



***** Newsletter *****	
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Message from the Chair

This issue of the WRI newsletter concentrates on information about widows contained in international surveys or articles written by or about dedicated persons who have been touched or angered by the treatment meted out to widows in many countries.

WRI welcomes this growing support for action to end the gross violations of the human rights of widows which are graphically described in this issue of the newsletter. It is however, important to remember that this support must cover advocacy at international and nations meeting but also financial support for the many grass-roots organisations in Asia and Africa which are best placed to tackle the sensitive issues surrounding these well-rooted harmful cultural practices.

Providing financial support for these organisations has become increasingly difficult and that is why we are again appealing to all our readers to resolve this year to help as much as they can this group of vulnerable women. A small donation to WRI will go a long, long way to alleviate a great deal of suffering.

Patsy Robertson

**We are urgently seeking funds to support our partners in
Africa – please support our work!**

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

World wide Poll Confirms Discrimination against widows and divorced women



Thai Widow with one of her children in a 2004 photo (USAID/Suzanne Ross)

After years of advocacy by WRI and other international groups, the treatment of widows is finally receiving the attention it deserves. A poll commissioned by the UK-based Loomba Trust, and carried out by World Public Opinion in 17 countries around the world, confirms the widespread perception that widows and divorced women are treated worse than other women.

"Discrimination against widows and divorced women appears to be a phenomenon of many countries, not just some traditional cultures," says Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org. "People in most countries, including developed ones, recognize there is at least some discrimination." He added "While there have been no large-scale studies quantifying the scope of discrimination against widows and divorced women, the thousands of respondents in the poll report that the problem is quite widespread."

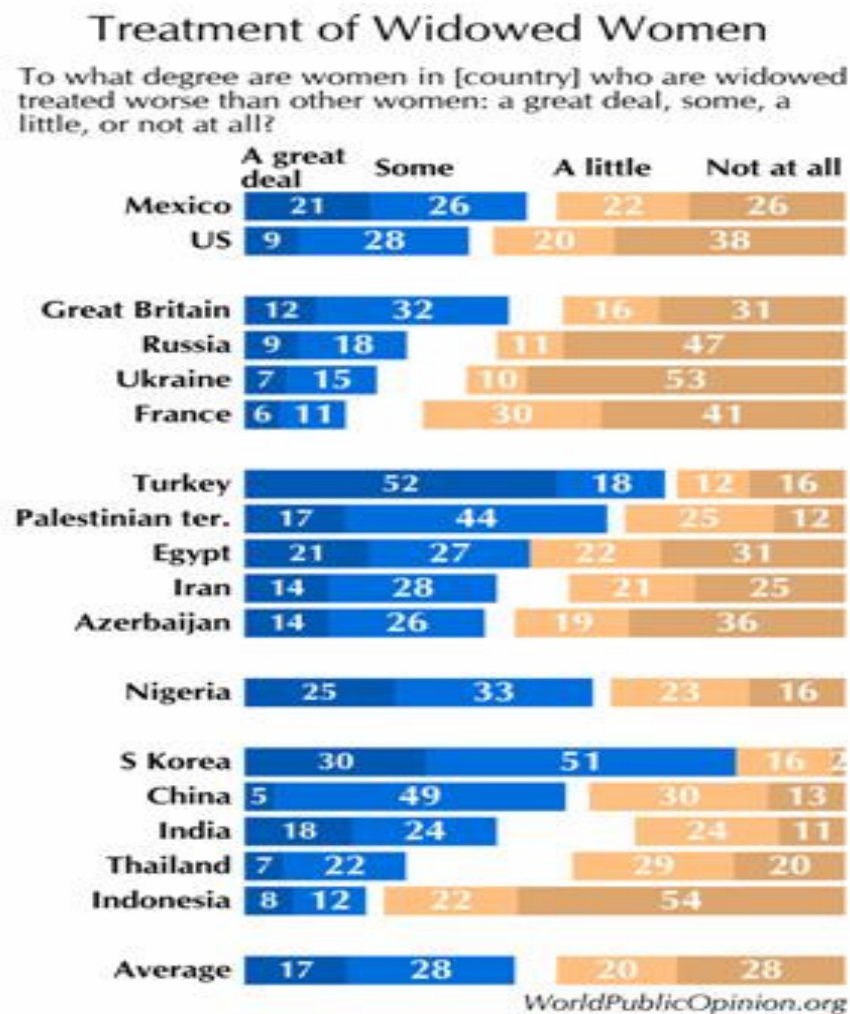
The findings of the survey confirmed the widespread perception that widows and divorced women in the 21st century get a worse deal than other women do. Only in two countries did the majority say that there is no discrimination of this kind - Ukraine (53%) and Indonesia (54%). In 12 of the countries polled, about four in 10 believe that there is some or a great deal of discrimination against widows and divorced women. Just 28% across the countries polled say there is no discrimination against widows, while 63% maintain that there is a little, some or a great deal of such bias.

Perceptions of the extent of discrimination vary widely. South Korea, for example, reported the largest group (81%) who believe that widows are mistreated. This reality seems to have nudged South Korea's lawmakers into enacting legal reform. Protective legislation followed the 2005 High Court verdict granting women the right to claim an equal share in jointly-owned family property for the first time in the country's history. In China, 54% see widows as discriminated against and the Chinese government has, since the 1990s, introduced a series of legal reforms. For example, today in China, the law guarantees the inheritance

rights of widows, although - as the survey revealed - the traditional stigma attached to them persists.

Egypt, where 48% believe that widows are mistreated, has been the focus of criticism from Human Rights Watch for its gender unfriendly legal framework. Not only do men and women need to conform to differing forms of initiating divorce, women are also denied property rights to their marital homes unless they have a specific legal title.

Two countries – Nigeria and India - in which WRI has for many years supported organizations working to end discrimination against widows are included in the survey. Responses to the questionnaire show that while in Nigeria a clear majority (58%) acknowledged that widows were discriminated against, in India they were more nuanced - 42% considered that widows were discriminated against but respondents with a higher level of education were more likely to see widows as mistreated.



The WorldPublicOpinion.org poll of 17 nations around the world finds a widespread perception that widows and divorced women are treated worse than other women. In only 2 do a majority say that there is no discrimination against widows and in only 1 that there is no discrimination against divorced women. In 12 of the 17 nations polled, about 4 in 10 perceive there is some or a great deal of discrimination against widows.

NEWS FROM SOUTH ASIA

Child Widows of Nepal

The plight of child widows in Nepal, has been highlighted by an article prepared by IRIN, the UN's vehicle to provide international human rights news from Africa and Asia. It tells the story of Purni Shah, an 11 year old who was forced by her family to marry a 25 year old man. After four years, her husband died and as a widow Purni has been forced into what has been termed 'a cursed life'. After 15 years she is still denied the most basic of rights, still looked upon with suspicion and still blamed for her husband's death.

According the Nepal's Demographic Health Survey over 63% of girls marry before 18 and 7% percent are married before reaching 10. Child widows are barred from eating fish or meat, barred from wearing colourful clothes – widows wear white - and must not show their faces in the early morning to prevent bad luck.

There is only one NGO - Women For Human Rights - Single Women's Group ([WHR](#)) - currently working on the problem.

Widows in India

The treatment meted out to a young widow in India, made such an impression on her young son that today, he has become a leading campaigner for the rights of widows in India and elsewhere. He is Raj Loomba, now a clothing magnate based in Britain and he established the Loomba Trust in 1997 to campaign for the rights of widows and their children. In 2005 he launched 23 June as International Widows Day to provide a focus for action to help widows.

In the article below, prepared and circulated by the Women's Feature Service based in India, the situation of widows in India and Mr Loomba's work are highlighted.

India: Widows - The World's Forgotten Women

By Amoo Arvind

"The greatest of all miseries, the culmination of the enormities of custom, is the forcible shaving of a Brahmana and other high caste widows. The cruel and pernicious custom is horrid beyond conception. (The widow) is simply helpless; she must submit to that cruel inhuman operation. She often faints, she is dumb-founded, tears flow in a flood... but nobody cares..."

This is a voice from the past, a quotation taken from a set of essays written in 1910 by the inmates at the Widows' Home in Pune. The historical cruelties perpetrated on the hapless Hindu widow are well-documented. They have been the stuff of legends and legislation. What is less known is that even in contemporary India, widows, although they may not have to undergo the barbarism of forcible tonsure, continue to suffer grievously in innumerable ways.

Equally ignored are widows in other parts of the world. They figure among the whether they live in Syria or Somalia, Ireland, Canada or the United States. Recently, World Public Opinion, an international research organisation, conducted a global survey on the treatment meted out to widows and divorced women in 17 countries, including India, China, USA, Indonesia, Nigeria and Russia.

India presents a curious case. Over the years there have been many attempts by social reformers to address the plight of Hindu widows and, in fact, for much of the 19th and 20th century social and legal reform was centred on the widow. However, enforcement of the laws remains a huge challenge. A clue as to why this is so may lie in an interesting trend that surfaces in the World Public Opinion poll: the percentage of Indians recognising that widows are discriminated against is low - only 42%. This, despite widespread evidence of structural inequalities and systemic biases directed against widows in Indian society. The report of the WPO poll suggests that this low result - lower than in any of the other countries polled - may be related to a relatively low level of consensus about the importance of women's rights, or the need for action against discrimination.

Many of these cruelties and biases are ordained by religious belief and social practice. The situation of the deserted widows of Varanasi is a prime example. These unfortunate women often dumped there by families unwilling to keep them, spend four hours chanting religious mantras and get a cupful of rice and a few rupees for their efforts.

It was this reality, in fact, that prompted Raj Loomba, the UK-based clothing industry magnate, to start campaigning on the issue from 1995. He observed that the real problem in India is that when a husband dies, a woman is regarded by her marital family and society in general as "inauspicious", a burden, and they begin to ostracise her. Loomba recalls, "Take my own mother. She was only 37 when she was widowed. Her social profile changed completely with that. Overnight, she was asked to take off her bangles. Her 'koka' (a traditional nose stud) was also removed. At my wedding ceremony, she was not allowed to sit at the marriage 'mandap' because she was regarded as inauspicious. I know of instances where widows were treated even more cruelly - forced to marry, against their will, the younger brother in the husband's family; robbed of their inheritance rights; sent back to their parental homes or even killed."

The treatment accorded to Loomba's mother caused him to perceive the issue in a broader context. "Today, in Iraq alone we are generating 100 widows every day. Wherever there are conflicts, there are widows, many of whom are refugees - and let us remember that the world is full of conflicts today. In Africa, the AIDS epidemic is leaving thousands of women widowed and their husbands' families will dispossess them of their assets so that they are left destitute. Even in prosperous countries like Finland, Germany and France, widows live in greatly straitened circumstances, surviving for the most part on modest pensions. There are an estimated 100 million widows in the world, with at least 25 million in India alone, and they in turn are responsible for the lives of at least three or four others, including children and dependents."

This, Loomba estimates, would make up about half-a-billion lives that are affected, either directly or indirectly, by the fact that widows today continue to lack both rights and recognition. "One would have thought that the plight of an estimated half-a-billion human beings would have invited exemplary attention and global redressal but that, unfortunately, is not the case," he comments.

Loomba would like the UN to consider designating a special day for widows. As he puts it, "It will make a difference. There will at least be one day when the world would pause to think of those innumerable faceless, nameless women who are forced to lead severely disadvantaged lives for no fault of their own. And then, perhaps, they would finally become the focus of some much-needed policy-making."

WOMEN'S FEATURE SERVICE, India - New Delhi
<http://www.wfsnews.org:80/>

Click here for [Full PDF Version](#)

Tiger victims' widows in Bangladesh

The Sundarbans, the last habitat of the Royal Bengal Tiger and the largest mangrove forest in the world, has become a major source of livelihood for many poor people in the southwest coastal region of Bangladesh. While collecting firewood and honey they are often attacked by tigers and a significant number are killed every year. According to local and national newspapers and informal surveys, tigers from the Sundarbans killed over 7000 men over the 18 year period June 1990 - June 2008. Their widows have become the most vulnerable people of the poor community in the Sundarbans adjacent area.

The widows are generally blamed for their husband's death by family members and others in the society who believe they did not diligently perform the important good-luck rituals while their husbands were in the Sundarbans (such as not using certain spices, not combing their hair, etc). The widows are ostracised by society and shunned by their in laws with whom they live often compelling them to leave their marital home to return to their parents' homes. Many have to go to live on the river floodplain or on government property.

Widows cannot remarry; no man will marry them because they are a 'sign of misfortune'. To survive, they catch fish and small shrimp from the rivers and canals helped by their children who do not attend school. The children suffer from severe malnutrition and various waterborne diseases. Young widows sometimes have to resort to prostitution and often become victims of sexual assault and sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS. Because most widows own no permanent property, they cannot receive the microfinance services provide by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Thus they pass their lives in undignified conditions as the outcasts of the society.

The tiger \, but these are almost never distributed. Such is the prejudice against widows, local representatives are afraid if they support them, people will not vote for them. Even though their husbands paid fees to the forest department to be able to collect resources in the Sundarbans, the Forest Policy does not provide any compensation to the widows.

LEDARS, a human rights NGO working in the southwest coastal region of Bangladesh, is the only group working to help the widows. Currently LEDARS has established a tailoring income-generating project for the widows and is currently working to ensure education for the widow's children. After the cyclone in November 2007, LEDARS assisted the widows to rebuild their homes that collapsed from the heavy winds and rain. Though financial resources are limited, LEDARS hopes to expand to their programs to assist the tiger victims' widows of Bangladesh.



NEWS FROM AFRICA

Organizations dealing with widows in Africa are stepping up their campaigns, seeking hard facts about the current state of widows in many countries and publishing their results in articles, booklets and on the web. In this issue we highlight work being done in Nigeria and Kenya.

Finding Out the Facts in Nigeria

Widowhood: Facts, Feelings and the Law edited by Dr Eleanor Nwadinobi who heads the Widows Development Organisation (WIDO) - one of our partner organisations in Enugu State, Eastern Nigeria. The booklet records the results of a survey among widows in Enugu State which shows that many harmful traditional mourning rights still persist, particularly in rural areas, despite laws which have been passed to prohibit them. The booklet gives the evidence of widows who have been forced to undergo these rites, as well as offering a blueprint for other states or groups who wish to bring in legal prohibitions of these practices which are deeply rooted in the culture of many of the traditional groups in the many regions of Nigeria. Enugu State was in fact the first of the five South Eastern States in Nigeria to pass a bill outlawing these practices.

These are some of the more prevalent practices described in the booklet:

Shaving of Widow's Hair: The belief is that a woman's beauty is intended for her husband only; when he dies she should be made to look as ugly and unkempt as possible.

Disinheritance: A married woman is viewed as a chattel and thus she should not own property. On widowhood all the marital goods and property are seized by the deceased husband's family, leaving the widow and her children destitute. The widow is pressured to marry a male family member, a brother or other blood relation of the deceased husband, so as to remain in the family.

Sleeping with the Spouse's Corpse: This cruel and inhuman practice is no longer commonly enforced, although a study in 2005 revealed that 2% of widows were still forced to undergo this rite.

Sitting on the floor: This symbolizes the loss of status of the widow now that she is no longer the chattel of a man. She has to sit on the bare earth, sometimes for weeks, during the prior of mourning, unable to wash and suffering various pains and cramps

Ostracism: In some groups, widows are deemed to have killed their husbands and are driven from their matrimonial homes. She is seen as evil and defiled and capable of defiling others; she may not be touched or shake hands.

Confinement and Isolation: A widow's movement is restricted; the period varies in different areas and can last from as little as 12 days to one year. During this time she is not allowed to farm, fetch water, cook or go to market.

Enforced Crying: Public lamentation is viewed as a demonstration of the widow's love for her husband. She is forced to cry and wail loudly at certain times during the day and at night.

Other Past Practices

All of these practices are now strictly forbidden in Enugu State and the four other South Eastern States. Anambra State passed the Malpractices Against Widow's and Widowers (Prohibition) Law in 2005, while the government of Ebonyi State has set up a Family Law Centre where cases of violation can be resolved and has instituted a housing scheme to build homes for widows and their families. But WIDO's survey, which gathered information from the traditional rulers who are the custodians of the culture of their people and from non-governmental organizations working on widow's rights, show that many of the practices are still prevalent.

KENYA – Navigating Power

Over eighty people, including 69 widows, attended a Widows' Navigating Power Sensitization Workshop to discuss strategies to strengthen widows rights in Kenya. Held last August in Mwala District, Eastern Province, the group shared experiences and concluded that:

- Widows are stigmatized in society
- Widows do not have access to basic services including food, clothing and shelter
- Widows stigmatize themselves and hence are unable to collectively demand their rights
- Famine affects women and can lead to involvement in activities such as prostitution
- Widows also suffer some degree of stigma in churches
- Married women view widows as husband snatchers
- There is lack of awareness of legal rights among widows hence they are unaware of marriage laws
- Widows living with HIV suffer double tragedy
- There are no community safety nets to support widows and orphans

Please see [full report here](#)

This information was provided by Leonida Odongo of Ebony Youth and Orphans Support Initiative Kenya (Email:Eyosik2004@yahoo.com).

GHANA - Measuring Success

The Widows and Orphans Ministry (WOM) in Northern Ghana is a non-governmental organization which gets assistance from overseas groups in Germany and Canada as well as local support from Action Aid Ghana, religious organizations such as the Accra Chapel, and from individuals.

Its latest report begins with the sad news that the year began with a tribal conflict that lasted for six months. As can be expected the war left many widows, which greatly increased the work of WOM. This disaster was followed by severe flooding that displaced many people; nonetheless they were able to maintain 97 local groups. However the heartening message from the report is that many small groups are determined to continue working despite the lack of financial and other support.

WOM has supported flood victims, including 8 blind and poverty-stricken widows, 100 orphans in school, and has completed the purchase of a grinding machine to extract oil from soya beans, groundnuts and peanuts. This will bring much needed revenue to the communities served by WOM. The building of a six-room shelter for widows outside Bolgatanga with the help of CUSO (Canadian University Service Overseas) has been completed. WOM plans to add a further six rooms with the help of the American Embassy.

Peace building has been one of WOM's main concerns and some 47 widows have been organized to report immediately early signs of conflict, and any person who buys a gun. This year WOM will be working with local authorities to end the harmful cultural practices directed at widows. Widows report a great reduction in violations because of the education done in workshops, and the training of people to report cases of violations and to confront perpetrators who abuse widows.

WOM's programme of human rights education includes lobbying the traditional rulers, encouraging them to collaborate with the Municipal Assembly to make by-laws that will protect widows from undergoing humiliating cultural practices. The success of their programme is indicated by the fact that some chiefs in the area *now* attend funerals and take action to prevent such rituals as stripping widows naked.

A copy of WOM's annual report and further information about its work can be obtained from National Director, Madame Betty Ayagiba, *Email: womghana2000@yahoo.com*

UGANDA

Our partner in Uganda, Jane Opolot of Woman of Purpose, came to the UK during the summer and thanks to one of our donors, Access 4, was able to talk about her work with widows in Pallisa at the local church. With the money she raised there she was able to buy a vital gift for 75 of the widows' children – impregnated mosquito proof bed nets and bed sheets - which she gave to each child at their Christmas party.



Children of Ugandan widows rejoice and embrace Christmas gifts of mosquito nets.

WIDOWS, AIDS, HEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN AFRICA

Vanessa von Struensee, JD, MPH

The summary of this article on widows draws the attention of Governments to "one vast category of women, struggling to survive across regions and cultures, who have been utterly neglected. They are the poorest of the poor, the most oppressed, violated and invisible and their voices are the most unheard. We are speaking of widows. Millions of widows are young mothers, some still children, all subject to extreme discriminatory practices and victims of neglect by governments. The gross human rights violations they experience in many areas of their lives have implications for the whole of society and development in general which cannot be ignored. Their poverty, often due to lack of inheritance and land rights or social support systems, aggravates their vulnerability to violence.

The huge increases in the numbers of widows due to AIDS, armed conflict and ethnic cleansing, has resulted in many millions of children being withdrawn from school because of destitution. The vulnerability of widows' daughters and child widows is especially severe, forcing them into unsuitable early marriage and early widowhood, life on the streets, prostitution and other high risk activities such as servile domestic service in the context of trafficking and HIV/AIDS infection.

Governments have done little to ensure that widows obtain their human rights to inheritance and land ownership. They are accountable for omitting to protect widows from gross mental, physical and sexual abuse perpetrated for example, through coercive traditional practices such as degrading and life threatening mourning rites; or resulting from cruel accusations of witchcraft leading to their brutal murder. Across cultures widows are "chased off" from their homes, robbed of their property and have no access to justice systems because these violations occur within the private sphere of the family.

www.crisisstates.com/download/forum/HIV/901widowsaids.pdf

ABOUT WRI

Widows' Rights International supports organisations in South and West Asia and 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 the Paypal button to help us help these disadvantaged women in their struggle for their basic human rights.



Widows' Rights International

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Thank you for supporting Widows Rights International.