

International Widows Day

a briefing paper and action guide
for UN member states and NGOs



*Why the UN
has designated
an annual day
for widows*

*Building support
for the cause*

*Creating a
country action plan*



THE LOOMBA FOUNDATION
Caring for widows around the world

International Widows Day

a briefing paper and action guide
for UN member states and NGOs



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The Loomba Foundation is a specialist organization established to alleviate the plight of widows and their dependents worldwide and to eradicate discrimination and injustice against widows.



The Loomba Foundation is accredited as a Non-Governmental Organization with the United Nations Department of Public Information and has Special Consultative Status in its Economic and Social Council.

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Message to Member States, 2011

Ban Ki-Moon

UN Secretary-General 2007-2016

This first International Widows' Day is an occasion to call attention to the many "firsts" that women must face when their husbands die. In addition to coping with grief, they may find themselves for the first time since marriage without any social safety net. Far too often, widows lack access to inheritance, land tenure, employment and even the means to survive.

Message to Member States issued on the occasion of the first UN-designated International Widows Day, 23 June 2011

In places where a widow's status is linked to her husband, she may find herself suddenly shunned and isolated. Marriage — whether she desires it or not — may be the only way for a widow to regain her footing in society.

Of the approximately 245 million widows in our world, more than 115 live in extreme poverty. In countries embroiled in conflicts, women are often widowed young and must bear the heavy burden of caring for their children amid fighting and displacement with no help or support.

Some of these widows are teenagers — or even younger. The death of their husbands can leave a terrible legacy these widows must endure throughout their remaining years.

All widows should be protected by the rights enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other international human rights treaties.

But in reality, interpretations of customary codes, as well as traditional mourning and burial rites, often deny widows virtually all of their universally recognized rights.

Despite the many difficulties widows face, many make valuable contributions to their countries and communities. Some take on leadership roles at the highest levels. Others work in their families, taking in orphans, serving as caregivers and reaching across lines of conflict to mend tears in the social fabric.

We must recognize the important contribution of widows, and we must ensure that they enjoy the rights and social protections they deserve.

Death is inevitable, but we can reduce the suffering that widows endure by raising their status and helping them in their hour of need. This will contribute to promoting the full and equal participation of all women in society. And that will bring us closer to ending poverty and promoting peace around the world.



Introduction

Lord Raj Loomba CBE

Founder and Chairman Trustee of The Loomba Foundation

International Widows Day is a day when we remember that many millions of widows remain invisible and unheard, unable to support their children as they themselves face degrading treatment and, often, extreme poverty. On International Widows Day, we give voice to their story to the world and spread awareness of their plight. Our aim is to form a grand coalition of governments, NGOs, communities and people of goodwill, united in their determination to bring about a culture change across all societies, faiths and communities that will put a stop to such injustices, so that widows can be respected as valued members of their communities.

Over the two decades of the Loomba Foundation's campaign to eradicate discrimination and injustice against widows, we have gained significant support not only from the United Nations but also from governments including those of India, the United Kingdom, the United States, Rwanda, Gabon, Kenya and many more, and this has played an important part in raising global awareness.

It is right to celebrate progress. But we must never forget the millions who remain in urgent need, with no prospect of relief, whose hopes depend on the success of our mission.

To those widows I say: We are here for you. We will never give up. We lead a growing army of people and organisations who care about you and your dependents. Between us we hope to reach and help as many of you as possible. In time, our aim is to change entrenched attitudes, to enlighten the minds and soften the hearts of those who would visit injustice upon you.

To governments I say: This blights your communities and harms the life chances of your daughters. You can help. Ensure that victims of oppression have a voice in the corridors of power. Make sure the human rights you have endorsed in international agreements are enshrined in domestic legislation. Work to provide individuals whose rights are infringed with meaningful recourse to law. Support programmes to educate and raise awareness. Facilitate collaboration between authorities, communities and support organisations.

Finally I say this to those who would join us to right this wrong: We've barely started yet. Your contribution is important. If we stay the course, eventually, together we will succeed.

In this publication, UN Member States, NGOs and community organisations will hopefully find useful advice and encouragement that can help to change the way society treats widows. That action starts at home, each in our own country, and by working together we can make a lasting change in the world.

*Raj Loomba launching
the International
Widows Day initiative
at the House of Lords,
London, May 2005*



Chapter One

Origins of a Global Campaign

New York, December 21, 2010. The 65th General Assembly of the United Nations was gathered in the General Assembly Hall for its 75th plenary meeting when Ali Bongo Ondimba, president of the Republic of Gabon, a sub-Saharan country located on the Atlantic coast of Africa bordered by Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon and the Republic of Congo, rose to speak.

President Ondimba of Gabon addresses the UN General Assembly

The topic of President Ondimba's address was the desperate plight of millions of widows all over the world, women who for no reason other than the loss of their husband are ostracised by their communities; deprived of their livelihood and possessions; unable to support their children and all too often condemned to a life of indignity and destitution.

It does not take a genius to figure out that such injustice undermines the very communities that perpetuate it; that aside from the moral wrongs, this widespread and deeply embedded discrimination entrenches poverty and suffering, and destabilises the social fabric. What is most shocking about the plight of widows is how widespread it is, yet at the same time how invisible.

In his resolution, President Ondimba emphasised that economic empowerment of women, including widows, is critical if we want to eradicate poverty. Women, including widows, should be an integral part of the state they live in, he said, calling on all Member States, the UN itself and other international organisations, to give special attention to the plight of widows and their children, and to raise awareness about this issue around the world.

President Ondimba called on the General Assembly to institute an annual day of action to highlight this important cause and to fight discrimination against widows. The day was to be called International Widows Day, and it would take place every year on 23 June.



Origins of a Global Campaign

The journey to that General Assembly session in New York began more than half a century earlier in Dhilwan, a small rural town in the State of Punjab in India, when a wealthy local businessman, Jagiri Lal Loomba, succumbed to the still widespread scourge of tuberculosis. The date was 23 June 1954.

Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba, the inspiration of International Widows Day

This was a tragedy for Jagiri's wife Pushpa Wati and the seven children of the family – but for their ten-year old son Raj, what happened next was a shock that was to stay with him for the rest of his life. On the very day of his father's death, his grandmother ordered the young widow to remove her bangles, jewellery and bindi – the sign of a married woman – and henceforth to wear only white clothes. From a happy, fulfilled wife, his mother was instantly transformed into a desolate widow.

Shri Jagiri Lal Loomba (inset) was a successful businessman in Dhilwan

Years later, when Raj married Veena Chaudhry, he was enraged when the priest asked his mother to sit away from the altar lest, as a widow, she brought bad luck to the young couple. "Why," he recalled recently, "a mother who gave me birth, a mother who brought me up, who educated me and always wished well for me – how could she bring me bad luck?"

Pushpa Wati Loomba was a strong woman, determined to ensure her children's prospects were not harmed by this tragedy. Her husband had ensured that the family was provided for. To give her children the best chance in life, Pushpa Wati resolved to devote the whole of their resources to ensuring that all the children, including the girls, received the best education possible, right through to university.

Like his siblings, Raj studied hard and went on to build up his business in the UK and India, but he never forgot the impact of those events. He realised how lucky he had been, and that many others were not so fortunate. "What if my father had not been able to leave us money?" he wondered. "My mother would not have been able to send us to college or give us nutritious food and good clothes to wear. The images and the state of poor widows and their children I had seen in my younger days all came rushing back to me."

Raj realised that if he had been the son of a poor widow, he would never have been able to build a major fashion company in London. "I would have grown up illiterate, possibly plying a rickshaw in some suburban town in Punjab."

Widows in India

For millions of widows from poor backgrounds in India, the situation is bleak. It is not unusual for them to be blamed by the family for the husband's death. Property and wealth is often taken away. A young woman who is widowed shortly after marriage cannot return to her own family, as she is thought to bring bad luck. The fate that awaits many widows is that they must wear plain white clothing, cannot work, find it difficult to remarry and are unable to pay for their children's schooling. It is not unusual for older widows to be abandoned by their families and even child widows can face a life of destitution.

So in 1997, after his mother had passed away, Raj and his wife Veena established a Foundation in his mother's memory to focus on the injustices suffered by widows and their children in his native India, building up a nationwide programme that has transformed the lives of more than 100,000 people.



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Origins of a Global Campaign

The sin of omission

But soon he began to see that the problem is by no means confined to India alone. Widows face unimaginable abuse and discrimination in many countries, including in Asia and Africa, where they are often subjected to degrading treatment, deprived of the means to support themselves and their families. There was little or no prospect of this changing: the problem was quite simply not seen or acknowledged anywhere.

“It can be said,” a report by UNIFEM (the predecessor of UN Women) stated in 2001, “that there is no group more affected by the sin of omission than widows. They are painfully absent from the statistics of many developing countries, and they are rarely mentioned in the multitude of reports on women’s poverty, development, health or human rights published in the last 25 years.”

But saying there’s a problem is not the same as doing something about it. In the early 2000s, there seemed no chance that this issue would ever rise to the consciousness of the international community.

So it was that Raj Loomba, half a century after that fateful day in Dhilwan, resolved on a plan to transform the fate of millions of the most disadvantaged and marginalised people in the world. A plan to eradicate discrimination against widows.

So deeprooted are the customs and prejudices that have sustained this injustice for centuries that Raj knew he would need the support of governments, international organisations, NGOs, researchers, educators, philanthropists and all people of goodwill to bring about changes not only in legislation and targeted support, but in attitudes and cultures the world over.



Origins of a Global Campaign

On 26 May 2005, Raj Loomba rose to address a meeting in the Cholmondeley Room at the House of Lords in London.

“The plight of widows,” he told his audience that day, “is an important hidden issue in many countries. Millions of widows and their children are the poorest of the poor, often invisible, forgotten and unheard. In many countries across Africa, Asia and elsewhere, widows can lose their human rights, land and property, and can be exposed to violence and abuse.”

Before an audience of leading politicians, businesspeople, humanitarian activists and journalists from the UK, India and around the world, Raj Loomba announced the launch of an annual, global day of action to tackle the prejudice that lies at the heart of widows’ suffering. The day, he announced, was to be known as International Widows Day. The date on which it would take place each year was 23 June: the date on which, as a 10-year old boy, Raj had lost his father and witnessed first hand the injustice of what happened to his mother because she became a widow.

On 23 June 2005, exactly four weeks after the launch, Raj Loomba and local schoolchildren released 1,000 multi-coloured balloons into the sky at Tower Bridge in London to mark the first International Widows Day, and similar events took place in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Uganda and South Africa.

So International Widows Day was born.

Raj Loomba knew that no amount of scholarships, sewing machines and fundraising events – so effective in transforming the lives of tens of thousands – could be leveraged to make a lasting impact on this global problem. To change the culture globally, the international community must be engaged. Governments must be persuaded, cajoled or shamed into helping. Communities must be encouraged to collaborate. Aid programmes must be focused not only on today’s need but on educating and empowering people to break the cycle of deprivation. So the first International Widows Day was never an end in itself: it was the beginning of a journey.

Lord Dholakia, Cherie Blair and Raj Loomba outside the House of Lords at the launch of International Widows Day, 2005



Origins of a Global Campaign

An ambitious strategy

Raj Loomba set about plotting the course from Tower Bridge to United Nations Plaza. From the start, he was determined to persuade the United Nations to adopt International Widows Day as one of its own official days of action. That would provide a platform to engage all governments, and to create structures through which human rights campaigners, community organisations and people of goodwill could all collaborate.

How to get there? The strategy had to be ambitious. Connect with partners in other countries. Knock on the doors of the corridors of power. Persuade good people to become champions. International Widows Day events and activities were planned with two objectives in mind: to raise public awareness and to engage the international community.

Releasing balloons at Tower Bridge, London, and (below) Raj Loomba with London schoolchildren, to mark the first International Widows Day, 23 June 2005





Origins of a Global Campaign

International Conference

On the second day of action on 23 June 2006, widows groups, public figures and political leaders were brought together by the Loomba Foundation to take part in an International Widows Conference at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in London under the patronage of HRH The Prince of Wales. Chaired by the broadcaster Alastair Stewart, the conference heard moving contributions from widows' representatives from Africa and Asia and was addressed by videolink by then US Senator Hillary Clinton and Sir Richard Branson.

US Senator Hillary Clinton addresses the International Widows Conference 2006 from Capitol Hill

An important early breakthrough was support from the Commonwealth, many of whose 53 member nations have deep-rooted cultural discrimination against widows in their communities. Keynote speaker Don McKinnon, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, supported the Foundation's call for UN recognition of International Widows Day and described the battle for widows' rights as "a silent war fuelled by culture and stigma". Mr. McKinnon firmly linked the issue with that of global gender discrimination, pointing out that women are disproportionately represented in worldwide figures of poverty and illiteracy. "The privations and discrimination attaching to widowhood," the Secretary-General pointed out, "add to the considerable disadvantage already faced by women in many countries." He called for action to be taken on international, governmental and non-governmental levels.

Foundation President Cherie Blair also addressed the conference, calling for continued international action to relieve the plight of widows. Other keynote speakers included cabinet ministers from India and the UK, and John Lennon's widow, Yoko Ono, who condemned the social taboo that shrouds the issue of widowhood all over the world.

Following the Conference, a Bollywood Concert was held in Trafalgar Square, hosted by the well-known Indian talk-show host Shekhar Suman and watched not only by the Conference delegates but by thousands of members of the public.

The culmination of this remarkable day was the release of balloons by Cherie Blair in Trafalgar Square and simultaneously by Delhi's Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit in the capital of India. The events were widely publicised, including interviews on Sky and ITV, and coverage from BBC News, Times of India, The Sun, The Mirror, Hindustan Times, Daily Express, Channel 5, Asian Voice and many others.

A new front

In 2007 Raj Loomba opened an important new front in the campaign. Conscious that the invisibility of widows as an issue was due at least in part to the lack of reliable data – as noted in UN Women’s 2001 report about the “sin of omission” – the Loomba Foundation resolved to gather the hard evidence that is needed to underpin policy-making and legislation at national and international level.

As part of the Foundation’s Focus on Widows project, the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House in London agreed to undertake a global survey of awareness of and attitudes towards widowhood. And in July 2007, the Foundation set out its framework for research into widowhood:

1. Develop reliable statistics and information about discrimination against widows, eg:
 - a. How many widows are there overall and by country,
 - b. How many widows’ dependents overall and by country,
 - c. Quantify causes of widowhood including conflict, HIV/Aids and other diseases
 - d. Quantify prematurely terminated education as a result of widowhood
 - e. Quantify victims of child labour, prostitution, drug and people trafficking as a result of widowhood
 - f. Set out, by region and country, forms of widow discrimination, eg customary laws and traditions, employment practices, inheritance
2. Carry out research:
 - a. To establish the significance of widow discrimination as a factor in structural poverty globally and by country
 - b. To demonstrate effectiveness of tackling widow discrimination in addressing and alleviating structural poverty
 - c. To identify benefits of educational programmes on widow discrimination in tackling structural poverty, eg
 - i. educating children of poor widows
 - ii. raising awareness of the consequences of discrimination against widows

Origins of a Global Campaign

To mark the third International Widows Day on 23 June 2007, balloons were simultaneously released in Nairobi, Dhaka and Colombo. In New Delhi, Raj Loomba hosted at a dinner to mark the occasion attended by the Minister for Women and Child Development, Renuka Chowdhury, and by 200 students of the Loomba Foundation's education programme, accompanied by their widowed mothers. In London, Foundation President Cherie Blair launched a blimp airship over Trafalgar Square.

International Widows Day 2007 in Sri Lanka





30 November 2007: the Loomba Foundation presented a humanitarian award to US First Lady Laura Bush at the White House in recognition of her support for widows

Origins of a Global Campaign

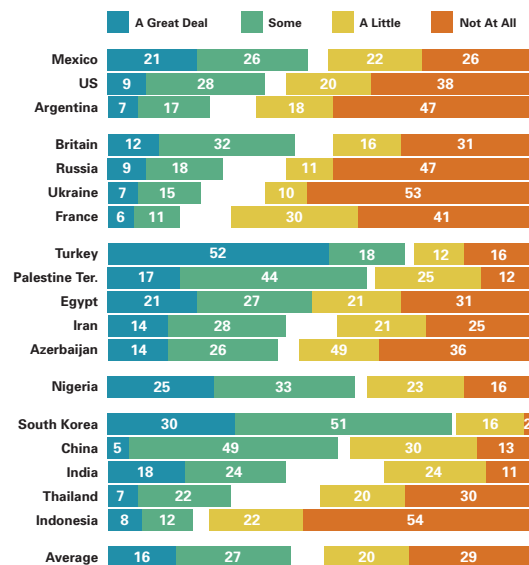
Recognition

Signs that the campaign was making an impact emerged in 2008, with the announcement in June that Raj Loomba had been appointed a Commander in the Order of the British Empire in the Queen’s Birthday Honours List, in recognition of his charitable and humanitarian work.

That same month, the Foundation became a UN-accredited NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) for the first time, associated with the UN Department of Public Information. A few weeks later, President Paul Kagame of Rwanda endorsed the campaign for UN recognition.

On 23 June 2008, to coincide with the fourth International Widows Day, the Loomba Foundation published the results of the survey conducted by Chatham House with worldpublicopinion.org. This survey – across a sample of 17 developing and developed countries – uncovered evidence of widespread widows’ disadvantage. Twelve countries saw at least 40% of respondents reporting varying degrees of disadvantage, from ‘a great deal’ to ‘some’. On average, 63% reported widows receiving worse treatment than the general population. The significance of this research was that it demonstrated that discrimination against widows is not exclusive to any one culture, society or region.

“To what degree are women who are widowed treated worse than other women?”



Treatment of widows. Survey results 2008.



Origins of a Global Campaign

2008's International Widows Day was the most global yet, with events organised in seven countries on four continents. In London, a concert was held in Trafalgar Square with an international cast of entertainers. In Leicester, the first Asian woman Lord Mayor, Councillor Manjula Sood – a widow herself – marked International Widows Day by releasing multicoloured balloons at De Montfort University.

*The Shri Jagiri Lal
Loomba Secondary
School in Dhillwan*

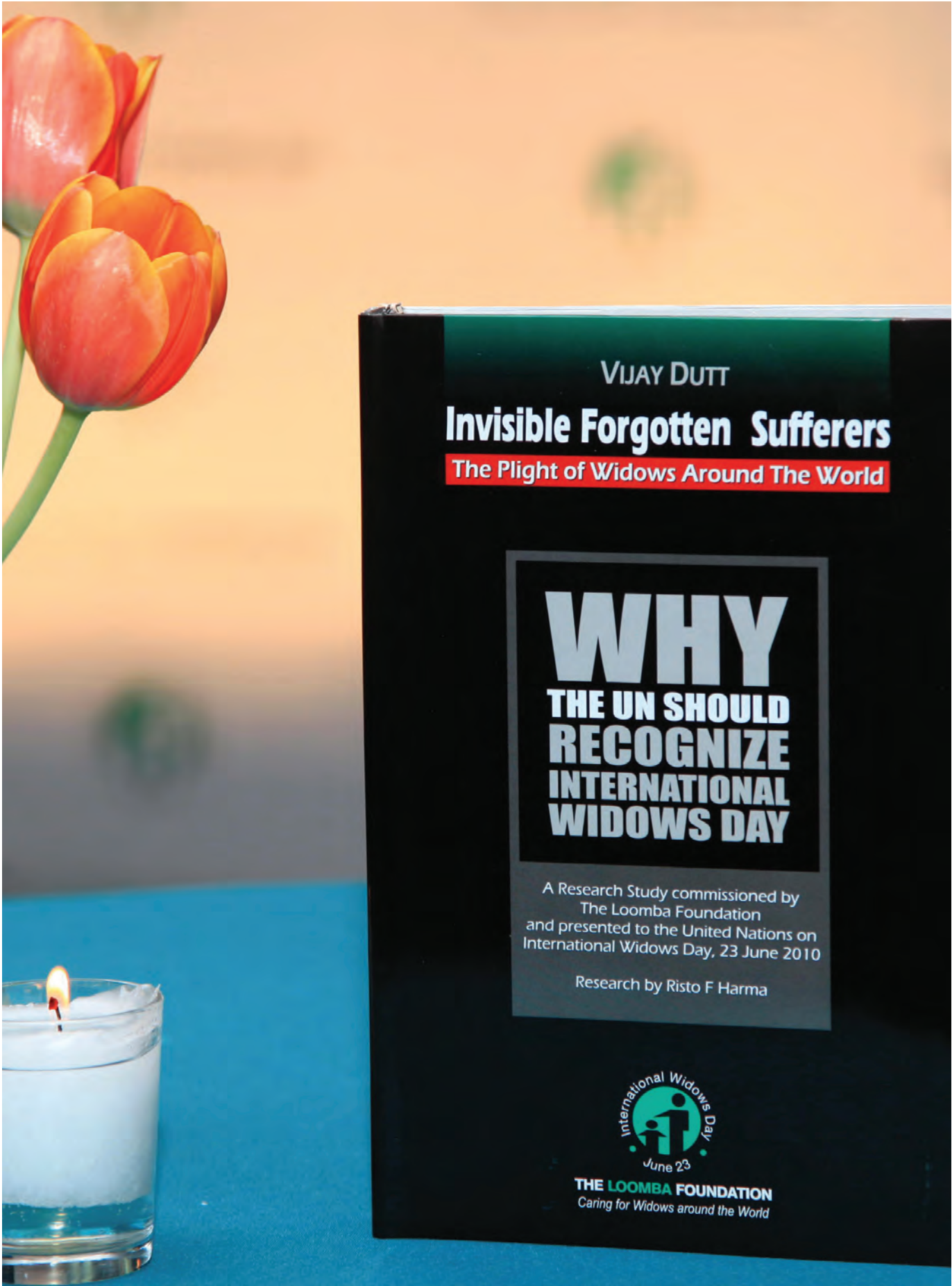
In Raj Loomba's birthplace of Dhillwan, balloons were also released by the Deputy Commissioner of Kapurthala District at the Shri Jagiri Lal Memorial Senior Secondary Government School, while in Delhi, British High Commissioner Sir Richard Stagg hosted a lunch for Loomba Foundation beneficiaries – widows and their children – and released balloons to mark the day.

In Sri Lanka, 450 widows from Hambantota District attended an event organised by the Women's Development Foundation and the Hambantota Youth Business Trust, marking the day by releasing a thousand balloons and planting a tree.

In New York, a lunch for international women of influence was hosted at the United Nations by Foundation adviser Elbrun Kimmelman.

Candles were lit and a tree was planted in a ceremony in Damascus, Syria, organised by the local partner of the Prince of Wales' international charity Youth Business International, which was also involved in the celebrations in Nepal.

In Kenya, more than 100 widows involved in the Loomba Foundation Entrepreneurship Programme attended a ceremony with their children where balloons were released to mark the occasion.



VIJAY DUTT

Invisible Forgotten Sufferers

The Plight of Widows Around The World

**WHY
THE UN SHOULD
RECOGNIZE
INTERNATIONAL
WIDOWS DAY**

A Research Study commissioned by
The Loomba Foundation
and presented to the United Nations on
International Widows Day, 23 June 2010

Research by Risto F Harma



THE LOOMBA FOUNDATION
Caring for Widows around the World

Origins of a Global Campaign

Appeal to the UN

On the fifth International Widows Day on 23 June 2009, events took place in many countries including India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Kenya and Rwanda. The international campaign had clearly been gathering steam and at an event in the House of Lords, Foundation President Cherie Blair issued a direct appeal to the United Nations to recognise the importance of the issue and adopt International Widows Day as an official day of action.

Raj Loomba reminded the audience of its importance in the global fight against poverty. "Poverty is the curse of mankind," he said, "but when you put it in the context of widows and their children, it creates a new dimension in inhumanity."

A breakthrough year

The research work set in train three years earlier bore fruit in 2010 with the completion of the Foundation's global study of the plight of widows, which it published as an appendix to a powerful appeal in the book *Invisible Forgotten Sufferers: Why the UN should recognize International Widows Day* on the eve of International Widows Day 2010.

Weeks earlier, on 26 May, the preliminary findings of the study were revealed at a London briefing for diplomats representing 30 countries. On 22 June the book was presented to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon in New York, followed by a dinner attended by 27 UN Permanent Representatives including Mr Hardeep Singh Puri, the Permanent UN Representative for India, who was the guest of honour.

Containing unprecedented information about the scale of the problem, country by country, with detailed information about causes and consequences, this first ever worldwide study of widowhood was a powerful argument that this issue had been neglected by the international community for far too long.

In 2010, International Widows Day was celebrated in at least ten countries: India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Nepal, Syria, South Africa, Rwanda, the United States and the United Kingdom.

Invisible Forgotten Sufferers, a powerful case for widows which included the first ever global study of the subject



Origins of a Global Campaign

Five years of hardnosed campaigning, detailed research, and building support across the globe bore fruit when President Ondimba of Gabon proposed to the 65th General Assembly of the United Nations that it should grant official UN recognition of International Widows Day – a motion that was accepted unanimously.

It was a great achievement – but Raj Loomba had always been clear about one thing. International Widows Day is not an end in itself: it is a tool to help change the world. The real campaign could now begin in earnest.

*Presentation of
'Invisible Forgotten
Sufferers' to UN
Secretary-General Ban
Ki-Moon, 2010.*



Chapter Two

A Pervasive Injustice

The Plight of Widows

A 2008 survey commissioned by The Loomba Foundation showed that people in 17 countries around the world – not confined to either poorer or richer nations – think that widows in their society face discrimination. On average, 63% say widows receive worse treatment than the general population. What it showed is that this is not an isolated issue affecting only distant lands. It is deeprooted, cultural and pervasive.

Gunjan, 8, daughter of a poor widow in Vindravan, India, sells flowers to support her mother and three siblings. Photograph © Amy Toensing.

In developed countries such as Britain, the United States and Russia, widows are often socially marginalised. Their problems are less acute than those in poorer parts of the world, but widows are often disadvantaged due to pension shortfalls, gaps or deterioration in social services, and inadequate healthcare entitlement. Ethnic minority groups tend to be worst affected. Given the more extreme impacts on poorer societies, the focus of global action is inevitably on developing countries, but it should be remembered that a culture shift is needed everywhere.

Global scale

The World Widows Report published in 2015 showed that the number of widows worldwide stood at 259 million, and with 585 million children this makes the total population directly affected 844 million. Conflict and disease are among factors that are driving these numbers up. Some 38 million of these widows live in extreme poverty. Taking their dependents into account, there are currently more than 100 million people in the world so poor that their basic needs go unmet as a direct consequence of this injustice, which in turn has deleterious consequences for their communities and the wider economy.

They say prevention is better than cure, and it is undeniably true that tackling the causes of premature male mortality would be better for millions of families and their communities. A 2006 World Bank study revealed that premature mortality between the ages of 15 and 59 is significantly higher among males than females in every region of the world. The reasons include conflict, hazardous working, chronic poor health and suicide – all amplified and exacerbated among those living in extreme poverty.

Much as tackling these causes will have beneficial effects, they will not be eradicated and so, inevitably, the other track of any coordinated approach must be to look at what happens next.

Loss of income

When the breadwinner dies, the first and often immediate consequence is the loss of household income from paid employment. A World Bank study in 2000 showed that the top cause for women dropping into poverty was “injury, illness or death”, while for men it was loss of employment. This illustrates families’ dependency on male income and the catastrophic impact of widowhood even without the aggravating factors of social and cultural discrimination.

Even relatively well-to-do families may not be able to rely on the family wealth to tide them over until they get back on their feet. By the time a husband dies after a long illness, resources are often severely depleted by the costs of care in societies which have little in the way of social provision or insurance.

Disinheritance

Where wealth does exist, it is routinely contested in many parts of the world, with widespread examples of confiscation and inheritance-grabbing – an issue that laws and international treaties have not so far succeeded in eradicating.

An impressive 189 member states of the United Nations – that is to say, every country except Iran, Palau, Somalia, Sudan, Tonga, the United States and the Holy See – is signed up to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which has been in force since 1981 and requires signatory countries to:

“take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations, and in particular (to) ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, the same rights for both spouses in respect of the ownership, acquisition, enjoyment and disposition of property.”

Yet disinheritance, whereby a widow is dispossessed by her late husband’s family, is a widespread problem in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and Central and South America. It can involve losing control of family land and housing, eviction and loss of property. In some places it is even common for the children to be taken from their mother.

The Plight of Widows

The reasons for disinheritance can include gender discrimination, economic pressure in areas where farm sizes are decreasing, and local restrictions, by law or custom, on widows inheriting their husbands' property.

Widows in northern India generally have a legal right to inherit their husbands' estate, but rarely do, due to persistent local customs that require inheritance through the male line of descent. In sub-Saharan Africa, few countries have strong enough laws to give widows any assurance of inheriting land and property. In Islamic societies widows theoretically benefit from a religious requirement that grants widows some share of their husbands' estate. Setting aside whether that provision is adequate to support the surviving family, the requirement is often ignored in favour of prevailing custom. In practice, Berber widows in Morocco and Algeria, Muslim widows in Assam and Kurdish widows in Turkey rarely see any inheritance. In many other places – including Pakistan, the Palestinian West Bank and Afghanistan – young widows with small children or with no sons are unlikely to receive any of their late husband's land or income. In rural Jordan, the widow can often only acquire land as custodian for her under age sons; if she is childless she is unlikely to inherit.

Disinheritance is not a significant issue everywhere. In East Asia, for example, the social status of widows is often higher although due to poverty and gender bias widows still find themselves disadvantaged. The areas most acutely affected by inheritance injustices are South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. In Africa the experience is hugely varied, with no single pattern, but a common feature is that the widow has little say in what happens. Her fate often can include eviction and sometimes even removal of her children. In some communities the widow is herself 'inherited' through forced remarriage to the late husband's brother, to secure all property and children within the husband's family.

Appropriation of inheritance and eviction of the widow are now illegal in countries such as Namibia, yet the practice persists due to weak enforcement of the law.

In a number of Central and South American countries – including Bolivia, Peru, Brazil, Chile and Colombia – there are some protections limiting husbands' freedom to dispose of the family estate in their Will, guaranteeing widows and children at least a portion.



The Plight of Widows

Gender discrimination

“Female livelihoods are precarious.”
— Duncan Green, Oxfam

There is evidence that the far-reaching consequences of widowhood are in many societies considered such a risk for all females that it fuels gender discrimination against girls from the moment they are born. This is another reason why the plight of widows cannot be viewed as a minority issue affecting a subset of the world population. It is so deeply embedded and far-reaching in its consequences that tackling the plight of widows must be a priority aim for all efforts to eradicate poverty and to promote stability, peace and prosperity worldwide, including the work done to meet the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015.

Other common forms of gender discrimination directly impacting widows are wage differentials and the exclusion of women from certain types of activity or work.

Traditions and customs

If the practice of Sati – where Hindu widows in India were expected to immolate themselves on the funeral pyres of their late husbands – is now a distant memory, degrading and marginalising traditions remain in that part of the world and similarly shocking customs are found elsewhere. As Vice-President Venkaiah Naidu of India stated at the Loomba Foundation’s International Widows Day event in Delhi in 2018, this will change only when social attitudes are transformed and the stigma attached to widowhood is overcome. In this, governments have an important role to play within a wider social engagement.

The reasons for cultural and traditional forms of discrimination against widows are complex, ranging from fears about the dissipation of family wealth in paternalistic societies, through religious and cultural customs to superstitions about bad luck. In practice, discrimination and abuse are often driven by shortsighted self-interest that, far from benefiting the community, causes it harm.

54-year old Solome Sekimuli from the Luwero District of Uganda was ejected with her children from the family’s home and land on the day of her husband’s funeral. Photograph © Amy Toensing.

Widow cleansing

Widows in a number of sub-Saharan countries in Africa face the ordeal of customary “cleansing rituals”. They may be required to drink the water with which their dead husband’s body has been washed, and to have sex with a relative, usually the dead husband’s brother. Cleansing violates the dignity and humanity of the widow, but it can often be regarded with as much trepidation or horror by the relative required to undertake the task for a variety of reasons, including the obvious risk of spreading diseases such as HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis B, and pandemics such as Ebola. So why does it persist?

Widow cleansing is based on the superstition that the evil spirit that caused the death will bring harm to the local community unless the supernatural bond between the widow and her late husband is broken. The widow may also be inherited by her brother-in-law: this is seen as providing a safety net for her and her children while preserving the estate and kinship line within the dead husband’s family. The wishes of the widow are not relevant, and neither are those of the inheritor, who may be told by elders that it is his duty to take care of the widow and children. The widow’s choice can be stark: comply or lose your children and your home.

Awareness of the risk of communicable diseases has led to an increase in the use of professional ‘cleansers’ – unrelated men who are paid to have ritual sex with the widow in place of the relative – and this in turn has further amplified the risk of those diseases spreading through the practice. The combination of poor quality health systems with these rituals and traditions was a potent accelerator contributing to the public health emergency we have seen in the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

The Plight of Widows

Widow blaming

In large parts of South-East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, widows are routinely accused of being responsible for the death of their husbands, whether deliberately or through neglect, and this is generally a precursor for systematic seizure of property and evictions. Accusations of witchcraft are common, either when the cause of death is unexplained, or simply because a widow living alone violates social norms of female behaviour. Such accusations represent a clear and present danger to widows, for example from vigilante groups in Papua New Guinea who specialise in the interrogation, torture and execution of the accused, and in the Sukumaland region of Tanzania, where “witch killings” are reported to be a daily occurrence.

This stigma is present in established religions as well as tribal beliefs and superstitions. In some Islamic societies, widows are at risk of targeted killing if their behaviour is considered at variance with religious requirements. While in wider Hindu society remarriage is relatively common, at the elite level widows are often not permitted to remarry or work, while their daily attire and behaviour are severely restricted for the remainder of their lives, and historical acts of Sati may still be revered within families.

In Hindu Nepal, there is often a belief that the husband’s death was caused by an immoral act by the wife in a past life – a significant stigma in a society where 67% of widows are under the age of 35. Similarly in Southern India, many widows regard widowhood as fate or the curse of a previous life.

When thinking about strategies to address cultural traditions, it is important to be aware that even with knowledge of all the risks, the beliefs that underpin them are widely held in the communities and often shared by the widows themselves.

War and conflict

Armed conflict – in wars, civil wars, genocide or driven by organised crime – can be indiscriminate, but in most cases involves disproportionately high male mortality rates. There are countries with significant war widow populations in all parts of the world, including more than two dozen countries in sub-Saharan Africa, ten in the middle East, 15 in south and east Asia and 17 in Europe including Russia.

War and conflict create widows – and make their plight worse. In addition to the risks of losing income, housing and livelihood faced by many other widows, there are additional threats to personal safety from soldiers and armed criminals, from ongoing fighting, looting, robbery, random torture and rape, making it often too dangerous to seek paid work. Supply chains may be disrupted, prostitution is rife and children may even be forced into becoming combatants. The lack of male guardians can signal that widows are available for sexual exploitation. Most dangerously, they may be displaced and become refugees.

If they end up in camps they become dependent on aid, which elderly widows are often not fit enough to collect, living in often poor conditions. In the mid 1990s, some 50,000 refugees from the Rwandan genocide died in a cholera and dysentery epidemic in a huge refugee camp in eastern Congo.

In Iraq, four years after the 2003 US invasion, one third of the population needed humanitarian assistance and essential services were in ruins. Although formally provision had been made to support war widows, in practice they were hardest hit with three quarters excluded from the benefit due to ignorance or inability to prove their status. Iraqi widows have also been targeted by death squads if they were considered to be acting contrary to Islam – a practice mirrored in the 1992-2005 Algerian civil war and in Afghanistan, where two decades of war has resulted in more than one in four females over the age of ten reportedly being war widows. Their condition is so perilous that some have resorted to selling some of their children so they can feed the others. Two thirds of widows in Kabul interviewed in 2006 suggested they were contemplating suicide.

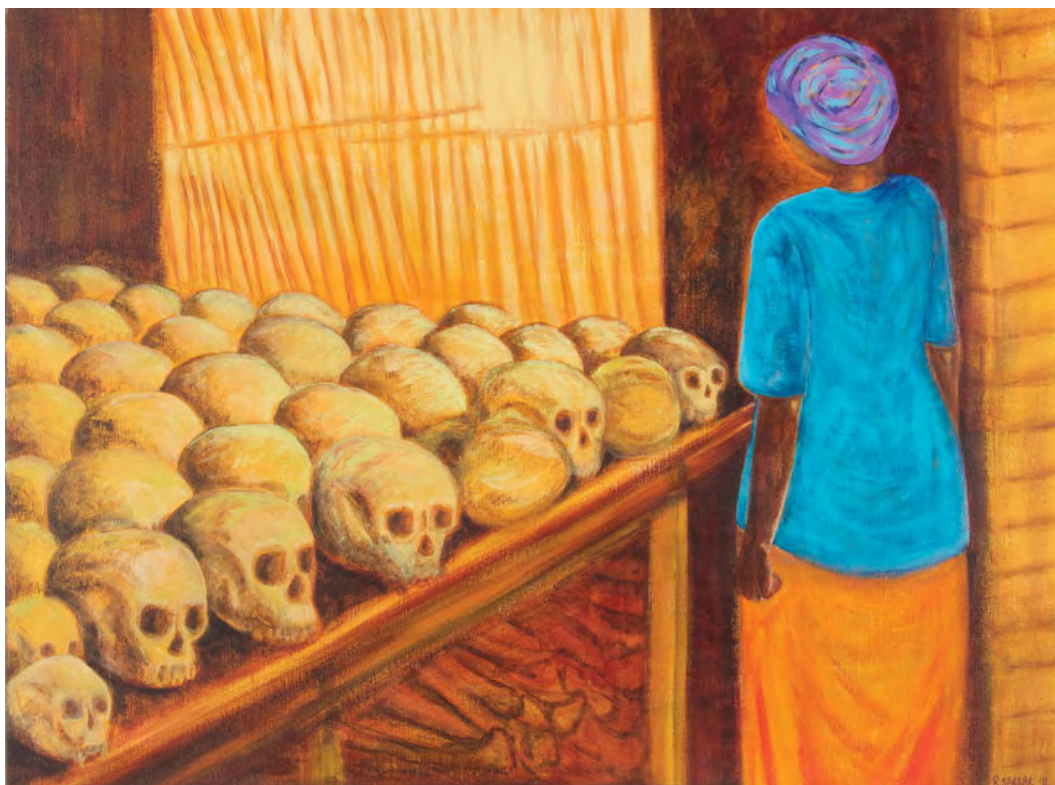
The Plight of Widows

Rape

Rape, whether individual or as a mass tactic of intimidation, is a common feature of war, yet rape victims are widely stigmatised and made to feel responsible for what has been done to them. In many societies, nothing is more important for a woman than the community's perception of her sexual purity, regardless of whether her actions are by choice or otherwise. Rape in such societies is a near guarantee of marginalisation and destitution. Widows subjected to rape have to confront not only the loss of their husbands but the rupture of ties and outright hostility within families.

The threat of HIV/AIDS is circular. It is spread particularly rapidly by war, and it undermines peace and stability. The fastest transmission is through armies, whether through rape or 'survival sex'. The stigma surrounding rape and HIV can stop widows from identifying themselves as victims and stop them from accessing such targeted assistance as is sometimes made available.

*Murambi-Kigali
Memorial Centre,
Rwanda (2011),
painting by Reeta
Sarkar*





The Plight of Widows

Creating a new livelihood

The impact of widowhood falls hardest on women and children from low-income and low-skilled backgrounds all over the world, and particularly in countries where those socio-economic groups form the majority. These are the people who are least able to recover from a sudden drop in household income and, as we have seen, the situation of widows in developing countries is often complicated by social expectations. The injustices that immediately follows the husband's death are often harbingers of worse to come, when the widow is deprived of her livelihood and forced into increasingly desperate measures to look after herself and her children. For millions of these women, widowhood sets in train a cycle of deprivation than can continue for generations.

Opportunities for the widow to address this by taking a job are scarce or non-existent in many countries, and in some communities widows are forbidden from working at all. In poorer countries their plight is often aggravated by international trade policies, whereby developed economies impose tariffs to block imports from developing countries, while at the same time cheaply selling heavily subsidised surplus grain on the world market and forcing developing countries to open their markets to agricultural imports – which are also subsidised. Such unfair trading terms have depressed the agricultural sector in developing countries with serious implications for widows by undermining job opportunities for low-skilled women, particularly in the least developed economies which have limited scope for diversification. Western development aid is not designed to address these issues effectively and in some cases can exacerbate them by introducing modern methods that lead to the collapse of traditional cooperative systems or to the overexploitation of small plots of land resulting in declining crop yields and eroding soil.

Younger widows widely face a prejudice that regards single women as sexually loose or promiscuous. This can deprive them of job opportunities, with employers feeling that hiring them would be regarded as sexually motivated. Looking further afield for work is equally difficult when travel outside the village community is seen as sexually questionable. The perception of promiscuity deprives widows of basic protection in the home and the community and this in turn can lead to being unable to defend themselves against sexual advances and exploitation.

Such work as can be obtained is frequently underpaid, exploitative and hazardous. Women are usually paid less than men, when male wage levels are often already barely adequate to support a family.

Deepa Mehta's award-winning film 'Water' tells the story of Chuyia (Sarala Kariyawasam) an eight-year old widow condemned to a life of renunciation.

Women may have to pay for childcare if they become the sole breadwinner, imposing additional costs and logistical problems.

“The buyers require two things of factory owners for the workers: a canteen and a children’s day-care facility. But in my factory we are not permitted to use them and are told that we should tell anyone who asks where the children are, that we have no children, so we don’t need the children’s facility.”

– Salma, factory worker in Dhaka

When factory workers agitate for equal pay, some men condemn them to “burn in hell”. Buses are not affordable so women may have to walk several hours to work, exposing them to risk of sexual assault, particularly when they have to work late evenings. Where a mother does succeed in working to support the family, the situation is often so fragile that if any of her children become ill and require urgent care, it immediately becomes unsustainable.

The desperate measures to which they must resort in the absence of adequate paid employment can typically include ‘exchange sex’ or ‘survival sex’ relationships, prostitution, rape, forced marriage, child marriage, withdrawal from education, child labour, trafficking and homelessness.

Poverty is a contributing factor in the spread of HIV/AIDS when the only option for widows to earn income is sex work. AIDS has also been a cause of women losing their husbands at a younger age, which in turn has increased the risk of eviction when there is no adult son to inherit the late husband’s property.

As has been seen in Western societies, the stigma attaching to HIV/AIDS is particularly counterproductive as it causes infected people to avoid treatment and leads to denial of risk.

The Plight of Widows

Impact on dependents

Widows' children in developing countries find themselves in exceptionally difficult circumstances. In India, children of widowed mothers under the age of 35 have a 20% higher chance of dying prematurely than those with two parents. Many children of poor widows are withdrawn from schooling as their mothers cannot afford the fees – and it is girls who are usually withdrawn first to protect the future earning power of the boys and the family as a whole. Lack of education is a key reason for the disastrous long-term impact on society of widow discrimination, as the consequences continue to the next generation and cause deeply entrenched poverty and deprivation. This is the reason for the historical focus of the Loomba Foundation's aid programmes on funding the education of such children in India, before widening its programmes more recently to skills training and empowerment of widows worldwide.

Often there are few options for sustaining the family other than child labour – or, in the case of girls, early marriage in the (frequently ill-founded) hope they will find themselves in a happier and more stable environment. Children have to work if their mothers cannot or are not permitted to enter employment, or where their pay is too low to support the family. In work, particularly domestic work, children are frequently subjected to sexual and other abuse and in some cases, child labour is indistinguishable from slavery – working for no remuneration or prospect of release. Widows' children are vulnerable to prostitution and trafficking, particularly in conflict areas. The sexual abuse of such children often leads to sexually-transmitted disease and, in the case of HIV/AIDS, early death.

For more information about the plight of widows, country by country and worldwide, see the 2015 World Widows Report compiled by the Loomba Foundation (www.worldwidowsreport.org).

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Chapter Three

The Loomba Foundation

Building support for the cause

Although conditions, obstacles and opportunities vary from country to country, the story of how the Loomba Foundation developed a nationwide programme in India, raising awareness and funds to transform the lives and prospects of thousands of affected families in the process, before broadening its scope to other countries, is instructive.

Foundation

In 1997, five years after Raj Loomba's mother passed away, Raj and his wife Veena established the Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba Trust – as The Loomba Foundation was initially known in the UK – to care for widows and their children, and to change the culture that discriminates against them.

The initial focus was on Raj's native India, where some 46 million women – almost 10% of the female population of marital age – are widows.

The curse of widowhood often plunges the whole family into destitution and despair, with consequences that blight communities and last for many decades. Raj Loomba saw that if he could find a way of funding the education of the children of poor widows, it would not only transform the conditions of that family but also provide for a better future for all its members.

This meant building up a network of supporters. From the beginning, Raj resolved to engage with government both in the UK and India, as well as industry, commerce and the public, to help raise awareness and build an effective programme.

When the charity was officially launched in London, on 25 March 1998, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair attended with his wife, Cherie Blair QC; she became the Foundation's first Patron – and, from 2004, its President. On 31 March 1999, the charity was inaugurated in New Delhi at the residence of the Prime Minister of India, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who lit a ceremonial lamp to mark the occasion. It was at this occasion that the Loomba Foundation launched its first scholarship programme to fund the education of 100 children of poor widows in the State of Delhi right through secondary education, and beyond for those who wished to go into higher education. The Foundation also announced its target, that within a decade it would fund the education of at least 100 children of poor widows – selected purely on the basis of need – in each of India's (then) 29 States. This meant the Foundation hoped to educate 2,900 children by 2009.

Opposite from left:

Prime Minister Tony Blair at the launch of the Loomba Trust in London, 1997.

Prime Minister Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee at the New Delhi launch in 1999.



Building support for the cause

Fundraising

Because of the duration of each child's education, every programme launched represents a significant commitment, so to achieve the target it would be necessary to build up fundraising and partnership activities. At the heart of the fundraising programme for almost two decades were the London Diwali Dinners: glittering occasions attended by political, business and community leaders and by celebrities from the performing arts.

The first of these, the British-Indian Diwali of the Century Banquet, took place at the Banqueting House in Whitehall on 4 November 1999, with the Princess Royal as Guest of Honour, and raised £70,000. The Diwali Dinners went on to become a popular event in the London social calendar and a further 15 have been held in London since, with guests including Mayors and Lord Mayors, UK and Indian Cabinet Ministers and High Commissioners, leading figures from the Commonwealth and the United Nations, and prominent philanthropists.

Events took place at other times of the year too, such as the British-Indian Golden Jubilee Banquet at Grosvenor House on 18 July 2001, with the Duke of Kent as Guest of Honour, as well as regular luncheons and dinners at the House of Lords to welcome the Countess Mountbatten of Burma, Joanna Lumley, Baroness Jay of Paddington, Sir Mark Tully and numerous others as patrons and supporters. Since the launch of International Widows Day in 2005, Diwali dinners and other fundraising events have also taken place in other countries, notably the United States and Canada.

Educating the children of poor widows

With fundraising under way and an education programme in place, the Loomba Foundation set about making progress towards its target. Areas that had recently seen a sudden increase in the number of widows were often prioritised, such as the scheme launched in Odisha State (formerly Orissa State) (for 100 children) after a destructive cyclone, and the one in Gujarat (also 100), following an earthquake in the city of Bhuj. Both these schemes were launched in 2001. In 2002, programmes got under way in Rajasthan (100) and Punjab (100) and the following year in Andhra Pradesh (100), Haryana (100), Uttarakhand Pradesh (110), and Arunachal Pradesh (100) in the far north-east of the country.

In Tamil Nadu, in 2004, the Loomba Foundation's funding was matched by its partner, the Sriram Welfare Foundation, creating a

Princess Anne, the Princess Royal, at the British-Indian Diwali of the Century Banquet, 1999.

Prospects transformed: four of the thousands of beneficiaries of the Loomba Foundation's programme to educate the children of poor widows.

Clockwise from top left: Rakhee Misri was educated thanks to Loomba Foundation support from age 11 and is currently studying for her Master's from Indira Gandhi Open University. Shriya Sus, a Loomba scholar from fifth grade, is a qualified computer engineer studying for her banking exams. The Loomba Foundation funded Gunjan Raina's education from age 14 and she went on to gain a technology degree from Kurukshetra University. Sanjeet Kumar Sharma's schooling was supported by the Loomba Foundation since he lost his father aged 13. He gained his Master's in commerce and banking at Jammu University and has a good job.



programme for 200 students. Then at the end of that year disaster struck with the Indian Ocean tsunami, causing destruction that, as always, left existing and newly-created widows and their children worst affected. In India, Nagapattinam district in Tamil Nadu was hardest hit, and the Loomba Foundation responded by extending its programme in the State for a further 500 children drawn mainly from the fishermen's villages in the district.

Five programmes were launched in 2005: Chhattisgarh (100 children), Jammu and Kashmir (100), West Bengal (100), Maharashtra (200) and Uttar Pradesh (100).

Further programmes for 100 children each were launched in the States of Assam, Bihar, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, bringing the total number of Loomba scholars by 2006 to 3,610. The Loomba Foundation had reached and far exceeded its target with two-and-a-half years to spare.

This would not have been possible without the generous support of numerous donors, including Sir Richard Branson, who funded scholarships for 500 children in five States for five years, and Brijesh Nayyar, who has funded the education of 300 children in three States for five years. Shamin and Shiraz Lalji generously funded the extended programme for 500 children in Tamil Nadu following the tsunami. The programme in Chhattisgarh is sponsored by BT; in Jammu and Kashmir by Sheetal Kapoor and Ricky Kapoor; and in Maharashtra by Martin Ciupa and Mellon Group Europe.

The students who received funding under the original programmes have completed their education. Some have gone on to higher education with the Foundation's support, including 18 students currently completing engineering degrees in Madhya Pradesh. New children have joined the programmes. To date, more than 10,000 children of poor widows have received funding, and in this way the Loomba Foundation has directly transformed the lives of 60,000 people in their immediate families. The programme continues to grow with the support of new donors, including the Hinduja Foundation, which has funded scholarships for 500 children in five States for five years. The Loomba Foundation's partnership with the Rotary India Literacy Mission includes education funding for 2,000 children.

In 2006, the Loomba Foundation donated five million Rupees, which was matched by the Punjab Government, to renovate, refurbish and provide sanitation and drinking water for a school in Dhilwan, where Raj Loomba was born, which had once been a magnificent



Building support for the cause

building but had fallen into disrepair. At the suggestion of Prakash Singh Badal, the Chief Minister of Punjab, the school was renamed in honour of Raj Loomba's late father and inaugurated on 18 November 2008 by the President of the Loomba Foundation, Mrs Cherie Blair.

A classroom in the Shri Jagiri Lal Loomba Secondary School in Dhilwan. Photo: Suzanne Liem

In 2005, as we have seen, Raj Loomba launched International Widows Day, and the following year the Loomba Foundation joined forces with Virgin Unite, the charitable arm of Sir Richard Branson's group of companies, to support 1,500 HIV and AIDS orphans in five townships near Johannesburg, South Africa, over 18 months.

Empowerment of widows

In 2007, the Loomba Foundation broadened the focus of its direct aid from the children of poor widows to empowering the widows themselves. In many communities all over the world it is impossible for widows to find employment, whether through prejudice or lack of skills. Having to find other ways to support themselves, this often leads to child labour, prostitution and other forms of exploitation. The Foundation's empowerment programme provides skills training, equipment and funding to help widows become independent.

In partnership with Youth Business International – an independent charity originally established by the Prince of Wales – the Loomba Entrepreneur Programme helps disadvantaged people including widows in many countries start up new sustainable businesses and create jobs. This partnership venture has delivered support to widows in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Syria, Kenya, Uganda and Chile. In Nairobi, the Loomba Entrepreneur Programme has trained hundreds of widows in business skills, providing loans and business mentoring to those who went on to set up in business. In Sri Lanka, ravaged by civil unrest and the tsunami, the Programme has trained women in jewellery, garment making and other skills, and provided funding for their businesses.

Following a conference on the plight of widows and their children organised by the Foundation at the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry in New Delhi in 2008, a partnership was established with leading health and beauty expert Dr. Blossom Kochhar to provide tuition and potential funding to 100 widows. In the same year, the Foundation launched its Entrepreneur Programme in South Africa to empower 100 young widows with the support of international and local NGOs. In 2009 the Foundation began its programme in Rwanda in partnership with Oxfam GB to deliver aid including training and startup funding to 350 widows who were genocide survivors.



Building support for the cause

The Loomba Foundation launched a new project in 2012 to empower 10,000 poor widows in India by providing skills training and equipment, a scheme which has been calculated to directly benefited 100,000 dependents in an impact report by Northampton University. New projects were launched in Bihar, Delhi, Andhra Pradesh and Puducherry in 2013, while further afield that year, the Foundation worked in partnership with UN Women to deliver support for widows in India, Malawi and Guatemala. In 2014 the Foundation entered into a partnership with Lions Clubs International which included donating 2,000 sewing machines to widows in India. That year, a further eight schemes were launched across India to empower 6,500 widows, including one benefiting 5,000 widows in Punjab.

The Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, launches the Loomba Foundation's empowerment programme in Varanasi.

On 22 January 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Loomba Foundation's empowerment programme for 5,000 widows in the holy city of Varanasi, which is home to 90,000 widows. Later that year, an empowerment by rehabilitation scheme was launched to provide skills training for 1,000 widows in 19 district jails in Haryana.

A programme to empower 2,000 widows in Vrindavan, known as the 'City of Widows', began last year, when the Foundation also launched its largest programme to date, to deliver training and startup support for 30,000 poor widows – 1,000 in each of India's 30 States.

The Foundation has raised more than £5 million in direct support for its programmes, including £2 million to date from the Loomba Group of Companies, whose chief executive, Rinku Loomba, continues to play a central role as trustee, donor and supporter of the Foundation's numerous events.

Walking and cycling for widows

In addition to fundraising dinners, corporate sponsorships and match-funding partnerships, individual supporters have gone to extraordinary lengths to aid widows in their struggle for justice. In 2003, Dr Mike Krimholtz walked 350 miles from Resolute Bay to the Magnetic North Pole, raising £2,000. International lawyer Chris Parsons, chairman of the India practice of Herbert Smith Freehills, cycled 2,000 kilometres from London to Gibraltar and raised £120,000: enough to educate 240 children of impoverished widows for five years. Four years later, Chris undertook an even more ambitious project, walking 30 marathons in 30 days from Bombay to Bangalore. The money he raised, more than \$300,000, went to support the empowerment programme in Varanasi.

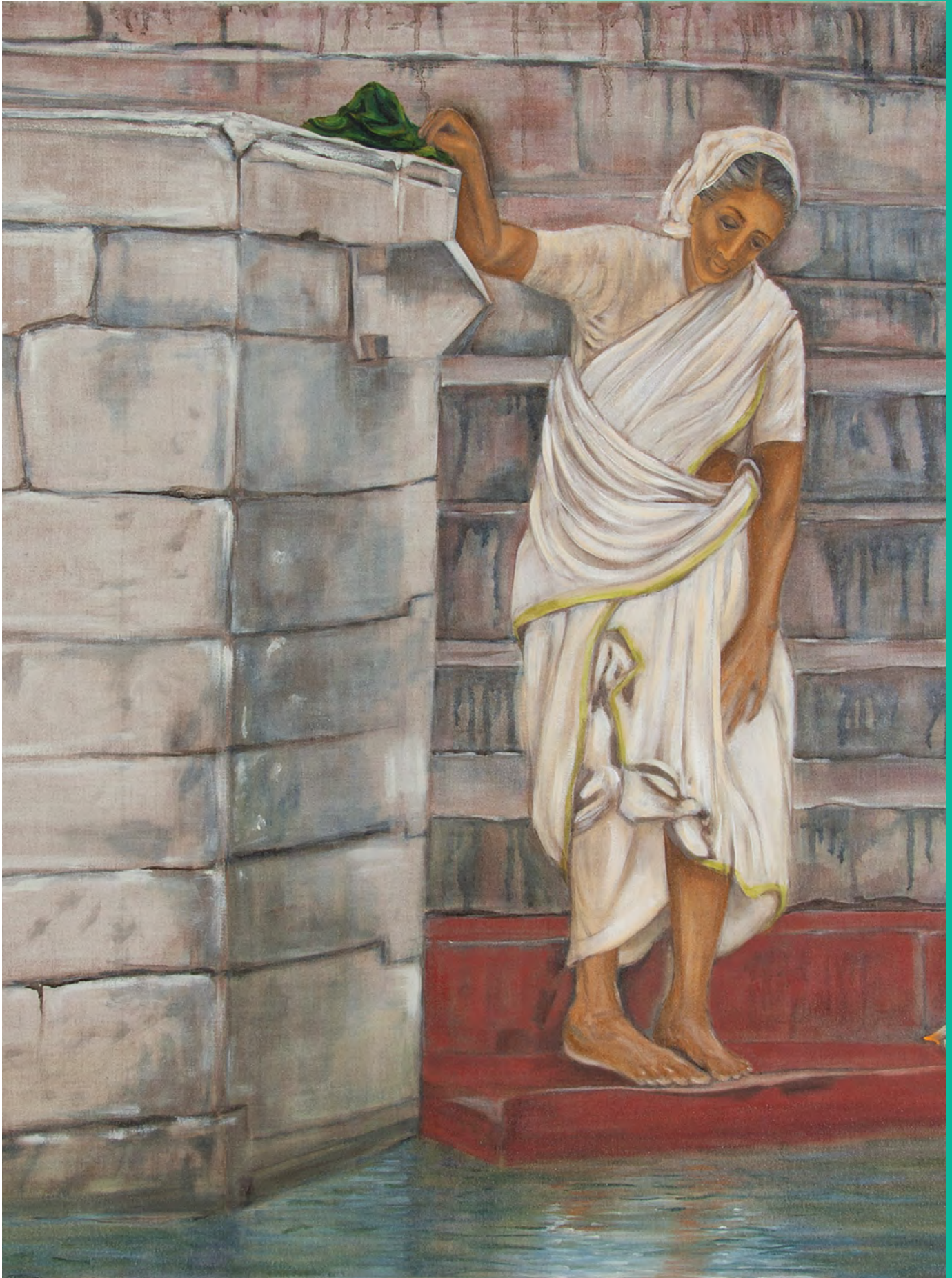


Building support for the cause

With the committed support and generosity of its partners and donors, the Loomba Foundation remains committed to its founding mission: to transform the lives of impoverished widows and their dependent children. It will continue to deliver direct aid to empower widows to be independent, and support their children's schooling to give them hope of a better future.

Through research and campaigning worldwide, the Loomba Foundation will fight to achieve its ultimate goal: to change attitudes that are deeply embedded in cultures and societies, discrimination and injustice against widows in India and throughout the world will be eradicated once and for all.

*A Loomba Foundation
skills training class in
India*



Chapter Four

International Widows Day

The story so far

In January 2011, just a few weeks after the UN General Assembly unanimously designated 23 June as the annual International Widows Day, Raj Loomba took up his seat in the House of Lords and vowed to use that parliamentary platform in the United Kingdom to highlight human rights and in particular the plight of widows all over the world.

A widow bathing in Varanasi (2011), painting by Reeta Sarkar

Message to Member States

That year on 23 June, 57 years to the day since Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba had become a widow, the first official UN International Widows Day was marked with a message from UN Secretary-General Ban K-Moon to all UN Member States:

“In addition to coping with grief, widows may find themselves for the first time since marriage without any social safety net. Far too often, widows lack access to inheritance, land tenure, employment and even the means to survive.”

Death, the Secretary-General noted, is inevitable. “But we can reduce the suffering that widows endure by raising their status and helping them in their hour of need. This will contribute to promoting the full and equal participation of all women in society. And that will bring us closer to ending poverty and promoting peace around the world.”

A conference on widows at the UN headquarters that day was attended by 500 delegates drawn from many countries. Chaired by the wife of the Secretary-General, Mme Ban Soon-Taek, participants included Dr Michelle Bachelet, then the Executive Director of UN Women, Mme Sylvia Bongo Ondimba, the First Lady of Gabon, Loomba Foundation President Cherie Blair, and Lord Loomba.

Noting that International Widows Day had been initiated in 2005 by the Loomba Foundation, Dr Bachelet remarked that “attention to the world’s widows is long overdue. This first International Widows Day,” she continued, “is a vital first step in promoting the protection and respect for their rights, across all regions and cultures.” The plight of widows, Dr Bachelet noted, “highlights the need to empower women economically and strengthen their land, property and inheritance rights in all countries... on equal terms with men.”

The evening before, Yoko Ono had opened an exhibition of paintings about widowhood by the British Indian artist Reeta Sarkar in the United Nations building.



The story so far

Goats on London Bridge

International Widows Day in 2012 saw major events in India, where the Foundation launched an empowerment programme for widows in Hyderabad, and in New York, which saw an awareness event in Central Park.

In London, three high profile events took place: an exhibition of Reeta Sarkar's paintings and reception at 10 Downing Street, hosted by Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg and his wife Miriam González Durántez, a celebrity walk across London Bridge, and a banquet at the Whitehall Banqueting House.

The London Bridge walk, which attracted a great deal of media attention, saw Cilla Black and Nancy Dell'Olio among other prominent women drive a herd of goats across the bridge – underlining the significance of the goat as an economic lifeline in many rural communities worst affected by global poverty.

In his message to Member States on the second UN International Widows Day, Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon called for the removal of all “discriminatory laws, policies and practices that impede widows from enjoying the dignity and equality they deserve.” He expressed special concern about the plight of widows in situations of conflict and natural disasters, saying they should have the opportunity to participate in decisions on humanitarian relief and peacebuilding so they can help build a better future.

“On this International Widows Day, let us resolve to end all discrimination against the world’s widows, and to enable them to enjoy their full human rights. The benefits will extend to their children, communities and society as a whole.”

The following month, The Loomba Foundation was granted Special Consultative Status by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, in recognition of its specialist expertise.

*The late Cilla Black,
Cherie Blair and Raj
Loomba, London
Bridge, 23 June 2012.*



The story so far

Championing the rights of women

The number of countries and organisations involved in the campaign has grown steadily.

In 2013, events to mark International Widows Day took place in many countries throughout Asia and Africa. In London, more than 500 people took part in a five kilometre charity race in Hyde Park, and the following day, the Loomba Foundation hosted an International Widows Conference at the House of Lords with participants including Acting Head of UN Women Lakshmi Puri, human rights campaigner Bianca Jagger and UK International Development Minister Baroness Northover.

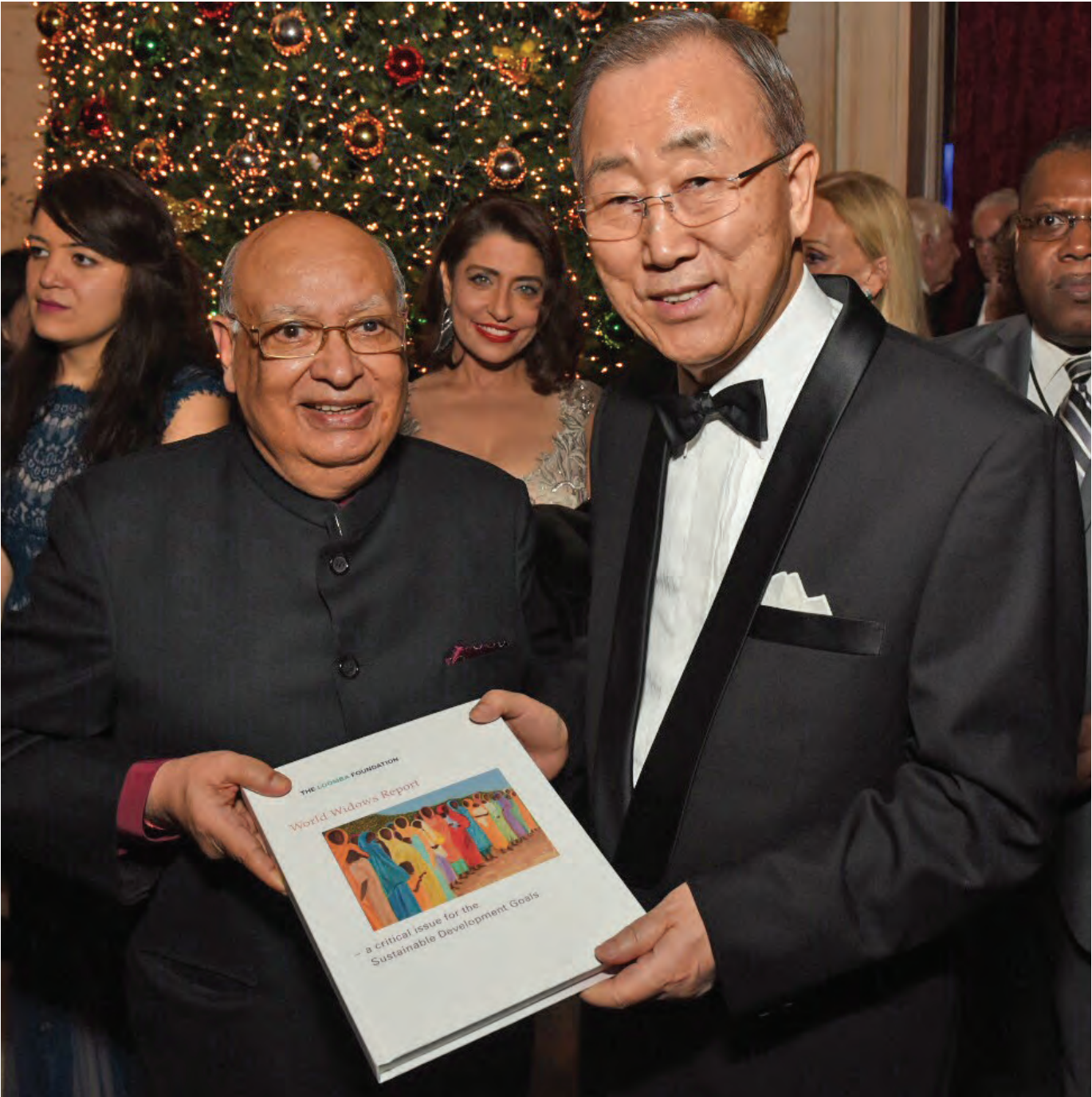
In recognition of his work raising awareness of the plight of widows around the world, UN Women used the occasion to invest Raj Loomba as its first 'Women's Rights Champion'.

Government support

Empowerment was the central theme of The Loomba Foundation's International Widows Day dinner at the House of Lords in London on 23 June 2014, when the president of Lions Club International, Barry Palmer, announced its partnership with The Loomba Foundation to train and equip 2,000 widows to make a living in sewing and tailoring, to an audience including UK Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg and Indian High Commissioner Ranjan Mathai.

A week later, on 30 June, Lord Loomba initiated a debate in the House of Lords highlighting the UN's International Widows Day. He quoted UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon's statement that it is "our collective responsibility to safeguard the human rights and dignity of widows". On behalf of the British Government, International Development Minister Baroness Northover pledged support for continued combined efforts "to achieve real gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, including widows."

UK Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg addresses an International Widows Day event at the Banqueting House in Whitehall.



The story so far

Another breakthrough came in 2015, ten years after the Loomba Foundation had launched International Widows Day and five years after its adoption by the United Nations. On International Widows Day in June, events included a 10th anniversary dinner in Westminster, a Widows Conference at the UN Information Centre in New Delhi and the launch of a skills training and empowerment programme for inmates of the Gurgaon and Faridabad Jails in Haryana.

*Lord Loomba
presents the World
Widows Report to UN
Secretary-General Ban
Ki-Moon*

Later that year, the Loomba Foundation launched a new, completely revised edition of its global research, the *World Widows Report* (see Chapter Two).

The *World Widows Report* was discussed with journalists at a briefing at the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House in London in December 2015 and presented to Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon at the United Nations later that month. On 17 March 2016, it was launched in New York at a parallel event during the 60th anniversary meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women with a warning that the newly-adopted Sustainable Development Goals will not be achieved unless urgent action is taken on the issue of deprivation faced by widows.

“Widowhood is a hidden calamity,” Lord Loomba pointed out. “When an earthquake, tsunami or any other natural calamity happens, the world takes notice. We can measure the number of people who are killed and the financial consequences. The calamity of widowhood is far greater, affecting almost one seventh of humanity, yet it is largely invisible. This report is an attempt to put that right.”



The story so far

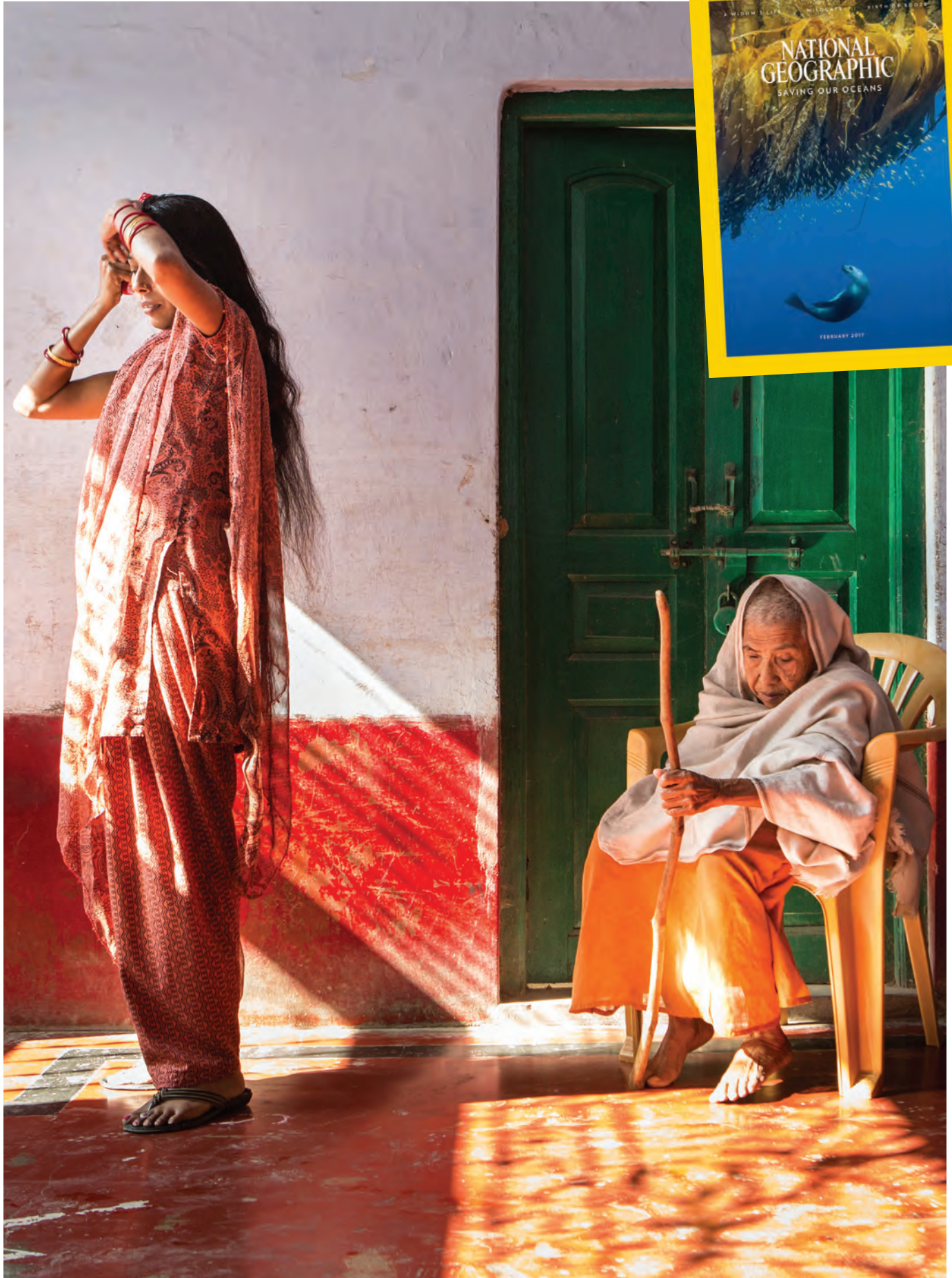
Sustainable Development

The point was picked up by Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon in his message on International Widows Day 2016. “The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda with its pledge to leave no one behind has a particular resonance for widows, who are among the most marginalized and isolated,” he said. “On International Widows’ Day, let us pledge to make widows more visible in our societies, and to support them in living productive, equal and fulfilling lives.”

The *World Widows Report*, in a comprehensive review carried out by the Economic and Social Research Council-funded Centre for Population Change at Southampton University, was described as “an important contribution to academic scholarship on the subject of Widows”. The Report is beginning to have an impact on the debate, as witnessed by citation in documents such as the 2017 Human Rights Watch Report on widows in Zimbabwe, and the underpinning of the *National Geographic’s* prominent feature on widows in its February 2017 edition.

The actress Joanna Lumley, a longstanding patron and supporter of the Loomba Foundation, launched an airship over the Houses of Parliament on International Widows Day 2017 to raise awareness of the cause, and at a dinner that evening, Raj Loomba paid tribute to retiring Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, thanking him for his support. He also expressed thanks to successive governments of the UK and India, in particular Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who had launched the Foundation’s empowerment programme for widows in Varanasi that year.

Joanna Lumley, a Paton and long-time supporter of the cause, releases a blimp over the Palace of Westminster to mark the Loomba Foundation’s 20th anniversary in 2017.



The story so far

A social movement for change

On 23 June 2018, the eighth official UN International Widows Day, powerful support was expressed by two leading Indian politicians in New Delhi. Speaking at an event organised by the Loomba Foundation to mark the day, the Union Minister for Law and Justice, Ravi Shankar Prasad, said that his ministry would take “decisive intervention in favour of the rights of widows” and emphasised this must be part of a wider social movement. “Without a change in attitude we cannot change much,” he pointed out.

The country’s Vice-President, Mr Venkaiah Nadu, also called for a change in mindset. “We as a society need to reflect on the social attitudes towards widows,” Mr Nadu said, “and how the stigma, humiliation and isolation attached to widowhood can be overcome. It is inter-twined with the gender discrimination, which runs as an unfortunate undercurrent in contemporary Indian society.

“Girls and women need to be provided equal and equitable access to good education and livelihood opportunities,” he added. “Our concept of New India encompasses economically emancipated women. If that vision is realized, many of the social ills like atrocities on women and neglect of widows can become a thing of the past.”

The combination of awareness events and evidence gathered by research has, since the first UN-recognised International Widows Day in 2011, produced much greater coverage of events and widows’ issues by media organisations including Reuters, the BBC, the New York Times, CNN, National Geographic, The Huffington Post and others, and generated a growing awareness among governments.

Much progress has been achieved. The goal, however, has not yet been reached, so the Loomba Foundation will continue its efforts to raise awareness and develop the foundations for evidence-based policy so that one day, the widespread and endemic discrimination against widows will be eradicated from our world.

Two widows at the entrance to an ashram in Vindravan featured in ‘A Widow’s Life’, National Geographic Magazine, February 2017. Photograph © Amy Toensing.



Chapter Five

Action Guide

Working Towards Justice, Peace and Human Rights

Fair treatment for widows is not only right from a human rights standpoint. It is also beneficial for their communities, their countries and the world. What actions can Member States and NGOs take to address this issue?

*Lord Loomba and
UN Secretary-General
António Guterres*

It doesn't have to be like that

When looking for solutions and effective action, it is worth remembering that there are positive examples. In Cambodia, widows do not suffer from the same gender discrimination, and daughters can assist their widowed mothers on the latter's agricultural plot – but they are still deprived due to the country's severe economic plight.

In Muslim matriarchal communities in Java and central and northern Sumatra, customary inheritance practice works in favour of women. In Java the social norm is that property is jointly owned by husband and wife, and a surviving spouse inherits where children are still young. If the children are grown up, the property passes to them along with responsibility to care for the surviving parent.

There are also good examples where longstanding traditions have been consigned to history, such as the practice of Sati in Hindu communities in India and the abolition in the early 1990s by local chiefs in the Chikankata region of Zambia of ritual widow cleansing by sexual intercourse.

The right action plan depends on the circumstances in each country and the range and extent of support, but there is a common set of building blocks to help create an effective strategy to alleviate suffering, break the cycle of deprivation and build resilient communities.

Success depends on goodwill, action and collaboration. At the Loomba Foundation we are developing advice and guidance for countries and organizations, addressing the urgent needs of widows today as well as the longer term change in culture and mindset we are determined to bring about.

This Guide is another milestone and starting point in our ongoing campaign. With the input and involvement of a growing number of countries and organizations, we hope to develop this advice along with tools and information about successful strategies and best practice in the coming years.

Key issues to consider

1. Property theft and denial of inheritance.
2. Customs based on superstition and beliefs.
3. Gender discrimination.
4. Removal of children.
5. Child labour.
6. Remarriage.
7. Child marriage.
8. Poverty and neglect.
9. Social welfare.
10. Disease and public health.

Governments

The building blocks for successful policy development by government may include steps such as these:

- Allocate specific responsibility for widows to a government minister and department.
- Ensure cross-departmental collaboration between relevant departments and programmes, e.g. Legal, Women & Children, Community Affairs, Education, Health, Social Support, Employment.
- Conduct a country audit to establish scale and specific issues affecting widows and their dependants.
- Allocate responsibility for widows to specific officials at regional and local level.
- Produce information about widows rights and entitlements and disseminate through regional and local government offices, health and medical services, NGOs and voluntary organizations. This may include specific advice and support at the point when a woman is widowed regarding property and inheritance rights, employment, skills training, education and support grants for dependents.
- Provide reliable and confidential contact details so married women and widows can find out about their rights and entitlements and seek help.
- Create a register of organizations involved in supporting widows or offering relevant specialist services to foster collaboration.
- Consider the policies and programmes that would be most effective in empowering widows to become independent, self-sufficient and able to make a positive contribution to society. Depending on conditions and circumstances, these could include for example pensions and income support, free healthcare and childcare, education provision for the children of poor widows,

Working Towards Justice, Peace and Human Rights

- literacy and skills training.
- Where appropriate, explore partnerships to help fund and deliver aid and education programmes,

NGOs and voluntary organizations

NGOs and voluntary organizations are often at the sharp end: the last resort for those in desperate need. The pointers in this Guide are not intended to add to their burden, but find ways of sharing and working together.

- Find out what the government's approach is to widows and related issues, including plans and available support.
- Where possible, establish a positive and transparent relationship with relevant ministers and government departments.
- Collect information about the nature and scale of discrimination and injustice faced by widows nationally and/or locally.
- Establish formal or informal collaboration between organizations that can help with all or some of the problems faced by widows and their dependents.
- Produce information about widows rights and entitlements (in conjunction with government where appropriate) and disseminate to those who need it.

Country audit

The detailed information provided in the World Widows Report about the scale and characteristics of widow discrimination by region and by country across the world can help inform local, national and regional responses as part of a coordinated global effort to tackle the issue. It is the first research study to bring together this information from all over the world with a specific and comprehensive focus on widows – however, the information that exists around the world is incomplete.

Conducting country audits to establish local issues, conditions and accurate figures will not only inform the development of a Country Action Plan, it will also improve our knowledge globally and enable international organisations and partners to provide more effective support to the efforts of Member States.

To conduct a country audit, please follow the guidance on www.worldwidowsreport.org/countryaudit.



Working Towards Justice, Peace and Human Rights

Country Action Plan

Governments, NGOs and local voluntary organizations are encouraged to work together to shape an action plan that will be effective in tackling local issues.

The most important elements of an action plan are likely to be information, communication and education.

Information means understanding the issues. Who is affected, what are the problems they face, what is the local understanding and history? Information is also key in helping widows to help themselves. What are their rights and entitlements? What help is available?

Communication is a lifeline. If people are suffering injustice and abuse, who can they turn to and how can they make contact? Communication is also central to effective collaboration between all those involved in delivering aid and support.

In the long term education must be at the heart of eradicating discrimination and ill treatment of widows, for example:

- Identifying misunderstandings and misperceptions that fuel injustice against widows and formulate educational strategies and interventions to address them.
- Demonstrating the economic impacts on communities over the long term from such discrimination.
- Addressing ignorance about the causes of death that lead to accusations of witchcraft.
- Showing how stigma can lead to the very problems it seeks to ward against, e.g. promiscuity and the spread of disease.
- Providing literacy and skills training for widows to enable them to become economically independent.

Global Coalition for Widows

The Loomba Foundation has joined with partners to form the Global Coalition for Widows, an umbrella organisation for all those who wish to collaborate to alleviate the plight of widows and eradicate discrimination and injustice. Membership is open to UN Member States, NGOs and other organizations.

For information about how to join the Coalition, please visit www.worldwidowsreport/coalition.

Young widow by her bakery in Nairobi, supported by The Loomba Foundation (2011), painting by Reeta Sarkar

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