



GHANA WIDOWS IN HISTORIC MARCH



A march by widows brought the streets of Bolgatanga, the capital of the Upper East Region in Ghana, to a standstill last June 2010. It took place at the start of a five day conference on the rights of widows and orphans in a traditional setting.

Organised by Mrs Betty Ayagiba, national director of the Widows and Orphans Movement (WOM), the purpose of the conference was to bring together widows from all over Ghana and give them the opportunity to speak openly about the traditional customs and violence which they encounter when their husbands died.

The conference also discussed human rights issues and a representative from the Ghanaian Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) said that widows and all women in

Ghana, had the absolute right to refuse to subject themselves to "barbaric and atrocious widowhood rites".

These included acts such as widows being made to drink the water that was used to wash their dead husband's body in order to prove their innocence of their deaths. In other cases, widows are made to tie leaves around their waists and walk barefoot from one end of the village to the other end.

There was also the practise of widows being forced to stay indoors for months before they are allowed out, which was described as a classic infringement of their right to free movement enshrined in the country's constitution.

Another speaker, Chief Moses Abaare Apia 1V, of the traditional Binaba Council, spoke on the role of cultural leaders in protecting the rights of

“These included acts such as widows being made to drink the water that was used to wash their dead husband's body in order to prove their innocence of their deaths.”

women. He said that while tradition did not necessarily mean outmoded ideas, norms and practices that are static.

But he conceded that some of these practices had outlived their usefulness and needed to be adjusted and refined to meet modern requirements. However many aspects of modern life were seen by the traditional leaders as incompatible with their wish to maintain values and assist the vulnerable.

Message from the Chair



Patsy Robertson

In accordance with the decision by trustees that WRI would engage actively in lobbying on behalf of widows at the international level. I attended a meeting of the fifteenth session of the Human Rights Council in September. And was accompanied by fellow trustee Dr. Karen Brewer.

I was given the opportunity to make a statement to the Council on 24th September 2010. It highlighted the situation facing widows and called for the adoption of a special Protocol targeting the rights of widows.

The Statement follows;

Over the last 30 years, the international community has made great strides in improving the status of women around the world since the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. However, one group of women, namely widows, remain amongst the most vulnerable and disenfranchised members of society. They face discrimination across the globe irrespective of cultures, religion, ethnicity

or even economic status and education.

Mr President, only one of the General Recommendations made by the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women mentions widows (Article 16(1)h) and this only in the context of inheritance rights.

Despite the numerous provisions in international instruments protecting the rights of women, there is evidence that, even in countries which do not suffer conflicts, in many communities the rights of widows, as women and members of the human race, are disregarded:

“...there is evidence that, even in countries which do not suffer conflicts, in many communities the rights of widows, as women and members of the human race, are disregarded”

- ◆ Widows cannot inherit land and property on the death of their husbands as male inheritance laws are still prevalent across the globe and especially in developing countries.
- ◆ Widows can be evicted from their communities and stripped of their belongings;
- ◆ Widows may lose the right to liberty and their right to freedom to marry (or protect themselves from forced marriage).;
- ◆ Widows may lose the right to custody of their children .

The children of widows also suffer social exclusion, having to assist the head of the household

financially, so they are withdrawn from education, have to work at early ages (sometimes as street children) and sometimes, in the case of girl-children, forced into early marriage or prostitution or worse.

Widows Rights International requests that the Human Rights Council urge CEDAW to develop a Protocol specifically targeting the rights of widows, perhaps drawing on both the General Recommendation by the CEDAW Committee mentioned above, and Article 20 of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights of Women in Africa which states:

"State Parties shall take appropriate legal measures to ensure that widows enjoy all human rights through the implementation of the following provisions:

a.) that widows are not subjected to inhuman, humiliating or degrading treatment;

b.) that a widow shall automatically become the guardian and custodian of her children, after the death of her husband, unless this is contrary to the interests and the welfare of the children;

c.) that a widow shall have the right to re-marry, and in that event, to marry the person of her choice.

Such a protocol should encourage women of all statuses to engage with government, community leaders and civil society groups to improve the situation of widows.

Patsy Robertson

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Report on Geneva visit

Dr. Karen Brewer, WRI trustee, underlined that the visit to Geneva was for the specific purpose of participating in the discussion on the integration of a gender perspective in the work of the Council. There was also a general discussion about the implementation of the Vienna Declaration and Plan of Action 1993.

The debate in the Human Rights Council on the issue of integration of a gender perspective in the work of the Council took place in the first session where presentations were made by government representatives on the promotion of gender equality in their countries.

HRC discussion on Gender Integration

The creation of UN Women which is due to come into existence in January 2011 was welcomed by all delegations. Michelle Bachelet, former President of Chile, will be the Under Secretary General to head this new body.

Delegates pointed out that although progress had been made in mainstreaming gender issues, there was still a great deal of work to be done. There was a need for cooperation within the UN system and that all agencies should be required to have a gender perspective and the UN special rapporteurs should promote gender as an integral part of their work (for ex: the UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking had not only mainstreamed gender but also age). It was important that gender was not seen as an add-on but an integral part of the work of the UN.

Columbia and Mexico had made a proposal that there should be a UN Rapporteur on Discriminatory Laws which was supported by a number of delegations.

There was a general view that the Universal Periodic Reviews should be required to integrate a report on gender issues in all country reports.

A number of countries reported on their work in im-

proving women's rights. Indonesia mentioned its participation in the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and commended.

The treaty bodies were commended for their work in the area but there was still a lot of work to be done on the ground.

Training on gender issues was still required, in particular to combat violence against women and particular attention should be devoted to women in particularly vulnerable situations. There were a number of issues which the Council did not hear about and it was important to assess why these issues were not raised. Men and boys should take responsibility for women's rights to be considered.

Most reports focused on the issue of violence against women but there was also a need to look at discrimination in health/ public services/ political participation etc...

There was also a call for the UPR to conduct an evaluation on what each state had done to eliminate the laws discriminating against women. The HRC had a role in identifying good practice that could be used elsewhere.

There was still a lack of accurate gender data and the UN had to give better support to member states in order to gather the information. The role of NGOs was also important in gathering data.

There was also a need to have a more balanced composition of the treaty bodies. The UN should have a gender audit.

Following the state reports there were a number of statements from NGOs. In response to some of the concerns raised by the discussion, the importance in ensuring that the issues discussed at international level permeate to the national level was stressed

by participants.

The fact that the Code of Conduct of Special Rapporteurs did not include a demand to take into account gender issues was seen as a missed opportunity. There was also a need to improve the special procedures so that they worked from a gender perspective too.

A full report on the session can be found at: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=10372&LangID=E>

Discussion on the Vienna Declaration and Plan of Action

In the afternoon, there was the General Discussion on the VDPA which reaffirmed the solemn commitment of all States to fulfil their obligations to promote universal respect for and observance and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all.

A number of states made interventions in relation to the right to self-determination, discrimination on the basis of disability, the fight against impunity, the trafficking of peoples and gender and sexual violence .

There were interventions from a number of NGOs, including WRI's oral statement. A full report is available on: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=10375&LangID=E>

In their conclusion on 1 October 2010, the UN Human Rights Council called upon States to fulfil their obligations and commitments to revoke any remaining laws that discriminate on the basis of sex and remove gender bias in the administration of justice, taking into account that those laws violate their human right to be protected against discrimination.

It was also decided to establish, for a period of three years, a Working Group of five independent experts on the issue of discrimination against women in law and practice.

Ghana widows describe abuses ... Continue from Page 1

One of the main purposes of the conference was to compile a definitive list of widowhood rites as carried out in each region of the country. Some of the practices described by representatives from each region are as follows:

Volta Region

◇ When a woman loses her husband, she sits on a mat or bare floor for 7 days. On the 8th day she is taken to a nearby river and instructed to bathe with special leaves provided.

◇ She is then permitted to wear only black for a year to signify that she is still in mourning.

◇ In 1970 the above rules were amended to provide that widows should sit on the mat for only 2 days while surrounded by other widows. On the third day she is allowed to bathe in very cold water, and sit on a chair but must still wear black for three months.

◇ Widows still have no rights to inherit property and families can still claim the entire property of the deceased, leaving the widow and her children to fend for themselves.

Northern Region

◇ Described by participants as diabolical and unwarranted, the practice is that a widow is confined for 40 days, after the death of her husband.

◇ After this period she is bathed in some herbal concoctions, as there is a belief that she will die if she dreams of her husband.

◇ The widow's legs are tied with cowrie shells, to signify that she is undergoing widowhood rites.

◇ She is prohibited from eating food prepared by her late husband's family, but can be fed by her own family members

Upper East Region

◇ The widow is confined for 4 days, with a rope tied around her neck, head, chest and wrist to signify commencement of the rites

◇ The widow is banned from talking to any man and if she does, she will be coerced to marry him when the rite is over. She is however allowed to communicate with all her children, regardless of sex.

◇ She is not allowed to eat from the same pot or drink from any family vessel,

◇ After 4 days, the widow is bathed with certain herbs amidst singing and drumming.

◇ In addition, she is forced to choose to marry any of her late husband's brothers, in accordance with customary requirements. Failure to do so, subjects her to abuse and being labelled a witch, thief, prostitute, or murderer. She becomes an outcast and is deserted by everyone and sometimes killed.

◇ In certain areas, the widow is nude and is only allowed to cover herself with leaves. Other areas require widows to cover themselves with leaves and to carry a pot on their back containing boiled herbs while an old woman pours the concoction over her. She is stripped almost naked in the presence of both males and females. After this ritual, the widow has to eat special food prepared in the open, then she can enter her house to continue mourning. Her hair is shaved, put in a calabash with other material, seeds are added, and then she is given a hoe and told to sow the seeds beginning at the graveside and continuing until she reaches her house. The rationale behind this is to pacify the dead husband so that he will allow her to sow seeds the following year.

Once the widow reaches the house, the elders of the late husband's family, will demand that she marries one of his brothers and if she refuses, the consequences are devastating – neglect, confiscation of property, name calling, societal outcast even death.

◇ Another practise is to force widows to sit in a refuse container, and eat specially prepared food, usual a herbal soup.

◇ All property is taken away by the late husbands' relatives,

leaving the family destitute.

Upper West (Nandom) Region

◇ When a man dies, the widow is prohibited from staying in the matrimonial home for 3 days. After the third day, a mixture of clay and water is smeared over her entire body to signify the commencement of the widowhood rites.

◇ She is prohibited from changing her clothes, and must sit on the bare floor.

◇ She is left alone and unattended

◇ She loses all her entire inheritance and entitlements to her husband's family.

Ashanti Region

◇ The widow's hair is entirely shaved and she must wear black

◇ She is confined for 40 days and must bathe at least three times daily

◇ She must mourn her husband for a year and cannot marry again during that period.

◇ Custom demands that if there is a will, the statutory law in this region is enforced and the widow can inherit. If there is no will, the family elders have the right to decide under customary law what happens.

Way Forward

At the end of the meeting, WOM appealed for an alliance of organisations working in the field of women's rights to assist in taking action to prevent abuses in the traditional environment which prevails in Ghana and other countries. The meeting also called on the Ghana Government to reprimand and take punitive action against perpetrators of human rights abuses against women and children.

State institutions such as the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU) of the Ghana Police Service as well as the country's judicial system should be strengthened, financially and technically, to enable them to act swiftly against perpetrators of some the abuses outlined above.

“The widow's legs are tied with cowrie shells, to signify that she is undergoing widowhood rites.”

TANZANIA



Tanzanian widows

Currently, no law in Tanzania prevents a woman from owning property and no law defends the deprivation of property owned by a woman. And yet, there are numerous cases where relatives deprive a widow and her children of their inheritance.

This is especially true when the husband dies of HIV-AIDS and the widow is found to be HIV positive. The case of Beatrice

Thomas was publicised recently. Seven years after her husband had died, she was still struggling to defeat the claims of her husbands relatives to the matrimonial home.

According to the Tanzania Human

Rights report 2009, which was compiled by the Legal and Human Rights Centre, whatever protection the 2008 HIV (Prevention and Control) Act gives to women and especially widows living with HIV, they continue to be marginalized and stigmatized.

But it is not only for health reasons that widows are persecuted. According to Tike Mwam-

bipile, head of research at the Tanzania Women Lawyers Association, women meet stiff opposition from male relatives and in-laws, especially when there is no will left by the deceased.

"Common practise has it that men own property while women do not because they have been under the latter's care from time immemorial" she says. She also points out that the law is divisive. For most communities, save for Muslims, a woman under the law has to provide monetary contribution to succeed in a division of property case. "Regardless of whether she really contributed but does not have documents to show for it or whether she was a home-maker while her husband fended for her and the children," she says.

Source: <http://allafrica./stories/20009160784.html>

NIGERIA

Call for government to empower women

Awareness of the need to protect and empower women and in particular widows in Nigeria was highlighted at the recent meeting where former Military President Ibrahim Babangida was guest speaker. Addressing a gathering of religious and political leaders in Benin City he said he was disgusted at the "pathetic treatment being meted out to widows in many parts of the country". He said that "Until recently, widows in some parts of the country were made to drink the bath water used in washing the body of their deceased husbands as guarantee that they were not responsible for their husbands' death."

"The widow has no share in her late husband's property, even where it is clear that such property had been jointly acquired by both of them while the husband was alive. After all, in most parts of the country, she too is considered part of the man's property," he stated. He called on the gathering to work to establish an adequate legal framework for the protection of widows and said "the widow must be given her due pride of place. She must be treated with dignity and self respect."

<http://www.medindia.net/news/Widows-Marry-Younger-Women-in-Tanzania-Tribal-Tradition-74251-1.htm>

UGANDA

Lango Kids, Widows Face Eviction

The eviction of widows from their lands, homes and property continues to bring extreme hardship to them and their children. In Uganda, there is a large number of widows who have lost their husbands from the HIV/AIDS pandemic as well as the twenty year war waged by the Lords Resistance Army in the north of the country.

A report compiled and issued by the UK based Uganda Women's Efforts to Save Orphans (UWESO UK) stated that they have information about 198 land cases involving widows and vulnerable children in the Lango sub region in northern Uganda. UWESO provides legal and other assistance to widows in this area and so far, 127 cases have been settled through mediation, 44 referred to the magistrates court and 27 are pending.

In their report, the cases of two

widows are cited. The first concerns the treatment of Rose Okello, a widow in Okwang sub-county, Otuke district, who was made destitute after her in-laws evicted her from her land after she gave birth to a disabled child. Rose's husband, Samson Okello, died in a refugee camp in Lira town in 2007. Three years later when she returned to the camp, she found it had been disbanded.

She took refuge at a local hospital but was chased away by her in-laws. Following an intervention by UWESO UK's local office she was taken back to the camp for displaced people and given an acre of land.

The other case concerns Dorita Akullo, 64, of Loro in Oyam district. She was helped by UWESO UK to win a case against her stepsons who planned to evict her from her land. She said her stepsons ordered her to leave the land, saying she was old. "I almost committed suicide because when I

went to the sub-county court committee, they demanded sh20,000 to hear my case," Akullo narrated.

"Three years later when she returned to the camp, she found it had been disbanded."

According to Tom Ivan Etti, the UWESO UK co-ordinator, conflicts over land are often based on the refusal by widows to be inherited by their relatives. In addition Judith Adoko of Land and Equity Movement in Uganda (LEMU), states that 50% to 75% of widows are involved in land conflicts. She also noted that about 80% to 90% of women returning from IDP camps are denied access to their land.

In the local magistrate's court in Lira, there are 502 land disputes and over 300 appeals waiting court's decision. Justice David Wangututsi of the judicial studies institute said the judicial officers were too few to handle the cases. A number of cases in the region had led to murder.

Source: Patrick Okino, 8 August 2010, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201008091217.html>

NIGERIA

Nigerian NGO Fights Customs that Harm Women

A group of women lawyers in the Rivers State in southern Nigeria have come together to eliminate cultural traditions that affect women. The Nigerian chapter of the International Federation of Women Lawyers are working to end cultural practices discriminating against widows.

The chairperson for the state Ms Florence Fiberesima says that there must be an end to these traditions that force widows to undergo degrading rites as well as losing the right to inherit property owned by their late husbands.

In a recent campaign, the lawyers called for an end to the culture of silence in the country. They said that women have been silent about the problems

they are facing and don't want to speak out. But if women wish to change the culture they should now stop hiding their true feelings and refuse to continue to suffer under the practices that reduce their potential as human beings. As a result, of FIDA's efforts, The Rivers State has enacted laws banning harmful practices including female circumcision.

Source: Tony Tamuno | Port Harcourt, Nigeria 11 August 2010, <http://>

KENYA

Kenya's New Constitution

Kenya's new constitution now provides for the elimination of gender discrimination in law, customs and practices related to land and property. These discriminatory arrangements bore most heavily on widows, as un-

der Kenya's previous law, inheritance was governed by customary law preventing widows laying claim to assets when their husband died.

A new bill of rights also provides that all marriages, including customary law marriages, should be registered or certified under an Act of Parliament. This will go a

long way to protect interests of widows in disputes with in-laws over property. The new constitution has been widely welcomed by Kenyan women who see it as the beginning of the end of their historic status as second class citizens.

Source: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201008120171.html>

INDIA**"City of widows"**

The fate of widows in India has been the focus of attention for Centuries although, practices which led to the death of widows have been successfully outlawed by the Indian Government. However traditional attitudes which see them as a liability result in thousands having to seek refuge in temples and to congregate in cities such as Vrindavan, commonly known as the "City of Widows". In a recent interview Mohini

Giri former chair of the Commission of Women in India has described, a widow as "zero and all her powers are lost". These forgotten widows chant at temples for food and live the rest of their lives in poverty and isolation.

There are some 40 million widows in India- 10% of the country's female population. Some are as young as 10 years old and are forced to spend the rest of their days in seclusion or earning a living through prostitution. In Vrindavan most of the 16.000 widows who live

there have no choice but to beg in the streets. Traditionally widows are allowed only one meal a day and must renounce all earthly pleasures.

Mrs Giri said that "traditions are man made and are prevalent in society due to their widespread acceptance in the social milieu... a patriarchal Brahminical society has enforced wrong values in society."

Full article is available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jun/30/india-city-widows-discrimination>

NEPAL**Widows voices empowered**

Earlier this year, we reported on the International Conference on Widowhood organised by Women For Human Rights in Nepal. The conference highlighted the unprecedented rise in the numbers of widows worldwide, caused by armed conflicts, HIV/IDS as well as natural disasters and the persistence of harmful traditional practices.

The President of Nepal The Rt Honourable Dr. Ram Baran Yadav attended and met with delegates from the thirteen countries

represented: - Afghanistan, Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Germany, India, Italy, Nepal, Pakistan, Scotland, Sri Lanka, USA and the UK. The meeting was described by Lily Thapa, founder president of WHR, as an important step by the Nepalese government in recognising and showing support for the widows movement.

The goals and objectives of the conference were to establish an international voice on the status of widows; to collaborate with international partners on effective advocacy campaigns on issues affecting widows; to examine how to mainstream

widows rights in national policies in order to put pressure on international bodies to act on widows rights issues; and finally to share best practices on how organisations working for widows can be more effective.

Delegates at the meeting presented papers describing the condition of widows in their countries, a valuable addition to the growing body of knowledge about the treatment of widows worldwide.

Full report of the conference may be found at http://www.globalactiononwidowhood.org/GLoW/Welcome_files/WHR%20Nepal%20Widows%20Conference%20Report%202010.pdf

DR CONGO

A Christian organisation base in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, OCD is seeking support for their work to reduce the miserable conditions which affect orphans, disinherited women such as widows and women raped in the region.

War and expansion of

HIV/AIDS are among the major causes of the increasing numbers of widows in the villages. Women are traumatized by these events, and have lost their capacity to help themselves and their children.

OCD is now planning to help these women to help themselves by promoting projects such as:

- The distribution of

seeds and tools to 150 farming widows

- The organisation of activities to improve nutrition of 50 non farming families.

There are also other income generating activities among widows which, it is hoped, will change attitudes to them and will encourage their independence.



Widows– both child and adult in Tanzania face discrimination on daily basis.

Contact: MBOKO / FIZI SOUTH KIVU PROVINCE IN DR. CONGO, P.O BOX 36 UVIRA, VIA BUJUMBURA / BURUNDI, ocd_absi@yahoo.fr

News From Groups seeking support
small community groups serving increasing numbers of widows and children

PAKISTAN

Faith Prayer Ministers Pakistan is an evangelical and humanitarian organisation located in Pakistan. It is both an inter-denominational and non-profit organisation founded in 1998.

One of Faith Prayer Ministers Pakistan programmes, ***Widows Food and Clothes Program*** helps widows in the surrounding communities of Karachi and Hyderabad in Pakistan. The program is focused

on widows who are aged, sick and who cannot work due to disabilities by providing them with food, clothes and medical help as well as financial support on monthly basis.



Widows receive food and clothes packages

Contact: Faith Prayer Ministers Pakistan, Evangelist Amjad Farooq, House #3, Mess 96 Ext. Doctors colony J.P.M.C Karachi Pakistan 75510, +92-300-2338564, +92-21-9201558,

ABOUT WRI

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.



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



Yes, I want to support WIDOWS RIGHTS INTERNATIONAL' s struggle for social justice for widows in sub-Saharan 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

Address.....

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 :/...../.....

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