on fundamental human rights, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the African Charter of Human and Peoples Rights; the Convention on the Elimination of all



The service would include welfare, counselling and legal assistance for widows.

Image of widows from:

<http://thewillnigeria.com/general/22048.html>

In addition, another speaker, Mrs Ekaette Uloma Akpabio, announced that over seventy houses had already been built for widows and their children in Akwa Ibom State.

Other speakers at the summit reported that plans were now underway in many states in Nigeria to provide skills training for widows to enable them to gain financial independence.

Other speakers at this high level summit were the Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Women's Affairs Senator Helen Esuene and the Minister of Women's Affairs and Social Development Hajiya Zainab Maina who said that improvement of the situation facing Nigerian widows would depend on how Nigerians themselves responded to the appeal to end injustices meted out to widows.

A communiqué issued at the end of the meeting included recommendations which were specifically drafted to set out an agenda for action. They included: (recommendations)

1. Men should write wills that state clearly how their property should be shared in the event of death; men should make an effort to update their employment, insurance and other relevant records to reflect their spouse as their next-of-kin.



L-R Wife of Cross River State Governor, Mrs. Obioma Liyel-Imoke, Wife of Anambra State Governor, Mrs Margret Obi, and Wife of Akwa Ibom State Governor, Mrs. Unoma Godswill Akpabio, at the summit

Image from:

<http://crossriverwatch.com/2013/07/akpabio-hosts-widowhood-summit-as-mrs-imoke-canvasses-transition-homes-for-widows/>

Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as well as the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women (African Women's Protocol).

On a more practical level, the leaders also called for the establishment of homes in each of the six geo-political zones of the country to cater for the needs of the widows in distress.



R-L: AKS Speaker, Samuel Ikon; Mercy Orji; Mrs Unoma Godswill-Akpabio; Barr Mrs Obioma Liyel-Imoke; Sen Helen Esuene; Justice Ntem Isua, CRS Speaker, Larry Odey, Barr Hauwa Shekerua, Onyebuchi Sunday & HRH Etim Okon Edet At The 1st National Widowhood Summit. Image from:

<http://www.power-women.org/index.php/news/135-first-national-widowhood-summit-ends-in-uyo>

2. Government needs to improve on its policy environment to accommodate widows, the legislative arm of government needs to review the current laws protecting widows and make them more severe.

3. Our traditional rulers who are the custodians of our culture need to review all traditional practices that subject widows to indignities

4. Laws must be made to protect the rights of widows. The law should criminalize all forms of unhealthy and abusive cultural practices against widows in the country. The law will also safeguard the rights of widows to inheritance, including gratuity and insurance.

5. All relevant stakeholders should join forces in addressing the issues of widowhood by putting in place a development intervention for widows.

6. Opportunities should be provided for widows to acquire skills in vocations that guarantee

their employment and income generation.

7. There is need for massive enlightenment of all stakeholders on harmful cultural practices and the need to address such practices. The enlightenment programme should include advocacy action as a collaborative effort between the Office of Wife of Governor, Ministry of Women's Affairs, Houses of Assembly, civil society organizations, churches and traditional institutions.

8. All states of the Federation should ensure that bills protecting the rights of widows is passed and enforced accordingly.

9. There is need to establish transit shelter for widows in crisis and other vulnerable groups.

10. States should ensure provision of legal aid to protect widows' rights and create

11. Widows should be encouraged to form cooperatives and networks at both local and state levels. Such networks provide opportunities for peer learning, mentorship and advocacy for action among others.



Image from:
<http://ibompulpit.com/2013/07/18/1st-national-widowhood-summit-in-uyo-akwa-ibom-state/>

The summit was well reported as demonstrated in some of the reports below:

Reports can be found at:

<http://www.thenigerianvoice.com/nvnews/119602/1/write-your-wills-wives-of-governors-advise-spouses.html>

<http://crossriverwatch.com/2013/07/akpabio-hosts-widowhood-summit-as-mrs-imoke-canvasses-transition-homes-for-widows/>

<http://thewillnigeria.com/general/22048.html> //

<http://dailyindependentnig.com/2013/08/when-first-ladies-met-over-widows/>

NIGERIA STEPS UP ACTION AGAINST GENDER VIOLENCE

The speedy passage of a Bill entitled Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) has been pledged by the President of the Nigerian Senate, the Hon David Mark who said that it was designed to bring an end to domestic violence and harmful practices against women.

New measures enshrined in the Bill would prohibit all forms of violence, discrimination, provide maximum protection and remedial action to help victims as well as punishment for offenders. Speaking in Abuja recently, Mr Mark also revealed that, when passed into law, the Bill would address the inadequacies of current laws regulating the Nigerian Criminal Justice System.



The Hon David Mark

He said "We shall give the Bill the utmost priority and urgency. We shall do everything possible to stop violence, especially domestic violence and violence against

women in their public and private lives".

This event is part of a series of high profile actions taken by Nigerian Government Ministers and officials to demonstrate that the country is determined to use the power of the law to end violence against women and girls.

In attendance was the Minister of Women's Affairs Hajiya Zainab Maina who revealed that cases of violence were increasing and that there should be speedy trials and punishment of perpetrators as this would send a strong message to the country.

She listed such harmful practices as rape, female genital mutilation, battery, sexual harassment, trafficking of women, early marriage and widowhood rites. She also added that the number of widows in Nigeria was increasing due to the security situation in the country and the effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The full report is available at:

<http://thenationonline.ng/new/law-to-punish-violence-against-women-coming-says-mark/>

THE EFFECTS OF AIDS



In Kenya, Kamba kitui, Maasai, Luo and Luhya community elders take part in a workshop on fighting disinheritance among widows. Photo courtesy of GROOTS International.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has created millions of widows around the world. Many of them are living with the condition, but are unable to disclose their status because of the fear of reprisals from their communities. This magnifies the violations they face in terms of property and inheritance rights with profound implications for their safety and that of their children, as well as their ability to seek treatment, care and support.

According to a report on the UN women website approximately half of all people living with HIV are women, and in affected regions such as sub-Saharan Africa, that proportion climbs to about 60 per cent. The impact of the AIDS epidemic on women and girls is intensified by their physiological susceptibility to HIV and unequal power relations between men and women. Rape and sexual assault also propel infections among women.

In responding to the HIV epidemic, UN Women, with support from the Canadian International Development Agency, works to empower women living with HIV as leaders and active agents of change, as well as to prevent violence against women (ranging from physical to economic violations).

UN Women works with diverse community-based grassroots partners, such as the Coalition des Organisations Non Gouvernementales et des Organisations Communautaires de Base du Cameroun Œuvrant dans le Domaine des Établissements Humains (CONGEH) in Cameroon, and GROOTS International in Kenya, which are on the frontlines of safeguarding women's property and inheritance rights in the context of HIV and AIDS.

Both organizations work with customary, local and traditional authorities who are influential leaders in many communities. They can also be the propellers of change and effective implementation of laws and lead in altering mind-sets and awareness levels of society.

"CONGEH was born from the need to support women in general, and those living with HIV, who were discriminated against and denied their rights to access land and housing. [HIV] makes it difficult for them to get medical and psychological support because of their economic insecurity, stigma and rejection, while impacting their economic situation, especially for women who derive their means of survival from the land," says Eliane Sylvie Bouba, CONGEH Programme and Projects Coordinator since 2008. The organization works with women to strengthen and protect women's property and inheritance rights, providing HIV-affected women with legal services and resources.

In Kenya, GROOTS works with "Watch Dog Groups" that monitor and guard against property-stripping, engaging traditional and customary leaders to address harmful cultural practices that deter access and ownership of land by wid

ows and orphans.

"We have a mandate to go out to talk to families and communities, to tell them that the good cultural practices should remain as they are, but the culture which endangers the future of children in a home and harms widows is very wrong and we cannot maintain it," says Tom Onyach, a member of the Luo Council of Elders, in Kenya.

The organization also increases the ability of women living with HIV, especially on women's rights to land and property rights under Kenya's new Constitution and other legal provisions to build women's capacity and legal awareness to pursue their rights.

"As the new constitution of Kenya states, every person has rights. In the case of married women, they have rights to inherit the properties of the husband. We [even] go as far as going to the administration in case some people are difficult and they don't listen we take them to court" adds Onyach.



Tom Onyach, of the Luo Council of Elders, speaks at a workshop where community elders drafted a community cultural practice guidebook in an effort to emphasize the role of customary law in fighting disinheritance among widows. Photo courtesy of GROOTS Interna-

While efforts are ongoing, some battles are already being won. "GROOTS helped me get my neighbour to stop destroying my crops," says Florence. "His son and

two village elders came to inspect my farm with a view of compensating me. I did not want to make him pay; I just wanted him to stop destroying my crops but the elders insisted that he pay me. GROOTS was really patient and kept encouraging me as I fought the case with my neighbour. I know they have helped other women, not just in my community, but also in neighbouring areas."

See more at:
<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2013/6/in-sub-saharan-africa-aids-widows-strive-to-regain-their-rights-after-husbands-are-gone/#sthash.XgJTqyAZ.dpuf>



A woman holds her savings account book during a finance training session.

A safe box is unlocked between participants' feet during a training session about finance. During these sessions the women can bank their money in the safes and discuss the most effective ways to invest their savings.



EMPOWERING HIV-POSITIVE WOMEN IN UGANDA: THE KADAMA WIDOWS

Think Africa reported on the success of a programme set up for the Kadama Widows Association. The NGO is partnered with Africare, a UK charity started by diaspora Ugandans and focuses on helping people affected by HIV in Uganda.



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Mary Mosinghi, Director of Africare, speaks to participants. As a member of the diaspora, Mary has

been able to use contacts in the government, banking and medical sectors to help increase Africare's influence at a national level. Mary says: "The diaspora have a wide range of contacts, which helps to provide easy access to persons of authority as well as helping to mobilise support".

Friends laugh as a blind-folded lady tries to find an empty seat by touch during a group exercise.



All Photocredits: Will Boase



The following images show how the programmes are working to empower women to manage their finances and build self-confidence.

Women are encouraged to discuss a range of issues during group activities.

Report taken from
<http://thinkafricapress.com/health/blog/empowering-hiv-positive-women-uganda-kadama-widows-association-pictures>

Wicked, Malicious and Injurious - the treatment of widows

Official efforts to end violence against women in Nigeria are being matched by civil society organisations operating in the country. One such organisation, Soroptomist International of Nigeria Association (SINA) has publicly condemned the traditional practices meted out to widows as "wicked, malicious and injurious".

In collaboration with other NGOs, the Soroptomists have been actively campaigning and advocating against the treatment of widows. They consider that widows face discrimination and humiliations which abrogate their human rights and have argued that widows have not been adequately protected or given the attention which their situation deserves. They have conducted workshops and seminars to raise awareness of the issues and have lobbied Nigerian lawmakers to legislate against all oppressive and injurious laws against women and widows in particular.

SINA President Mrs. Funlola Buraimoh-Ademoyewo in her speech had this to say: "I wish to encourage all Nigerians individually and collectively to spare a thought for Nigerian widows to bring about an improvement in the wellbeing of Nigerian widows and their children. Specifically, I would like to call on Nigerian lawmakers at the federal and state levels to legislate against all oppressive, injurious and degrading widowhood practices as well as other harmful traditional practices that continue to place women at the lower rung of the social and economic ladder. In addition, relevant public and private institutions should endeavour to provide functional basic education to the citizens to adequately prepare them for meeting the challenges of bereavement."

She added that "there should be appropriate collaboration among the relevant

stakeholders to institutionalise interventions of fostering widows' integration into the society" and that "with the commitment of all stakeholders, the future of widows in the country would be better".

SINA has now recommended that:

Nigerian lawmakers should legislate against all oppressive, injurious and degrading widowhood practices.

Government at the three tiers should endeavour to provide functional basic education to the citizens to adequately prepare them for meeting the challenges of bereavement.

Government should establish a national commission for widow affairs as a way of fostering widows' integration into the society.

Younger widows (below age 35) should be encouraged to remarry as a way of integrating them properly into the mainstream of affairs in a socially-inclined society like Nigeria.

Counsellors in training should be made to take bereavement and widowhood counselling in their training programme as a way of adequately fortifying them to provide the necessary integrative counselling to the marginalized groups in the society like the widows.

SINA also announced that Governor Godswill Akpabio of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria recently signed into law a bill passed by the state House of Assembly banning the cultural and traditional practice whereby widows are made to drink the bath water of their dead husbands, have their hair shaved and their deceased husband's property seized.

The law now makes such acts a crime punishable with 3 years imprisonment without an option of a fine. Therefore the perpetrators of such wicked and malicious acts now face imprisonment."

Original story Nneka Chris-Asoluka , available at: <http://businessdayonline.com/2013/09/campaign-against-harmful-widow-practices/>

Botswana Court Makes History

The Marvi Post reported that a Botswana court made history by upholding the right of women to inherit under customary law and rejecting the tradition of males as sole heirs.

In a case heard by the appeals court in the capital city of Gaborone, the issue was whether daughters can inherit family property under customary law that long has held only males had the right of inheritance.

Edith Mmusi, 80 years old, argued that since she lived in the ancestral family home, and she and her sisters had invested in improving it, she and her three sisters should inherit it.

Her claim was challenged by a nephew's assertion that, as the male heir, he should inherit the homestead, although he had never lived there, because his father had been given the home by a male relative.

The judges unanimously ruled in favour of the four sisters, rejecting a long history of customary law that favoured males in inheritance matters.

"The judgment today by the Court of Appeal made it clear that women are not second class citizens in Botswana," said Priti Patel, deputy director of the Southern Africa Litigation Centre (SALC), which supported the sisters' case.

"Some people had feared that the Court of Appeal would set the fight for women's rights back yet again," said Patel. "But instead they ruled unanimously in favour of equality and against gender discrimination. It is a hugely important decision not only for Botswana but for women across southern Africa."



Image taken from <http://allafrica.com/stories/201309040672.html>

Justice Isaac Lesetedi, who wrote the court's decision, took note of the changes in society over the past 30 years in his opinion.

He wrote that the "Constitutional values of equality before the law, and the increased levelling of the power structures with more and more women heading households and participating with men as equals in the public sphere and increasingly in the private sphere, demonstrate that there is no rational and justifiable basis for sticking to the narrow norms of days gone by when such norms go against current value systems."

In his concurring opinion, Chief Justice Ian Kirby also firmly rejected the tradition that favoured only male heirs. He wrote that "any customary law or rule which discriminates in any case against a woman unfairly solely on the basis of her gender would not be in accordance with humanity, morality or natural justice. Nor would it be in accordance with the principles of justice, equity and good conscience."

Original story available at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201309040672.html>

Widows in Varanasi and Vrindavan celebrate Festivals

In previous newsletters WRI has highlighted the work of Sulabh International, a social service organisation which has many programmes promoting the concept of low-cost sanitation. It has recently taken steps to address the welfare of widows as a result of "the Supreme Court taking strong exception last year to the manner in which the bodies of widows, who lived in government shelter homes at Vrindavan, were disposed". Sulabh has been appointed to monitor the status of widows in Vrindavan, by the Supreme Court of India.

It is common knowledge that Varanasi and Vrindavan are home to thousands of widows who are "considered cursed and inauspicious". Rejected by their families and society they are sent to these cities where they spend the rest of their days (regardless of their age), praying in ashrams for pittance and small rations of food.



Hindu Times—Ajay Aggarwal

However the work of Sulabh International is raising the profile of widows rights and is challenging traditional practices by encouraging widows to celebrate many of Hindu festival which before now widows were unable to partake in.

Earlier this year widows in Vrindavan, a small religious town in northern India, celebrated the Hindu spring festival of colours, Holi for the first time, where more than 800 widows came forward to sing and dance.



Hindu Times—Ajay Aggarwal

"Vrindavan Holi is an effort to free widows from the shackles of age-old tradition. Not only will the widows play Holi,



Widows throw flowers into the air during Holi celebrations at the Meera Sahavagini ashram in Vrindavan. Reuters.

they will also participate in cultural programmes," said Bindeshwar Pathak, chief of Sulabh International.

The event was part of a multi-pronged approach organised to bring widows, into mainstream society. It has been widely documented that widows in these cities lead a miserable life, with no money, few clothes or food and lack healthcare.

On 20 August 2013 widows gathered at the Nepali Ashram on the banks of the Ganga river to celebrate the festival of Raksha Bandhan in the presence of seers and Sanskrit scholars. Raksha Bandhan is a festival which celebrates the bond between brother and sister — an exchange of a thread bracelet is tied on the brothers' wrist by the sister, symbolising the binding nature of the relationship. The brother in turn will offer gifts or blessings symbolic of being a protector.

The Sulabh International group has also launched a pension and medical welfare scheme for widows of Varanasi.



Image: rakhis tied on wrist of Bindeshwar Pathak, founder of the Sulabh International group, Image from: <http://themailtoday.com/sulabh-lights-up-smile-on-faces-of-varanasi-widows-at-raksha-bandhan/>

Since Rakshabandan Sulabh International have dedicated five well-equipped ambulances to them for dealing with medical emergencies. Responding to the



Sulabh International founder Bindeshwar Pathak and his family members sing with the widows of Vrindavan at a function in New Delhi in September 2013.

each widow living in five government-run shelters in Vrindavan. Besides, we have opened a centre to provide proper healthcare and last rites," said Mr Pathak.

Another recent festival celebrated by the widows was the Durga Maa puja which took place in October of this year and was marked by a boat trip in Kolkata. The Samaj Sebi Sangh, organised the event and member Vasvari Sarkar stated they would now take up the cause of widows. The participating widows were each presented with copy of the Gita and a saree by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.



Widows begin five days of Diwali celebrations at the 100 year old widow shelter Meerasahabhagni Ashram in Vrindavan.



The most recent milestone for Sulabh is the incredible feat to have arranged Diwali celebrations this year which included widows of Vrindavan. As reported in the Hindustan Times, Sulabh arranged a five day programme of celebrations. Widows dressed in traditional sarees, made rangoli near the ashram

court directives, Sulabh has been working steadily for widows to lead a dignified life. "We have started giving Rs. 1,000 per month to temple, went shopping and then celebrated with firecrackers. At the market near the ISKCON temple, they purchased sarees and shawls of their own choice.



Photo from: Hindustan Times

Thousands of earthen pots were arranged and painted by the widows themselves for celebrations.

Many widows for the first time in decades were able to light candles and earthen pots on Diwali.



Photo from: Hindustan Times

Pathak said that he intended to draft a bill and hand it over to Parliament to improve the plight of widows abandoned by their families. He has urged all political parties to support his proposed bill drafted by him.

Full reports are available at

<http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/articles/449949/20130325/holi-vrindavan-widows-colour-spring-festival-gulal.htm>

<http://blogs.hindustantimes.com/kaleidoscope/2013/03/25/vrindavan-widows-break-shackles-celebrate-holi/>

http://zeenews.india.com/news/uttar-pradesh/widows-in-varanasi-celebrate-raksha-bandhan_870265.html

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/sulabh-gesture-to-vrindavan-widows/article3942919.ece>

<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/all-help-to-vrindavan-widows/article5215702.ece>

<http://www.easterneye.eu/news.html?groupId=7&newsId=2501#sthash.aFKjbNJO.dpuf>

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/after-decades-of-darkness-vrindavan-widows-celebrate-diwali/article1-1145917.aspx>

ABOUT WRI

Widows' Rights International supports organisations in sub-Saharan Africa working for social justice and human rights for widows including:

- ◆ Right to keep their home and property
- ◆ Right to inheritance and land ownership and possession
- ◆ Right to keep their children
- ◆ Right not to be forcibly married to the dead husband's kin
- ◆ Right to work outside the home

PLEASE SUPPORT OUR WORK!

Go to www.widowsrights.org and press the button to help us help these disadvantaged women in their struggle for their basic human rights.



WRI works:

- ◆ to promote the recognition of widows' special vulnerability
- ◆ to combat negative social attitudes which lead to their isolation, exploitation and poverty
- ◆ to bring these practices to an end:

WRI mobilises action by:

- ◆ International organisations
- ◆ National governments
- ◆ Legal and other civil society organisations

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Enabling widows to have a brighter - and fairer - future

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Gift Aid is a Government run scheme which allows WRI reclaim the tax on your donations. This means we will receive £1.25 for every £1 you donate.

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