



# INTERNATIONAL WIDOWS DAY



## *Celebration of First International Widows Day on June 23, 2011*

The first official International Widows Day was celebrated worldwide . This was the result of an international campaign to get a special day recognised by the United Nations, following a declaration by the UN General Assembly last December which called on member states to observe International Widows' Day each year.

The UN also called for the universal protection of widows' rights, as accorded them under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other international agreements. According to UN Women, the United Nations entity for gender equality and the empowerment of women, there

are 245 million widows worldwide, with approximately 115 million living in extreme poverty. Adding that "Yet too often, no strong collective voice speaks for their rights or calls for their protection."

### Celebrations at the UN

To mark this first International Widows Day, advocates from civil societies, diplomats, UN officials, NGOs and other dignitaries convened at the UN in New York to raise awareness of the plight of widows and their children around the world. According to research by the Loomba Foundation, which works to promote the rights of widows, a majority of widows live in conditions of abject poverty and degradation and are victims of violence.

Addressing the plight of widows is central to achieving the UN Millennium Development goals and social and economic justice for women.

Panel discussions were held to highlight the issues faced by widows, particularly in Africa and Asia. Among the panellists were Dr. Michelle Bachelet, Executive Director of UN Women; Madame Sylvia Bongo Ondimba, First Lady of the Gabonese Republic which sponsored the resolution for the establishment of International Widows Day in 2010; Mrs. Cherie Blair, President of the Loomba Foundation; Lord Raj Loomba, Founder of the Loomba Foundation; Mrs. Ban Soon Taek, wife of the United Nations Secretary General and Mr. Amir Dossal, Founder of the Global Partnerships Forum.

***Continued on page2....***

This rare designation of an international day of recognition by the UN follows independent verification of shocking levels of violence and deprivation faced by hundreds of millions of widows worldwide.



Yoo Soon-taek, wife of the UN Secretary General HE Ban Ki Moon

Since its establishment in 1997, [The Loomba Foundation](http://www.theloombafoundation.org/) has spearheaded the campaign for UN acceptance of IWD and has been an active advocate for widows' rights globally.



Lord Raj Loomba CBE at the UN International Widows Day Conference

Speaking at the UN Lord Loomba said, "I saw my own mother suffer after my father died of tuberculosis. As soon as my father stopped breathing my mother also stopped being an individual. She could only wear white clothes, she was belittled and ostracized. She lived in this shadow for 37 years until her death. I started this charity and began this journey in honor of my mother, and with the passage of International Widows' Day we can help widows worldwide so that they do not suffer the injustices my mother had inflicted upon her." He added, "With the recognition of International Widows' Day by the UN and the leadership of such individuals as Dr. Bachelet, we can move this issue to the forefront of people's minds so that they can take meaningful action."

Further details can be found at <http://www.theloombafoundation.org/>

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## And in Africa...



**Dr. Eleanor Nwadinobi, President and Founder  
Widows Development Organisation**

Widows groups in many African countries sent reports on how they celebrated International Widows Day.

WRI's partner organisation in Nigeria, the Widows Development Organisation, used the occasion to appeal for Government and civil society support. Dr. Eleanor Nwadinobi, President and Founder, issued a message stating that the inauguration of International Widows Day meant that "widows all over the world now have cause to heave a big sigh of relief".

Her message, broadcast nationally, said that "in some parts of the world, including Nigeria, widows still undergo forced shaving of the hair, confinement and loss of their property. The rural poor widow is worst hit as she may suffer disinheritance, losing her land and economic trees which constitute her only source of livelihood. The practice of levirate, whereby the widow is inherited by a surviving male of her husband's family, or where the widow is expected to procreate indiscriminately to produce sons in the name of the deceased husband, is still prevalent. These practices also increase the vulnerability of widows to HIV and Aids. The belief that when a man dies, he has been killed by his wife, is responsible for some of these inhuman practices. Since women and children are inextricably linked, children of widows suffer the consequences of harmful widowhood practices"

### **Appeal For Action**

In a strong appeal to her country she added "As

we join the rest of the world to commemorate International Widows Day, it is time for all sectors of the public to play an active role in ensuring that widows are protected. Nigeria is yet to domesticate international and regional instruments that protect the rights of women. Such instruments include CEDAW and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the rights of women in Africa. Only a high level of commitment from Government will bring about transformative change"

While congratulating States such as Enugu and Anambra that have passed widows rights laws, she called on other states, religious leaders, law enforcement agencies, civil society organisations and the media to do more to outlaw negative or harmful cultural practices, to intervene appropriately in the justice system and to educate members of the public to provide support, celebrate successes and name and shame those who perpetrate these harmful cultural rituals. She ended by saying that all Nigerians must now harness positive aspects of their culture, folklore, songs and drama and to protect widows and support them at their time of grief.

### **For information: the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights include;**

**Article 20:** on widows rights puts the obligations on State Parties to take appropriate legal measures to ensure that widows enjoy all Human rights including making sure that widows are not subjected to inhumane, humiliating or degrading treatment. It also states that a widow shall automatically become the guardian and custodian of her children and shall have the right to marry a person of her choice.

**Article 21:** on the right to inheritance clearly states that a widow shall have the right to equitable share in the inheritance of the property of her husband.

For more info about Widows Development Organisation, please see <http://www.widoafrica.org/>



## Marking the Day

### Message for International Widow's Day 23 June 2011



Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon

“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.”



Ivorian Widows run a restaurant.  
UN Photo

### Message from WRI Chair

Patsy Robertson



The message from the Secretary General recognises the contribution that widows can make to their societies if they are allowed to participate fully. This acknowledgment is testimony to the efforts of those who have worked tirelessly to end the injustices, which widows face daily in many countries. This historic declaration, at the UN, that June 23 would be a special day for widows internationally has been met with quiet satisfaction and celebrations. However, here is still much to be done before the harmful cultural practices that deform the lives of widows and their children are finally eradicated

WRI will continue to work with its partner organisations to ensure that widows rights are incorporated in all human rights legislation and development policies, particularly in Africa and Asia.

**Widows' Rights International**

Registered charity number: 1069142

## And in the UK...

### Lords Meeting on Widows Rights

A special event at the UK House of Lords on Tuesday 21 June 2011, marked International Widows Day. Baroness Sandip Verma Minister of State., Department for International Development (DFID), UK. Organised the meeting attended by representatives of women's organisation in Britain.

The meeting was addressed by Jane Opolot, Founder and Executive Director of Women of Purpose (WOP), a community based women's organization in Eastern Uganda. This organisation, supported by WRI and Access 4 UK, works to eradicate the practices that abrogate widows rights.

Concentrating on tribal and cultural leaders, Jane Opolot spoke about sensitizing communities, on the importance of recognizing and respecting widows' rights. She stated "it was crucial for widows to be enabled to access resources such as land, and to be empowered with skills to transform them from subsistence farming to more productive farming".

In her presentation, at the House of Lords, Jane said "The communities in which we work still have a high prevalence of discriminatory customary practices that oppress women. For example, cultural practices such as widow inheritance, limitations to property ownership, as well as separation of widows from their children, are still prevalent. These not only deprive widows of their human dignity, but also increasingly limit their access to resources for development. This in turn exacerbates the feminization of poverty. It is not uncommon to find girls, dropping out of school in order to help their widowed mothers earn a living. This results in a viscous cycle of poverty among women-headed homes, inevitably leading to social exclusion, in which widows and their families are unable to fully participate in social, political and economic life.

As such, the main thrust of our work is aimed at transforming the communities to respect the rights of women in general, and widows in particular, as well as put in place mechanisms for widows' potential to be fully tapped in development. We mainly do this through community sensitization".

She stressed that a legal framework without favourable socio-economic conditions renders human rights guarantees illusory. Indeed, merely passing laws is not

sufficient because experience has shown that laws may not be effective in combating vices that are embedded in socio-cultural norms. Thus, the need for sensitization to enable people to change negative perceptions and mind-sets, is not easy.



Jane Opolot at a meeting with widows.

### Community Programme

The community programme includes identification of influential people in the communities. Trained to be Community Resource Assistants (CRAs), they inform communities about widows rights and provide Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) to negotiate and mediate actual and potential disputes between widows and their in-laws.

Policy makers are alerted on a continuing basis on the need to obtain details on social relationships, institutions and practices that inhibit widows' full participation in their communities.



Visiting widows: Kate Young of WRI

Jane Opolot also noted that liberated people are productive people. She added "as part of our work, we focus on the role played by culture, social relations, processes and institutions in mediating the

impact on widows of broader economic processes".

Economic efficiency and local customs influence the extent to which people benefit from participating in particular forms of exchange or production. For instance, those disadvantaged by gender, such as widows, are often not granted political or social authority by local traditions, which perpetuate inequality. Social disempowerment and a lack of resources prohibit market access and participation in the value chain systems of the main stream economy .

Gender issues in development efforts are mainstreamed and Community Resource Assistants are trained to assist widows in basic business skills; such as record keeping to properly manage small businesses and income generating activities. These are mainly in the agricultural sector of the country, which employs over 70% of the working population and of these, over 80% are women. Access to resources, such as land and skills, has transformed widows from subsistence to more productive farming.



## NEWS FROM AFRICA

### Four Thousand mark International Widows Day in Nigeria

Alleging that widows are being ill treated by "wicked in-laws", over 4000 widows in Cross River State, called on the government of Nigeria to enact legislation to cater for their welfare and rights

The Nigerian newspaper, *The Nation*, reported that the widows from the 18 local government areas gathered at the Ikom Township Stadium to celebrate the International Day of Widows. Mrs Lydia Eburnta, the Cross River State chairman of the National Association of Widows said:

*"Governments come and go , but the existence of widows in our society is a horrible nightmare because each passing day, widows suffer violence at the hands of those who govern them"*.

According to her, the average widow in Cross River State is now married to poverty. She has been forcefully ejected from her late husband's home and stigmatised as a husband killer. Widows are abandoned even by their own families. Most are unemployed and without skills, and many are dying because of lack of medical care.

Recalling the suffering of many women in Nigeria, Mrs Ebuta speaks of women who have "been made to drink water washed from their husband's dead bodies and forced to refrain from washing for a year to prove their innocence".

These widows, demand the passage of a Widows' Rights Act , similar to that enacted in Enugu and Anambra States. Her Foundation, along with other non-governmental organisations, will be presenting a bill to the Cross River State House of Assembly for the enactment of a Widows' Rights Act.

Mrs Eburnta also stated: "We want employment for all able and willing widows and their children, free education for all our children at all levels,. We want the government to ensure that political office holders dedicate a percentage of their constituency allowances to widows and the education of their children".

By **Kunle Johnson, Calabar**

Full story available at:

<http://www.thenationonlineng.net/2011/index.php/newsextra/11700-4,000-celebrate-widows%E2%80%99-day.html>



Participants at a meeting to discuss widows rights in Nigeria.

Photo source: <http://www.ccwaintl.org/news.php>



## NEWS FROM AFRICA

### Challenging Cultural Values



*National Troupers on stage*

Nigerian activists are using culture – dance, drama and music, to highlight the ordeal of widows in many parts of Africa. The National Troupe of Nigeria staged a play 'Ojomolami' by Martin Adaji, which has provided a new platform to address the plight of women and in particular widows to add another voice to the clarion calls for African society to accord women their rights.

The play deals with the death of a man and the traditional search for his killers among his many wives. This is customary practice in most parts of Africa, including Igalaland, home of the playwright. The dead man's kinsmen accuse his first wife of killing her husband and demand a confession. Constructed through dialogue and episodes, the play educates the audience on the subject of widowhood, at both cultural and contemporary levels.

Using aesthetic and scenic entertainment and indigenous music, costume and choreography the play reflects Nigeria's cultural diversity. The issues raised in the play include a women's right to inherit property, as well as the preference for male children in some parts of Africa. In the play's resolution Josephine Igberaese, the director, uses a strong female protagonist to challenge harmful and dehumanising widowhood practices. It is hoped the play will tour the country, under the same female director, and advance the cause of eradicating barbaric customs against widows and women in general.

By SOLA BALOGUN

Full story available at: <http://www.sunnewsonline.com/webpages/features/arts/2011/july/14/arts-07-14-2011-001.html>

# NEWS FROM ASIA

## KASHMIR

### Update on half widows in Kashmir

A new report issued by the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) entitled '*Half Widow, Half Wife? Responding to Gender Violence in Kashmir*', examines the situation of women whose husbands have "disappeared" but have not been declared deceased. Released in late July 2011, the report provides a gender analysis of the situation, drawing on the experiences of half-widows to capture an often unseen and pernicious face of insecurity in Kashmir.

Based on extensive individual and group interviews, as well as data from APDP surveys and archives, the report makes several key findings about the population of half widows. There are, at a minimum, 1,500 half widows in Jammu and Kashmir. As wives of "disappeared" men, half widows face various economic, social, and emotional vulnerabilities.

These are compounded, rather than addressed, by the legal and administrative remedies currently available to half widows. Further, children of half widows are often traumatized, showing extreme resentment and loneliness, and are particularly susceptible to impoverishment and exploitation. While most half widows show immense strength and resilience—acting as the sole breadwinners for their families and overcoming massive trauma—they continue to be deprived of the assistance and justice they deserve.

The 48 page report makes immediate and short term recommendations for law and policy changes to address the various forms of gender related violence. It explains that "besides violence inflicted directly on women's bodies, women also bear the ramifications of the general—typically male on male—violence in the Valley. Such effects on women also constitute gendered violence. Although the direct violence is disproportionately inflicted on males because they are perceived or imagined as threatening, females suffer indirectly, as reflected in the experiences of half widows."

In the immediate-term (1 year), the report recommends that the government should streamline a system of compensation for half widows; convene a special bench of the High Court to expedite their cases; and immediately pass special legislation on enforced disappearances. This would be in keeping with the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances, which the Indian government has signed and must ratify.

In the short-term (2-3 yrs.), it demands that security laws that provide legal immunity to the armed forces must be amended and disappearances cases in general must be resolved and families told the whereabouts of their loved ones, dead or alive.

It also strongly recommends that civil society—local, Indian, and international—recognize the issues faced by half widows and advocate meaningful change, as well as the establishment of a fund for initiatives; such as health care programs and income-generating projects that take a rights-based approach to directly aid half widows and their children.

The report compiled by ADPD, led by activist Parvez Imroz encapsulates the determination and fearlessness of the women caught in this tragic situation.

More details available at:

<http://www.kashmirdispatch.com/headlines/28074925-apdp-releases-report-on-conditions-of-half-widows-in-kashmir.htm>



# ABOUT WRI

## PLEASE SUPPORT OUR WORK!

Go to [www.widowsrights.org](http://www.widowsrights.org) and press the button to help us help these disadvantaged women in their struggle for their basic human rights.



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**Widows' Rights International supports organisations in sub-Saharan Africa working for social justice and human rights for widows including:**

- ◆ Right to keep their home and property
- ◆ Right to inheritance and land ownership and possession
- ◆ Right to keep their children
- ◆ Right not to be forcibly married to the dead husband's kin
- ◆ Right to work outside the home

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### **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:

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### **WRI mobilises action by:**

- ◆ International organisations
  - ◆ National governments
  - ◆ Legal and other civil society organisations
-



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

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Postcode.....

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I would like to give (please tick): £5  £25  £50  £100  Other £.....

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