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Widowhood: Facts, Feelings & The Law



Dr. Eleanor Nwadinobi

Book Review by Peter Igwilo,
 PhD (iopeters@yahoo.com)

To gain an understanding in a discussion of the global problem of widowhood the three most essential elements are getting the facts, capturing the feelings and applying the correctly available laws. Many writers and advocates concerned with the problems of widowhood have lacked the facts, the laws or the feelings. Few have encompassed all three in the way that "WIDOWHOOD: Facts, Feelings & The Law" has succinctly done. Edited by Dr. Eleanor Nwadinobi of the Widows Development Organization from Eastern Nigeria, this book makes the understanding of issues of widowhood much easier and clearer.

"I was asked to sit on the bare floor. My blouse was removed. My hands tied up with rags so that I could not scratch my face or eat with my hands. If my body became too dirty, they would use sand to

bathe me. I did not bathe with water or wash my hands until after one month of my husband's death. I wore one wrapper throughout. No blouse on my chest" (pg. 9).

This is just one of the many shocking revelations. The book contains numerous other cruel and barbaric instances of massive abuse in Nigerian society in the name of "culture and tradition." The book covers a wide range of egregious topics found in widowhood practices such as the shaving of the hair, disinheritance, sleeping with the corpse, ostracism, confinement and routine crying. It also presents a special case study of such practices in neighbouring Southeast States.

Using an artistically illustrated style, this book uses picture stories, widowhood poems, and excerpts of a 2005 study on widowhood to tell its story. The use of colours and artistic design; the contrasting of *Feelings, Facts* and *Laws* presented together on one page facilitates comprehension of the cruelty and violence to which women are subjected to in many cultures. The language and grammar of the "Feelings" sections are presented verbatim to accurately convey the feelings of victimised widows.

Well-researched, scholars will find this book invaluable due to its attention to statistical details and information on widowhood that fills the void that has made research in Africa so difficult. This book is especially a revelation on the problem of widowhood in Nigeria and is essential for all policy makers and legislatures, government agencies, school libraries, and non-governmental organisations. "Widowhood" should enjoy great appeal for students of social sciences, African studies, high school students, college/university undergraduates/graduates and students of criminal colleges. Its portability should make it essential for conferences, seminars and workshops.

"WIDOWHOOD: Facts, Feelings & The Law", a publication of the Widows Development Organisation (Nigeria) with the support of the Sigrid Rausing Trust (UK), Enugu (Nigeria); 40pp.; thick paperback; edited by Eleanor Ann Nwadinobi.

Dr. Eleanor Ann Nwadinobi, is a wife and mother, founder and pioneer President of the Widows Development Organization (WIDO) and is currently the Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Chair of the United Nations NGO/DPI Executive Committee.

Message from the Chair



Patsy Robertson

The egregious human rights abuses suffered by widows in many countries continue to receive our attention. As documented in "WIDOWHOOD: Facts, Feelings & The Law," edited by Dr. Eleanor Nwadinobi who heads one of our original partner organisations in eastern Nigeria, widows in Nigeria, and in numerous other countries, suffer from practices such as sleeping with the corpse, disinheritance and ostracism. This is done in the name of culture and tradition.

There are many agreements and conventions written to protect the status and rights of women, however few mention the situation of widows. WRI has prepared statements on the plight of widows for UN international bodies. We are lobbying for member states of the United Nations to gather evidence and report on the conditions for widows when they submit their reports on the status of women. We wish to ensure that the discrimination that blights the lives of widows, and their children, is recognised and acted upon.

The focus of our advocacy is to empower grassroots organisations that are working to help widows. In this time of shrinking funding, although we have reluctantly had to curtail some of our activities, we are

still committed to bringing the work of grassroots organisations to the notice of the international community in general and of possible funding supporters in particular. These groups are using the knowledge they have gained from working closely with local organisations to give factual accounts of the many cultural rites that leave widows in poverty and in poor health.

In this edition of our newsletter, we include a review of "WIDOWHOOD: Facts, Feelings & The Law" and highlight the work of some of people and organisations in Tanzania, Kenya and Nepal who are struggling to improve the lives of widows.

Patsy Robertson

Chair WRI

Roundup of human rights

Call for increased action by national human rights groups

National Human Rights organisations from 13 UN member states issued a statement in March 2010 underlining the fact that no national HR organisation currently has independent participation status at the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

They urged CSW to grant formal recognition of the independent role of such organisations in promoting women's empowerment and gender equality at the national, local and international level.

(full link to the statement: <http://www.wunrn.com/>. Enquiries regarding this joint statement can be directed to Ms Pip Dargan at pipdargan@asiapacificforum.net)

Widows' Rights International

Registered charity number: 1069142

War makes widows and so do guns

Women suffer disproportionately from the effects of wars. The question of how much is spent by governments on military matters has long been on the agenda of women's organisations. Wars make widows. WRI has always supported groups which campaign for peace, for the ending of the sale of small arms, especially to developing countries. Two such organisations are IANSA (*The International Action Network on Small Arms*) that has been campaigning for years and WILPF (*Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*) which has published these horrific statistics relating to the sale of arms and on military spending in 2008.

World military spending 2008:

1 464 000 000 000 USD

or 4 000 000 000 USD per day

What Would You Buy?



Forsvarets-Bildbyrå



Mauritanian School Class,
John Spooner, flickr.com
(Creative Commons)



UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe



UN Photo/Marie Frechon



1 YEAR of the world's military spending.

OVER 24 YEARS of the additional foreign aid required to reach the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

43 YEARS of the annual cost required to achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive health services.

2928 YEARS of the budget for the new UN women's agency.

Women judges and their role in promoting women's equality

Judges and the international human rights system are essential in keeping the principles of equality and non-discrimination alive and relevant to women's daily lives. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay was addressing the International Association of Women Judges in a keynote speech.

In her speech, Ms. Pillay highlighted the fact that The International

Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights "makes clear that inequality in women's enjoyment of civil and political rights is deeply embedded in tradition, history, culture, and religious attitudes, which often relegate women to a subordinate role in society." She called upon States to enjoyment of civil and political rights is deeply embedded in tradition, history, culture, and religious attitudes, which often relegate women to a

subordinate role in society. It calls on States to be attentive to these obstacles and ensure that they do not deprive women of the full enjoyment of their civil and political rights under the Covenant. These include violence against women, and practices that may threaten women's right to life, including access to safe abortion, female infanticide, dowry killings, burning of widows, and extreme poverty or deprivation that may be life



Navi Pillay
High Commissioner for
Human Rights

News from Africa

Kenya

Wilbroda Wandera, "We won't sleep hungry when I have 40 shillings"

The story of her life, as told by Wilbroda Aoko Wandera, 48, encapsulates the experience of widows in many countries. Widowed 16 years ago, with ten children to care for, she has had to fight for survival, at times spending just 40 Kenya shillings (US\$0.50) to feed her family. She has no steady job and sells spinach, works as a hairdresser and laundress in order to survive.

Earlier this year, she told her She spoke to IRIN :

"My husband had been sick for a long time, and when he died, his relatives chased me away with my children and demolished our house in the village. They said I had been responsible for his death. Since then life has been one long struggle.

"My mother sent me the fare to return to Nairobi where we had been living before my husband died.

"I have tried very hard to feed my family and to put the children into school; right now two boys are in

secondary school.

"I have sold [donuts] and worked as a cleaner at the Catholic Church nearby. Once I was lucky when the local chief allowed me to build a kiosk near the road; I used the front as a salon where I plaited people's hair and lived in the back with my children. However, this was demolished in 2007 to pave way for the Kibera slum upgrading programme. Now I live near the river, where I have built a mud structure.

"We mostly live on one meal a day. This is hard, especially on the children. I have learnt to make meals for the whole family even when I have only 40 shillings [\$0.50]. With this, I buy maize flour for 20 shillings, sugar for five, paraffin for 10, a lemon for two and water for three. This will make a [pot] of porridge and everybody can get a cup. That takes us to the next day.

"When I have 50 shillings, I buy sukuma wiki [kales] for 10 shillings, maize flour for 30, cooking oil for five and paraffin for five. With this, I

cook ugali and the sukuma wiki and everyone will at least have a hot meal.

"On a good day, when I make at least 100 shillings, the diet is better; I buy maize flour for 45, omena [sardines] for 20, tomatoes for 10, paraffin for 10 and cooking oil for 10. This is enough for two meals for the whole family. But the days I make 100 are rare. Besides, when I make more than 100, I put away some money for school fees and rent.

"I feel blessed that I have the support of other widows. We formed a self-help group in 2007. We are there for each other, we skip meals together, we help each other in merry-go-round donations of 20 shillings a week and struggle to bring up our children. Life in Kibera is hard but it is 10 times harder for a widow with children."

Source: <http://www.irinnews.org/HOVReport.aspx?ReportId=89132>

News from Asia

Young widow fights adversities to help others

Married while still a teenager and just completing her school exams, Sanju Timiisina Katri was widowed four years later, with a two year-old daughter to care for. With her husband, she had lived a simple life in a village, but he was brutally murdered by a Maoist leader when her country Nepal was embroiled in a long struggle which pitted Government forces against Maoist rebels.

Despite her loss, Sanju faced up to all the adversities which befall widows in her country and now in her mid-20s, has started to fight for other unfortunate single women like her in Jumla, her local district.

Widowed in teens

Before her husband, who worked on farms, died, Sanju, having passed local examinations, was able to gain short-term employment with the Nepal Red Cross Society.

"I had received my first paycheck of Rs 17,000," she recalls. "I didn't even buy a single piece of cloth and gave the whole amount to my husband Tirtha Raj," she adds. Because of ill health after the removal of a kidney stone while still a young boy, he suffered from chronic back pain. "I asked him to go to Nepalgunj for treatment," she reminisces and he went to see his stepbrother who was

a Nepal Army soldier posted at the Sunbarsha Barrack in Banke. Maoist insurgency had reached its peak and Tirtha Raj's family, with his father a retired assistant sub inspector of Nepal Police, had been coerced to make donations to the warring groups.

But casual talk at a local teashop in Banke cost him his life. "He revealed that he was going to see his army soldier brother to one Naresh Khatik, the Maoist in-charge of Betahani, during a conversation at the tea stall," she said.

Khatik then offered to show him to the barracks and abducted him on August 17, 2004. She only knew of the incident when a local newspaper published the news of her husband's murder six days later.

"The villagers say Khatik shot him four days after abduction and threw his body into a swollen Rapti river," she reminisces with misty eyes. The family never recovered the body. The then Royal Nepal Army killed Khatik a week after Tirtha Raj's abduction in retribution and Sanju says Khatik's mother confessed to human rights activists that she had repeatedly pleaded to her son to release Tirtha Raj.

"But Khatik would not listen to her and I guess the money from my paycheck must have played a part in the determination to kill him," she explains. The Maoists have since admitted that her husband was unnecessarily killed but have done nothing to help her and the state has also not done anything till date. "The district peace committee has registered my name in the list of conflict victims a few months back. I don't know what they will do," she says.

Helping others in need

Despite the fact that Sanju had lost everything, she decided to fight back. With the encouragement of her supportive in-laws, she went to college and is now in her third year of a Bachelor of Education course in Jumla. With her daughter at boarding school, she is now President of the Jumla branch of Women for Human Rights, which represents single and widowed women.

She reports "We have helped a widow, who was thrown out of her house by in-laws, return to her house while another single woman who had a property dispute with her husband's elder brother has received her share. A 16-year-old girl, who had been regularly beaten by her in-laws and made to work hard without even adequate food, is currently fighting her case," she said on the sidelines of the two-day International Conference on Widowhood: Widows Voices Empowered held in the capital Katmandu recently. It was attended by over 100 Nepalis from 66 districts and 25 foreigners from South Asia, USA, UK, Australia, Italy, Scotland, Germany and other western countries.

She has formed 18 groups in Jumla and they include even the women widowed by the state during the Maoist insurgency. "Our groups in five of these have even received Rs 100,000 each from the VDC offices for women empowerment," she reveals.

"I pray that no other woman is widowed like I was at a young age due to conflict in my country or in the world," she said.

"Widows Voices Empowered"

International conference on widowhood in Nepal

The urgent need for a powerful international campaign to confront the injustices meted out to widows in many countries was highlighted at a two-day international conference on widowhood held in Nepal recently. The conference was inaugurated by Nepali Minister for Women, Children and Social Welfare Sarba Dev Ojha, who gave his full support to such a campaign.

The conference heard that women in Nepal are discriminated against in various aspects of everyday life; their rights are infringed by cultural traditions as well as laws and policies. The situation of widows is even worse with pervasive marginalization from society, according to Women for Human Rights, the single women's group (WHR) which hosted the international conference on widowhood.

The WHR, a private non-profit organization actively working for human rights of widows in Nepal, further outlined that widowed women are identified as inauspicious symbols of ill health and the cause of the demise of their husbands. The WHR, secretariat of the South Asian Network for Widows' Empowerment in Development (SANWED) hopes that

common practices will be developed in order to change policy, build stronger campaigns and ultimately eradicate the impoverished lives of widows. The SANWED has members in South Asian states--Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The difficulties facing widows in extreme patriarchal societies are numerous especially after the decade long conflict and the traditional way of life in much of Nepal. Though there are no concrete statistics of widowed women in Nepal, according to WHR, currently it has 300 single women groups in 52 districts across the country with a membership base of over 45,000.

Inaugurating the conference, Nepali Minister for Women, Children and Social Welfare Sarba Dev Ojha vowed to form a unified work-plan to address women related issues including widows. He added that the government will begin to collect the exact number of widows across the country in the next census. "Widow Women's statistics will be compiled in government's data system in upcoming national census," he said. He also expressed government's commitment to wipe out the discrimina-

tory laws against women and widows.

Similarly, the Chairman of Nepal's National Women's Commission Nain Kala Thapa stressed that discrimination against widows is not only Nepal's agenda but also a matter of concern for whole South Asia.

"Widow Women's situation in Nepal is worst most specifically of those who are economically marginalized. Most of them are living their life as corpses," added Thapa. However, she said that progress was being made in changing current cultural practices and laws.

The two-day meeting was attended by participants from 13 countries -- Afghanistan, Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Germany, India, Italy, Nepal, Pakistan, Scotland, Sri Lanka, the United States and Britain.

The meeting concluded on Friday, June 25th with the adoption of a "Kathmandu Declaration"- details of which will be published in our next newsletter.

Source: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2010-06/24/c_13367791.htm



Participants of the conference

News From Our Partners seeking support

- small community groups serving increasing numbers of widows and children

Tanzania



Widows working with sewing machines

Hurumia Watoto is a small community based organization affiliated to a larger Tanzania community programme for the protection of widows and the advancement of the girl child.

It's objectives are to alleviate poverty, ignorance and HIV/AIDS

prevention among the widows, girls and communities in general through enhancing economic activities.

It supports about 7 programmes in the Mwanza region to promote income generating activities, HIV/AIDS campaigns and orphan support. Since 2007, it has also conducted activities to support widows

by helping them to develop sources of income and support in their communities.

PROBLEMS WIDOWS FACE

Widows face great difficulties in this region. These include harassment, sexual assault, lack of food, shelter and poverty. Many had depended entirely on their husbands and, after their death, have been stripped of their homes and property. They cannot inherit anything as they do not know their rights and so remain in hardship. For these reasons Harumia Watoto's support has included the provision of sewing machines, help with schooling for their children as well as training to make them aware of the rights.



Seminar on rights

Contact:

HURUMIA WATOTO GROUP ORGANIZATION, Jonathan Mulokozi (director)

registered number 178, P.o.Box 1362, Mwanza, Tanzania

E-mail: hurumiawatotocentre2006@yahoo.com, Phone: +255765 433802, +255769 62163

Kenya



Feeding the orphans

Widows Africa is a small community based organisation in rural Kenya working with and helping widows to fight for their rights.

On of its most active members, Marcella, is the widow of a former member of the Kenya Air Force. She and is a devout Christian and she leads a group of widows who have been feeding orphan children on a daily basis.

Marcella has been serving the orphans with porridge prepared at her house and brought to her local church at her own expense. For many months, she has fed 20 orphans who attend Sunday school. She funds this activity by selling peanuts at a roadside stall- a small business which she has developed to support herself and her family.

In another district, there are about 500 widows and about 800 orphans who are victims of HIV/AIDS. Widows Africa writes "that their living conditions are very bad and the poverty level is high. The widows face total rejection after the death of their husbands and some end up being forced out of the community".

contact person: Joshua at widowsafrica@yahoo.com

Marcella (in blue)



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

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**

Financial assistance may be available for:

- ◆ pioneering activities by and for widows which provide examples of best practice
- ◆ activities designed to establish legal precedents; heighten public awareness; repeal of laws inimical to widows
- ◆ action to influence international agencies to condemn practices which deny widows their rights
- ◆ action to train widows and legal personnel in rights awareness

PLEASE SUPPORT OUR WORK!

Go to www.widowsrights.org and press women in their struggle for their basic human



the button to help us help these disadvantaged rights.



Widows' Rights International
Registered charity number:1069142

Yes, I want to support WIDOWS RIGHTS INTERNATIONAL's struggle for social justice for widows in South and West Asia and Africa.

Name

Address
Postcode.....

Telephone e-mail:.....

I would like to give (please tick): £5 £25 £50 £100 Other £.....

Please debit my account

Bank sort code

Once Monthly Quarterly Half year Annually

Starting on (date):/...../..... Signature

YOUR bank name and address

Name Ad-
dress..... Postcode
.....

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Using Gift Aid means that, if you are a UK taxpayer, for every pound you give, we get an extra 28 pence from the Inland Revenue, helping your donation to go further. To qualify for Gift Aid, what you pay in income tax must be at least equal to the amount we will claim in the year.

Tick the box if you are a tax payer and would like us to reclaim tax on this:

Date of Declaration :/...../.....

Please return this form to:

WIDOWS RIGHTS INTERNATIONAL,
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Davina House
137-149 Goswell Road
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Tel: 020.7253.5504
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Thank you for supporting Widows Rights International.