

Ending the Harm: Confronting Harmful Traditional Practices Against Widows

In many societies, widows face not only the loss of a life partner but also a myriad of harmful traditional practices that exacerbate their grief and suffering. These practices, deeply rooted in cultural norms and often perpetuated through generations, subject widows to discrimination, isolation, and economic hardship. It is essential to shed light on these harmful traditions, challenge ingrained beliefs, and work towards a more compassionate and equitable society.

Forced Mourning and Isolation

In some cultures, widows are subjected to prolonged periods of mourning during which they are isolated from the community. This isolation can be emotionally devastating, leaving widows without the support networks crucial for healing and recovery. There are also mourning rites such as shaving the dead, forced fasting amid other more rigorous abuses.

Inheritance and Property Rights

Widows often face challenges in securing their inheritance and property rights. In many places, widows may be denied access to their deceased husband's assets, leaving them economically vulnerable and dependent on extended family members.

Harmful Rituals and Stigmatisation

Some societies have rituals that stigmatise widows, branding them as bearers of bad luck or even accusing them of causing their husband's death. Such harmful beliefs contribute to the social ostracisation of widows, further deepening their emotional distress. In many places there is a notion that in order to rid the widow of bad luck, she needs to be cleansed. This is often done through forced sexual intercourse with a male relative of the deceased husband.

Forced Remarriage and Sati Practices

In some cultures, widows are pressured into immediate remarriage, often against their will. Additionally, historical practices like Sati, where widows were expected to self-immolate upon their husband's death, although outlawed, continue to leave a lasting impact on the perception of widows. This is of particular difficulty in areas where polygamy is practiced. Here the widows who previously lived as one family will be married to different brothers of the deceased, separating them from the family support network built up over years. Though where there has been violence or abuse, those widows may well welcome a new home.

Limited Educational and Employment Opportunities

Widows, particularly in traditional societies, may face barriers to education and employment opportunities. This lack of access to resources hinders their ability to rebuild their lives independently, perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependency. Widows can seldom afford education for their children and there is research that indicates that the girls of widows are more vulnerable to trafficking and being prostituted. Their boys are more vulnerable to radicalisation and being enveigled into militias.

Advocacy and Legal Reforms

International and local organisations, along with activists, are actively advocating for the rights of widows. Legal reforms aimed at protecting widows' inheritance rights and challenging discriminatory practices are crucial steps towards dismantling harmful traditions. Organisations working for widows must be supported financially as they work on the ground and are best placed to make a real difference.

Relationship to Agenda 2030

If the Sustainable Development Goals are to be achieved, the harm suffered by widows must be stopped. Without data desegregated by marital status and sex there are no robust figures for the number of widows in the world. A conservative estimate is 300million. This is more than those who suffered from apartheid and more than the population of Indonesia which is the fourth most populous country in the world. According to the World Health Organisation and their World malaria report, there were 249 million cases of malaria in 2022, thus more widows than those suffering from malaria - one of the leading causes of ill health world wide. With such a huge demographic it is easy to compute that if widows could be assisted out of poverty SDG 1 could be closer to achievement. The same applies for SDG 2, 3, 4, 5 and at least 8, 10, 15.

Addressing harmful traditional practices against widows requires a multi-faceted approach that combines legal reforms, awareness campaigns, and community engagement. It is essential to challenge ingrained beliefs, promote gender equality, and provide support networks that empower widows to rebuild their lives with dignity and autonomy. By collectively confronting these harmful traditions, societies can pave the way for a more inclusive and compassionate future where widows are respected, protected, and given the opportunity to thrive beyond the shadows of harmful practices. When they thrive, they contribute to their communities and are a force for peace and prosperity for their children, family and society at large.

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