



CSW SAYS NO TO VIOLENCE AGAINST

A resounding NO to violence against women and girls signalled the end of a successful and historic session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York last March.

The Commission was attended by representatives of the UN headed by Michelle Bachelet, Executive Director of UN Women, Madame Marjon Kamara of Liberia, the Chair of the Commission, who represented national governments. There was also a record turnout of civil society and other organisations at the 57th Session of the Commission.

All who attended agreed that the time had come to send a message worldwide that there was now a strong "coalition of the willing" ready and able to work to end this scourge of violence against women at the national and international levels. The priority of the Com-

mission this year was the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls. Although the final documents do not mention the specific concerns of organisations, there was much in the document which are relevant to the issues which organisations such as WRI are seeking to eliminate.

In fact, in the final and other statements which were made at the Commission's meeting, it was clear that the harmful cultural practices which constrain the lives of widows are widely understood and are now an integral item on the international agenda.

This was borne out by the definitions of what this violence means which the Commission accepted.

In the agreed conclusions, various paragraphs encapsulated the special criteria issued to define the situation affecting widows,

such as: "violence against women" means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women and girls.

These include threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. The Commission also noted the economic and social harm caused by such violence.

In special paragraphs devoted to the responsibilities of States to act, custom, culture and tradition were included as follows:

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H.E. Ms. Marjon V. Kamara (Liberia) of the African States Group, Chair.
Photo Credit: UN Women/Catianne Tijerina, taken from www.facebook.com/UNCSW



States should “strongly condemn all forms of violence against women and girls and to refrain from invoking any custom, tradition or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination as set out in the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women.”

The Commission also recognised “all human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated and that the international community must treat human rights globally in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing and with the same emphasis, and stressed that, “while the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of States regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

The Commission also looked at how the implementation of legal and policy frameworks and accountability must be strengthened. Member states were urged to:

“Review and where appropriate, revise, amend or abolish all laws, regulations, policies, practices and customs that discriminate against women or have a discriminatory impact on women, and ensure that the provisions of multiple legal systems, where they exist, comply with international human rights obligations, commitments and principles, including the principle of non-discrimination”

Finally the Commission addressed the structural and underlying causes and risk factors in order to prevent violence and mentioned in particular the need to transfer social norms and practices involving violence as follows:

States were urged to “design and implement national policies that aim at transforming those social norms that condone violence against women and girls, and work to counteract attitudes by which women and girls are regarded as subordinate to men and boys or as having stereotyped roles that perpetuate practices involving violence or coercion”

(Agreed conclusions: www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/CSW57_agreed_conclusions_advance_unedited_version_18_March_2013.pdf)

INCREASE IN INITIATIVES TO COMBAT VIOLENCE

The conclusions of the meeting, were presented by Ambassador Kamara, Chair of the Commission who said that there has been a significant increase in the number and types of initiatives to combat violence against women.

She added that good practices have been identified and multiple stakeholders have become engaged, but despite this, violence continues, occurring in all countries and regions during peace and in conflict and causing extensive human suffering.

While there had been ex-

tensive legal and policy reforms resulting in strengthened and comprehensive legal policy frameworks, she reminded national Governments of the importance of adhering to international and regional instruments.

These instruments include the Beijing Platform for Action, CEDAW, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, on the Rights of Women in Africa and the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

Access To Justice

However she also noted that while the importance of adequate legislation and policies is recognised, their effective implementation and enforcement remain a challenge. Despite improvements, discriminatory attitudes on the part of officials and procedural barriers to women’s access to justice continue to contribute to low rates of reporting. She said that civil society, in particular women’s organisations, play a crucial role in addressing this scourge of violence.

Role of Local Leaders

Ambassador Kamara also said that engaging with community, traditional and religious leaders was critical in preventing and responding to violence and that efforts have increased to engage these leaders to end many of the practices which perpetuate violence against widows. She added religious leaders have



Image take from:

<http://cedarleadershipforum.com/2013/03/03/>

committed to working with governments to eradicate harmful traditional practices. Formal cooperation between governments and traditional leaders has been developed to promote positive cultural practices and eliminate those which discriminate against women.

Advocacy by WRI

WRI has for years been advocating at national and international levels, that acceptance of harmful cultural practices are not only breaches of human rights commitments by government, but are also an integral and important part of the world wide campaign to end violence against women.

Chair's summary http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/panels/HLRT_chairs_summary.pdf

ADVOCACY BY ORGANISATIONS AT CSW 57

Organisations from Africa and Asia representing widows of all ages in developing and post-conflict countries submitted statements to CSW highlighting many of the hidden aspects of violence perpetrated against widows and their daughters.

These organisations also stated that:

- i. widow-related gender based violence has been long neglected by governments and the international community.
- ii. this violence had not been adequately researched, and there is still no reliable data or qualitative information on the causes, nature and consequences of these practices.
- iii. violence was endemic in the environment in which widows live in conflict and post conflict societies.

iv. widows face violence from within the family, where deprived of rights to inheritance of property and land, they can be "inherited" as a chattel and are exploited as domestic, agricultural and sexual slaves.

v. the daughters of poor widows were also at risk from the violence of forced marriages.

vi. the common practice was for poor widows to remove their daughters from school and to marry or sell them to older men.

vii. In the context of the HIV-AIDS pandemic, such men are often widowers and carriers of the virus and in time, these little girls become child widows and are condemned to a life of violence as their mothers have suffered.

LOCAL SUPPORT FOR CAMPAIGN AGAINST WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES.

The decade long campaign to raise awareness about the treatment of widows is gaining support at the local level in many countries. Two articles-from Togo and India describe how local leaders are increasing their efforts to end harmful practices as well as protect the rights of widows. The first from Togo outlines how a local Chief Togbui Dzede, worked to rid his community of a history of degrading rites and violence against widows.

In India, with the help of Outreach International a group of rural widows were trained to communicate with government bureaucrats responsible for awarding them pensions.

Customs in Togo

Becoming a widow exposes women to acute forms of discrimination in regions of Togo where traditional widowhood practices persist.

Chief Dzede, a 48 year old traditional leader in the Canton of Woame, prefecture of Kloto, Togo, decided to end the history of degrading rites and violence against widows. The father of four and paralegal has led his township since 1985. As a child, his father left his mother because she did not bear him many children. He heard many

cases of violence against women at the traditional court and these solidified his commitment to defend women's rights.

He explained that "Every Tuesday there's a general hearing in the Chief's court. During our arbitration meetings, we sometimes hear our mothers and sisters complain about various forms of violence against them. Husbands often don't understand their wives' grievances," he says.

Twelve years ago, when he was elected chairman of the chieftom of his community, he convinced traditional and cultural leaders to eradicate harmful and degrading rites for widows.



Chief Togbui Dzede

Later, he participated in a nationwide project to end violence against women with the NGO Alafia, supported by the then UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

In 2005, Chief Dzede ruled on an inheritance dispute between four sisters and two brothers. After their father's passing, one of the sons grabbed all of the deceased's property and threatened to kill his siblings, especially his sisters, because his father's estate would become the property of the families his sisters had married into.

"The Council and I told him that old practices were over and that we must comply with the law. We called for a meeting to divide the property among the children and eventually all the descendants had a share of the inheritance" he said.

Togo is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and has enshrined women's rights in the 1992 constitution, as well as in the family code.

Both the Committee on the Elimination of

Discrimination against Women and the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review have urged Togo to introduce measures to modify or eliminate customs that discriminate against women, in particular widowhood practices.

The UN Human Rights Office has also mainstreamed human rights and gender issues in Togo through its country office, its regional office in Dakar, Senegal, the UN Country Team and civil society organizations on the ground.

Chief Dzede says "My wish is that the Togolese government would financially support traditional leaders, NGOs and other women's rights organizations, raise awareness and promote access to widows all over Togo in order to improve their condition. Some districts have abolished harmful practices and unequal distribution of estates. But much remains to be done."

He adds that the Togolese government should also review certain articles of the Code of Persons and the Family that disfavor widows when it comes to sharing their husbands' properties."

Report and image taken from:

www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/FightingwidowhoodpracticesinTogo.aspx

Indian Widows Fight for Pensions

In the poverty-stricken community of Kuljng, India, malnutrition and diseases are prevalent, and for some, even fatal. Living in poor conditions, it becomes increasingly difficult for women to care for their children, especially after the death of a spouse.

Whether death is caused by old age or a result of poor living conditions, it presents a tremendous struggle for those left behind.

With Outreach International's help, six widows received pensions that will allow them to care for themselves and their children on their own.

By law, the Indian government allows widows access to a pension. But unfortunately, it's not quite as easy as it sounds. Those seeking out such a gift must travel miles outside their home communities, fill out forms and endure a questioning—difficult tasks for those unable to read or write and having little experience communicating with



people outside their own vil-
lages.

Because of the stigma wid-
ows carry in India's caste
system, they often face diffi-
culty overcoming oppres-
sion—adding one more road
block to obtaining a govern-
ment pension.

Living in the same commu-
nity for generations, many
families are unfamiliar with
much outside their own envi-
ronment, and few are knowl-
edgeable that such grants ex-
ist.



Bringing awareness to the
community, Outreach Inter-
national helped teach widows
in Kuljing how to speak with
government authorities and
properly fill out government
forms.



Through a series of role-
playing exercises, women left
behind feelings of inadequacy
and became self sustaining,

ready to seek out their pen-
sions.



Recently, these six widows
made the courageous journey
to a government station.

With their new-found confi-
dence, they successfully re-
ceived government support,
giving hope to their children
and their communities.

The full report and all pic-
tures taken from:
[http://outreach-
international.org/six-
courageous-widows-in-
india-see-pensions-for-
family-support/](http://outreach-international.org/six-courageous-widows-in-india-see-pensions-for-family-support/)

**CHANGING
ATTITUDES:
Women support**

Normally in the Hindu relig-
ion widows are not allowed
to put vermillion (kumkum)
on the foreheads of other
women whose husbands are
alive.

However with the help of a
local charity, this custom has
been challenged in an inno-
vative project to enable 25
widows to participate in this
ritual.



Earlier this year a local char-

ity, Sakhya organised women
and widows at a sports day



and this has led to a remark-
able change in the attitude of
women towards widows.



The report featured on the
Caritas India website is avail-
able at [http://
pareeswar-
tha.blogspot.co.uk/2013/03/
change-in-attitude-of-women
-towards.html](http://pareeswartha.blogspot.co.uk/2013/03/change-in-attitude-of-women-towards.html)

**WIDOWS
ABANDONED AT
INDIA'S LARGEST
FESTIVAL**

Men and women, particularly
widows have been aban-
doned during the religious
event of the Maha Kumbh
Mela.

According to a report pub-
lished by Laura Spinney
for National Geographic News
on February 22, 2013, Anshu
Malviya, an Allahabad-based
social worker, confirmed that
this practice is still prevalent
at this festival attended by
millions of devotees every
twelve years.

People attend to wash away
their sins in the sacred River

Ganges, however human rights groups have found that some people take advantage of the immense crowds and choose to abandon their elderly relatives whilst on the pilgrimage.

Access to Law and Rights for Widows



Image of lost pilgrims who wait for relatives. Photograph by Parth Sanyal, Reuters, available at <http://news.nationalgeographic.co.uk/news/2013/02/130223-culture-travel-religion-india-maha-kumbh-mela-world-women-widow-hindu-festival/>

Government-run shelters may provide housing for individuals however conditions are described as notoriously bad and many prefer to remain on the streets, begging.

The holy cities Varanasi and Vrindavan offer a place for widows to be sent often when families do not or can not support them. According to the report Dr Mohini Giri, a Delhi-based campaigner for women's rights and former chair of India's National Commission for Women, estimates that there are 10,000 such women in Varanasi and 16,000 in Vrindavan.

For the full report see:

<http://news.nationalgeographic.co.uk/news/2013/02/130223-culture-travel-religion-india-maha-kumbh-mela-world-women-widow-hindu-festival/>

Image taken from:

<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/mahakumbh-2013-lakhs-of-devotees-ritual-bathing-mauni-amavasya-allahabad/1/249674.html>



WRI trustee Dr Karen Brewer spoke at a London conference celebrating international women's week.

The Pacing Conference theme: Celebrating Women in Business & Empowering Widows & their families was addressed by Dr. Brewer in a wide ranging speech on widows rights, outlining the abuse which widows are subjected to in many countries. These abuses have been well documented by WRI and other organisations working to end these harmful cultural practices and in her speech, Dr Brewer highlighted the work which WRI and others are now doing.

Dr Brewer stated that in most countries where this abuse is prevalent, the work to counteract them is carried out almost exclusively at a local level by charitable and non-governmental organisations. In addition, even if poor widows had help to invoke the law in cases where property rights are challenged, this rarely occurs, because the majority of widows in these countries are unaware of their rights under the law or are too traumatised or frightened to protest. She added that some of the charities working in this area now provide access to training so that widows can gain new skills.

These include providing homes for shelter and cows to give them access to food for their families by selling milk at local markets. Work is also being undertaken with local community leaders to increase awareness of the rights of widows - but there is still much work to be done.

This new agenda includes the new initiative by WRI to draw up a database of widows' organisations which have managed to change practices for the better as well as a list of lawyers and activists able to provide better access to case law. This access is being hampered because many Governments still ignore the issue as census records do not provide enough statistical data.

WRI is seeking assistance from all organisations and individuals which may be able to provide information relevant to the database on specific cases relating to access to law.

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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