



Widows' Rights International

Registered charity number: 1069142

\*\*\*\*\*

## Newsletter

\*\*\*\*\*

N°11

March 2008

### CONTENTS

<b>Message from the Chair</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>About WRI</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>NEWS FROM AFRICA</b>	<b>4-7</b>
Hope for Widows: Promoting Widows Rights in Uganda	4
Mzansi Widow's Rights in South Africa	5
In-laws & Widows: Dark rumours often follow Women who lose their husbands	6
<b>NEWS FROM ASIA</b>	<b>8-9</b>
The Case of Half-Widows in Kashmir	8
Widows: The photographs of Fazal Sheikh	8
<b>IN BRIEF</b>	<b>10-11</b>
WRI Attends the 52 <sup>nd</sup> CSW	10
Abuse of Older Women – From <i>Bodies-Broken Dreams: Violence Against Women Exposed</i>	11
<b>PLEASE HELP WRI</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>GIFT AID FORM</b>	<b>13</b>

#### **WRI's Board of Trustees**

Patsy Robertson, Chair  
Victoria Brittain  
Diana de Deney  
Zarin Hainsworth  
Naana Otoo-Oyortey  
Eleanor Stobart  
Kate Young

#### **WRI's Auditors**

F. W. Smith, Riches & Co,  
18 Pall Mall  
London SW1Y 5LU

#### **How to contact us**

[enquiries@widowsrights.org](mailto:enquiries@widowsrights.org)

or

WRI  
Room 405, Davina House  
137-149 Goswell House  
London  
EC1V 7ET

or

Telephone:  
+44.(0)20.7253.5504

#### **Please do visit our website**

[www.widowsrights.org](http://www.widowsrights.org)

#### **DISCLAIMER**

WRI includes in its Newsletter and other mailings material which may be of interest or relevance to its member organisations. Much of the contents is drawn in good faith from material sent to WRI by members and others. WRI does not accept responsibility for the accuracy of the contents, and inclusion does not imply endorsement of any particular point of view, product or service.

## MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

Women throughout the world have always marked International Women's Day – March 8- by drawing attention to the issues which concern them in their societies. More often than not, after a flurry of publicity, commitments given are quietly shelved and life continues as usual. But this year we have reports of the success of a campaign waged by concerned women in India for action to end the widespread practice of female foeticide and the preference for boys, who are seen as future breadwinners. It is estimated that this has led to an estimated half a million abortions of female fetuses annually.

In an announcement to mark International Women's Day, the Government of India has made a commitment to pay cash to poor families in seven states to keep their girl children and that as an extra incentive, any girls who reaches 18 will get be given extra cash, provided she has completed her education and is not married.

Although selective abortion has been outlawed in India for over a decade, only one doctor has been convicted. The government is now considering tougher measures, including life sentences, to bring this practice to an end.

This action by the Indian Government underlines the fact that merely passing laws against certain cultural practices do not lead to their eradication. There has to be monitoring of the situation on the ground and tough follow-up action against perpetrators. This is a lesson which is most relevant to Governments in countries where the rights of widows are consistently abrogated and where many are subjected to dangerous and humiliating rites.

These customary practices are still overriding human rights and other laws in many countries and the time has come for Governments to take positive action to end them. India may now have decided that money will change people's behaviour, but it is also considering punitive action. Our hope is that it should now move against the ill treatment of widows and their children and that countries in Africa, South East Asia and elsewhere should begin to take whatever action is necessary to end the horrible practices which blight the lives of millions of widows worldwide.

For further information on the Indian Government's initiative, please click [here](#).

Patsy Robertson, Chair  
**March 2008**

**Widows Rights International (WRI), Registered Charity no 1069142**

Room 405, Davina House, 137-149 Goswell Road, London EC1V 7ET, Tel : 020.7253.5504, E-mail : [enquiries@widowsrights.org](mailto:enquiries@widowsrights.org), website:  
[www.widowsrights.org](http://www.widowsrights.org)

# WIDOWS RIGHTS INTERNATIONAL

## **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

Traditional customs in many developing countries, especially in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa – which can deprive a widow of home and livelihood or subject her to social ostracism - lead to dire poverty for widows and their children.

Even when modern laws exist to prevent these abuses, ignorance of the law, or cultural habits, impede access.

### **Widows are young as well as old, because of:**

- \*Child marriage
- \*HIV/Aids
- \*Civil strife

### **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

### **WRI offers resources for:**

- Capacity building and networking
- Advice and information for national groups, especially through our website
- Research into the status and condition of widows and their children
- Legal action for widows' rights
- Assistance to raise international awareness of degrading practices
- Advocating creation of international instruments protecting widows' rights
- Supporting regional meetings to promote social justice for widows

### **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

## **Widows Rights International (WRI), Registered Charity no 1069142**

Room 405, Davina House, 137-149 Goswell Road, London EC1V 7ET, Tel : 020.7253.5504, E-mail : [enquiries@widowsrights.org](mailto:enquiries@widowsrights.org), website: [www.widowsrights.org](http://www.widowsrights.org)

# NEWS FROM AFRICA

## PROMOTING WIDOWS RIGHTS IN UGANDA

The enjoyment of human rights remains very elusive for many widows in sub-Saharan Africa where the patriarchal customary system continues to prevail. In African traditional society widows are treated as lesser human beings in a complex society based on communal existence. The status of widows is generally dreaded because of the social stigma it carries. Their position is even more precarious when considered in light of other surrounding circumstances that continue to formally relegate them to an inferior position in society.

Despite the application of British common law and in statutory law for over a century, customary law has continued to dominate, especially **rural areas** and customary norms and rituals continue to affect the lives of many Ugandans. This is so especially when it comes to ownership and transmission of land and other property issues such as inheritance and succession. This is worsened by the fact that even where statutory provisions and rights exist, many people in the rural areas are not aware of their existence let alone the content. As a result, widows suffer because many issues pertaining to their rights are usually based on customary law and traditional norms irrespective of whether statutory laws of succession apply or not. Often traditional customary law, which is negotiated by clan elders, is used to compromise the provisions of the law. Among the practices that most affect widows are wife inheritance and the denial of the right to own property. In a nutshell, most customs that are frequently followed in many African cultures are not pro-widows!!

Widows have continued to lose land and their homes because the society insists on following customs that have been outlawed. They are still oppressed by customs that forbid them to speak out, to inherit property and to control their sexuality. Some cultures and cultural practices in Africa have relegated widows to a position of second-class citizens. Property grabbing and widow harassment is still commonplace, and many of these practices derive from some of the oppressive perspectives inherent in customary law, although they are also a reflection of the modern vice of greed.

Illiteracy is one of the leading causes of widows' rights abuse. Some people in the community exploit their ignorance and illiteracy to deprive them of their rights. For example, some of their in-laws forcefully take their children away from them because they are unaware of the fact that they have a right to bring up their children.

### THE WAY OUT

Various approaches should be employed to ensure better standards of living for widows. Because of the patriarchal stereotypes that are ingrained in most of these widows' mindsets, it is important that we do not oppose outright the culture per se, but find a way of initiating a human rights concept within the existing cultural context.

- **CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS:**

Experience has shown that agitation for cultural changes that are perceived as located outside what is considered part of the culture more often serves as a stimulant for reactionary forces. Permeating the cultural system and legitimising conduct that is otherwise considered deviant, such as inheritance by widows, should avoid this kind of social conflict. It should be noted that culture is dynamic; with human rights education, communities can be sensitized to do away with cultural norms and traditions that

**Widows Rights International (WRI), Registered Charity no 1069142**

Room 405, Davina House, 137-149 Goswell Road, London EC1V 7ET, Tel : 020.7253.5504, E-mail : [enquiries@widowsrights.org](mailto:enquiries@widowsrights.org), website: [www.widowsrights.org](http://www.widowsrights.org)

undermine the dignity of widows. This must be done cautiously, taking into consideration the problem of illiteracy and ignorance of laws governing widows' rights.

**Woman of Purpose**, under the Hope for Widows Project has been successful in pressing towards this. We undertake widows' rights education with a three-fold focus strategy to include the widows, community and cultural leader.

1. We give the cultural leaders their rightful position in society and talk to them at their level of understanding.
2. We invite them to our drama competitions geared at highlighting the plight of widows and they get the message outright. The drama plays in double role i.e. relieving the community of stress as they enjoy the drama but also passing a message across.
3. We lobby for change in the legal and policy framework in order to create a suitable environment for the enjoyment of widows rights.

▪ **ECONOMIC ALTERNATIVES:**

Widows are trying to take a number of practical, social and economic measures to improve their own lives. The initiatives employed are specific to the form of injustice being addressed and the intended goals. For example, despite the hurdles and obstacles they face in accessing resources, widows have risen to the challenge and come up with ingenious ways to access financial resources, increase their income and thereby improve their lives. At grassroots level, widows have formed self-help groups and clubs through which they pool resources and assist one another financially. Many take the forms of Rotating Savings and Credit Associations formed by small grassroots groups of mutually trusting persons. With minimum contributions from members, many such self-help groups ensure that widows save small amounts of money, which they can use to improve their homes or to start small businesses in the informal sector. Such groups form, expand and dissolve as needs are met and are therefore dynamic.

**Prepared by: Jane Opolot, Project Director HOPE FOR WIDOWS**

## **THE MZANSI WIDOW'S FORUM – South Africa**

The Mzansi Widow's Forum (MWF) based in Johannesburg, South Africa aims to provide mediation and understanding between widows and their in-laws. The Forum also supports children who have lost their parents and men who have lost their wives. According to the President of the forum, Mummie Khumalo, the in-laws usually blame the women for their husband's deaths, seize their assets such as money, the house and cars and go as far as banishing them from the family. Khumalo's main objective through the forum is to "create awareness on the rights of widows, widowers, orphans and other women in the areas of basic education, legal awareness and income-generating activities." Further, MWF wishes to lobby the government in order to change the way the administration of the deceased estate is dealt with.

"Mzansi Widows Forum believes in the following rights for wives who have lost their husbands:

- 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

The forum would also like to change laws that do not help widows and also launch activities to empower widows, widowers and orphans throughout the country."

**Widows Rights International (WRI), Registered Charity no 1069142**

Room 405, Davina House, 137-149 Goswell Road, London EC1V 7ET, Tel : 020.7253.5504, E-mail : [enquiries@widowsrights.org](mailto:enquiries@widowsrights.org), website: [www.widowsrights.org](http://www.widowsrights.org)

The Mzansi Widow's Forum was officially established in 2006 by Mummie Nukthalo Khumalo as a result of her own experience of being blamed for her husband's death. After two years, she was acquitted of this charge and was chased away from her marital home with her son. Her in-laws left her with nothing and even banned her from attending her husband's burial. The Mzansi Widow's Forum now has 3,075 members across South Africa and has had many successes in creating better understanding between widows and their in-laws and in helping widows realise their rights.

**Prepared by: Debjani Roy (WRI)**

**Source: Mzansi Widow's Forum newsclips ('Paving the way for widows and orphans' by Mpho Dube)**

## In-laws & widows

Dark rumours often follow women who lose their husbands.



Harmful traditional practices which have worn very heavy on widows have often been carried out by the elders in rural societies in Africa. This has led to the belief that it is men who are the main perpetrators of the punishments meted out to widows. However, in an article in Move! Magazine which we have reproduced below shows that mothers in-law have often been equally responsible for the traumatic experiences of many widows.

"Losing a husband is painful. Yet many widows suffer a double trauma when their in-laws and communities paint them with a black brush. Dark rumours will surface: "Yhusana apparently she killed her man to 'cash' him." If a widow puts up a stop-nonsense (fence), this becomes evidence that she killed her husband.

Norah Ngobeni, a social worker for 25 years and a trauma and bereavement counsellor, says she has come across many heartbreaking stories.

A widow once told her that her in-laws expected her to stay with her husband's corpse overnight (as is customary in many African traditions) alone. She was taunted by her in-laws, who suggested she should have allowed her husband to take a second wife – at least then she would have had company, they said.

**Widows Rights International (WRI), Registered Charity no 1069142**

Room 405, Davina House, 137-149 Goswell Road, London EC1V 7ET, Tel : 020.7253.5504, E-mail : [enquiries@widowsrights.org](mailto:enquiries@widowsrights.org), website: [www.widowsrights.org](http://www.widowsrights.org)

This is just one of the many cruelties women face, says Norah.

But what could be the cause of such cruelty? Norah says death of a loved one brings a lot of blame.

"Most widows blame themselves. They wonder if there was anything they could have done to save their husband." When there is external blame from the husband's relatives or community, the widow is put under enormous stress. "This means she will have to defend herself. Her pain takes a backseat," says Norah.

Mental and physical illness can arise from this 'second trauma'.

In-laws, especially the mother in-laws, also deal with the pain. "Often people concentrate on the widow. We must recognize the mother might act irrationally because she has lost a son," says Norah.

Dr. Gcwalisile Zulu-Kabanyane of Prince Ndabuko Creative Solutions, based in Eshowe, agrees that widows can get a raw deal.

"Some people say the woman killed the husband for money or she was cheating and wanted him out of the way. The widow's married friends or neighbours don't want them near their husbands, fearing they will steal them," Gcwalisile says.

Gcwalisile believes being neglected causes these women to do culturally unacceptable things like dating men.

**(The following article was reproduced from *MOVE! Magazine*, 13 September 2000. Thanks to Mzansi Widow's Forum for the clip.)**

**Widows Rights International (WRI), Registered Charity no 1069142**

Room 405, Davina House, 137-149 Goswell Road, London EC1V 7ET, Tel : 020.7253.5504, E-mail : [enquiries@widowsrights.org](mailto:enquiries@widowsrights.org), website:  
[www.widowsrights.org](http://www.widowsrights.org)



# NEWS FROM ASIA

## THE CASE OF 'HALF-WIDOWS' IN KASHMIR

Hundreds of women in the region of Kashmir in Northwestern India have been leading a life in limbo because their husbands have been arrested and have gone missing since a separatist revolt occurred in 1989. According to the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), a total of 10,000 people have gone missing since the revolt and 2,000 of them were married, male and young. It is women such as Begum Rafiqa whose husband was arrested in 1997 and whom she has not seen in almost a decade. To describe her situation, she says, "I am neither a widow nor divorced, I am married but without a husband." In the region of Kashmir, women in Begum's situation have been labelled 'half-widows', leaving them in a situation where they are unable to re-marry and move forward with their lives. Many of the men are presumed to have been tortured, kidnapped and possibly killed. Rafiqa has made many attempts to search for her husband in security camps and police stations but to no avail.

Rafiqa's faith does not allow her to re-marry for at least seven years after her husband has gone missing. This is the case for most of the 'half widows' who come from Muslim families and lower-income backgrounds. In many cases, these women have been forced to leave their husband's or in-laws' home and have returned to their parent's home. Rebuilding their lives is very difficult since those who would like to marry are unable to find partners since other men fear that the women's husbands may in fact return. 'Half widows' also fall through the cracks of the legal system where they are unable to provide proof of their husband's death and therefore are ineligible to claim any government compensation that may be available for widows or any property that may have belonged to their husbands.

A number of these women are psychologically traumatised firstly for the fact that they are left waiting for a husband who may or may not be alive and secondly, because they are still expected to live within the traditional framework of marriage even without the presence of their husbands. For the 'half-widows' of Kashmir, life is indefinitely at a pause.

**Prepared by: Debjani Roy (WRI)**  
**Source: The Guardian**

## WIDOWS: THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF FAZAL SHEIKH

Amongst the four photographers short-listed for the 2008 Deutsche Borse Photography Prize is American photographer Fazal Sheikh, nominated for his publication *Ladli*. Fazal Sheikh is both an activist and photographer who in his latest publication depicts the blatant discrimination and prejudice against women and girls in modern-day India. Preceding the publication of *Ladli*, Sheikh published a work entitled *Moksha* which presents a series of photographs specifically on the subject of widowhood in the holy city of Vrindavan in northern India. Accompanied by his own words, Sheikh provides an insight into these women's despondent situations, giving us a glimpse of the hollow world in which they have been forced to exist. The text is based on interviews which Sheikh conducted on this photographic journey. In most cases, the women he speaks to are cast away from their marital homes once their husband's pass on; often deemed a source of bad luck, responsible for their husband's death. They are condemned to a life of sacrifice and depravity where they are stripped bare of any legal right to their homes, property, land, and even their own children. They somehow manage to find shelter within the several ashrams around city, barely living off of charitable donations which ultimately lead them to beg

**Widows Rights International (WRI), Registered Charity no 1069142**

Room 405, Davina House, 137-149 Goswell Road, London EC1V 7ET, Tel : 020.7253.5504, E-mail : [enquiries@widowsrights.org](mailto:enquiries@widowsrights.org), website: [www.widowsrights.org](http://www.widowsrights.org)

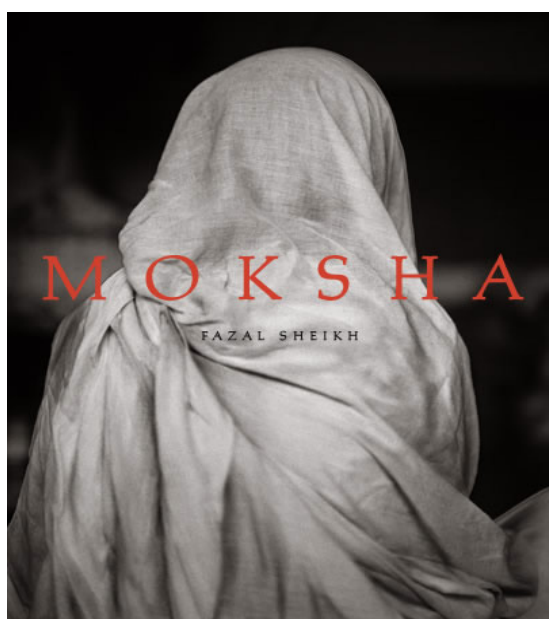


on the streets for money. The lives they lead in this holy city is one in which they are preparing for the next, hopefully better life to come or the ultimate reprieve of Moksha or heaven where they can escape the cycle of death and rebirth and finally rest among their gods.

Images from both of these publications are now on display at [The Photographer's Gallery](#) in London. You can also click [here](#) to see a preview of the photographs from *Moksha* and [here](#) for the photographs from *Ladli*.

For **FURTHER READING** on the plight of widows in Vrindavan, click [here](#) for the article, 'Singing for Supper' published in **The Economist** (August 16<sup>th</sup> 2007) and [here](#) for the article, "Nothing to Go Back To" published in the **Women News Network** ([www.womennewsnetwork.net](http://www.womennewsnetwork.net)).

**Prepared by: Debjani Roy (WRI)**



**Widows Rights International (WRI), Registered Charity no 1069142**

Room 405, Davina House, 137-149 Goswell Road, London EC1V 7ET, Tel : 020.7253.5504, E-mail : [enquiries@widowsrights.org](mailto:enquiries@widowsrights.org), website: [www.widowsrights.org](http://www.widowsrights.org)

# I N B R I E F

## WRI at the 52<sup>nd</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

The 52<sup>nd</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women took place from February 25<sup>th</sup> to March 7<sup>th</sup>, at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City. The main theme was 'Financing for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women' and the review theme was 'Women's Equal Participation in conflict prevention, management and conflict resolution and in post-conflict peace-building'. The emerging issue was 'Gender Perspectives on Climate Change'.



(l-r: Maina Juliet Mkandawire, Marie-Louise Pambu, Zarin Hainsworth and Augusto Lopez Clarus)

WRI participated in the CSW by submitting a statement addressing the themes as well as hosting an event on the issue of 'The Role of Widows in Sustainable Prosperity' at the Church Centre in New York. The panelists included Maina Juliet Mkandawire from Malawi, Marie-Louise Pambu from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zarin Hainsworth from WRI and Augusto Lopez Clarus, former Chief Economist of the World Economic Forum.

Zarin opened the event by welcoming everybody and introducing the panelists. The first panelist to speak was Augusto who made the very valid point that instead of addressing an audience at a women's conference at the UN, it is important that we also address the people of the villages around the world where widows often undergo harmful treatment, in order to change their minds. Marie-Louise Pambu gave a very powerful first-hand account of being widowed and ordered to leave her home by her in-laws in the DRC. Further, she asked, 'how are widows supposed to contribute to society when they have no food, home, family, money, etc.' A common issue facing widows is the fact that very often they are unaware of their rights, and therefore are stripped of all of their property and assets. Those who do know their rights still have problems accessing them through the many legal and social barriers. Marie-Louise also talked about the value of using micro-credit systems to help widows reach self-sustainability. WRI was also joined by the head of one of our partner organisations, Eleanor Nwadinobi from Widows Development Organisation, who spoke about their grassroots work.

**Widows Rights International (WRI), Registered Charity no 1069142**

Room 405, Davina House, 137-149 Goswell Road, London EC1V 7ET, Tel : 020.7253.5504, E-mail : [enquiries@widowsrights.org](mailto:enquiries@widowsrights.org), website: [www.widowsrights.org](http://www.widowsrights.org)

The meeting concluded with a final word from all the panelists and suggestions for positive action which included making sure the issues of widows is included in CEDAW shadow reports of members states, utilizing the media to promote the issue of widow's rights and considering the widow's angle on the many issues that we are already working on in the women's sector.

For more information on the 52<sup>nd</sup> Session of the CSW, please click [here](#).

**Prepared by: Debjani Roy (WRI)**

## ***ABUSE OF OLDER WOMEN – from "Broken Bodies – Broken Dreams: Violence against Women Exposed"***

"All over the world, women live longer than their partners. Some forms of violence against older women are based on cultural practices that specifically target widows, who are often regarded as insignificant without their husbands. While widows of all ages are subjected to mistreatment, older widows can be particularly vulnerable when their age lowers their status in the community and makes caring for themselves more difficult"

To read more, click [here](#).

**Widows Rights International (WRI), Registered Charity no 1069142**

Room 405, Davina House, 137-149 Goswell Road, London EC1V 7ET, Tel : 020.7253.5504, E-mail : [enquiries@widowsrights.org](mailto:enquiries@widowsrights.org), website:  
[www.widowsrights.org](http://www.widowsrights.org)

## URGENT APPEAL FOR SUPPORT

**WRI is in urgent need of funds so as to be able to continue supporting our existing partners. Please consider sending us a donation.**

If you are a tax payer in the UK please consider signing a GiftAid declaration which converts every £10 gift to £12.80; every £15 gift to £19.20

Gift Aid form is given below.

**Widows Rights International (WRI), Registered Charity no 1069142**

Room 405, Davina House, 137-149 Goswell Road, London EC1V 7ET, Tel : 020.7253.5504, E-mail : [enquiries@widowsrights.org](mailto:enquiries@widowsrights.org), website:  
[www.widowsrights.org](http://www.widowsrights.org)



**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 ..... Address .....

..... Postcode .....

**Gift Aid Declaration**

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**, Room 405, Davina House, 137-149 Goswell Road, London EC1V 7ET. Tel: 020.7253.5504

e-mail address : [administrator@widowsrights.org](mailto:administrator@widowsrights.org)

**Thank you for supporting Widows Rights International.**

**Widows Rights International (WRI), Registered Charity no 1069142**

Room 405, Davina House, 137-149 Goswell Road, London EC1V 7ET, Tel : 020.7253.5504, E-mail : [enquiries@widowsrights.org](mailto:enquiries@widowsrights.org), website: [www.widowsrights.org](http://www.widowsrights.org)