



Enabling Widows to have a Brighter and Fairer Future

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Chair's Message

Wishing you all the best on International Widows Day, 23 June 2017.

In a changing political landscape and a new international emphasis on women's empowerment and gender equality, the 61st session of the UN's Commission on the Status of Women was held in March 2017. It was the first CSW held after the new Secretary General of the UN, Antonio Guterres, took office and proclaimed his "determination to put the UN in the forefront of the global movement for the achievement of women's empowerment and global equality agenda".

In his opening speech, the Secretary General also said that the empowerment of women is about breaking structural barriers and added that "with nearly a billion women entering the global economy in the next decade, their empowerment will unleash the potential of all these women and girls and they will

lead the world to a new future".

WRI was represented by Trustee Zarin Hainsworth, who, with partners working for widows rights in many countries, organised an even which looked at the lessons learned from the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) on how to advance economic empowerment for widows and female headed households. The meeting was chaired by Ms Heather Ibrahim Leathers, Founder and President of the Global Fund for Widows.

Others speakers included Dr Eleanor Nwadinobi, Director of the Women's Development Organization in Nigeria, Ms Meera Khanna, Guild of Service, India, Ms Lily Thapa, founder of Women for Human Rights in Nepal and Ms Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda, founder of the Rozario Memorial Trust, Zimbabwe who is also the Africa Union Goodwill Ambassador on Ending Child Marriages.

Despite the presence of many widows rights activists at CSW, the UN has consistently

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refused to list them among those mentioned as suffering from multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalization in relation to the world of work. The emphasis at the meeting was on indigenous, rural, migrant and refugee women as well as women in conflict and post-conflict, humanitarian crisis, natural and manmade disasters and suffering as a result of the impact of climate change.

For the first time, the Commission recognised the important contribution of women and girls of African descent to the development of societies. Yet, widows who for centuries have suffered untold misery because of the harmful cultural practises which are still inherent in many societies today and consistently left off this list. WRI will continue to bring to the attention of all sections of the UN community as well as Governments the facts that widows are still among the most deprived and humiliated women in the world, and WRI will continue to gain for them the recognition that their suffering deserves.

In addition, the situation facing widows in many countries was raised at a meeting at the British House of Commons during a discussion on Female Heads of Households and the SDGs, when WRI Trustee Dr Karen Brewer gave a vivid description of the plight of many widows and said that they are underrepresented in peace building processes even though they constitute

the majority of the displaced. She added *"There is sufficient evidence to show that widows have a substantive role to play, if empowered, in rebuilding communities torn apart by conflict"*. She added that WRI has been campaigning at an international level for over a decade and has recommended that the CSW should develop a Protocol on the rights of widows.

We are very grateful to Isabel Spence and Harjinder Hullin for all the work that they did on the preparation of articles for this issue of the Newsletter.

Patsy Robertson
Chair
23 June 2017

UN Commission Agrees To Mobilise Around Gender Equality

This year, at the CSW meeting, there was a universal agreement that forces should be mobilized around the gender equality and women's empowerment agenda (GEWE).

Champions of human rights and the worldwide women's movement pledged that the time had come to test the international political commitment to this goal, and firmly placed it as an integral component of the UN's mission of sustainable development, peace and security, human rights and humanitarian response.

The new Secretary General Antonio Guterres, who was appointed in January 2017 spoke about his determination to put the UN



Picture taken from www.lucitrust.org/blog_wgun/women_townhall

at the forefront of the global movement for the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment.

But the reality is that the vast majority of women in the world still lead constrained lives and still suffer from all forms of discrimination. But it is not only poor women who suffer - highly educated and trained women still find their paths blocked by age old prejudices and practices that distort their lives.

Prior to the opening session of the NGO meeting, consultation with members of organisations and young people highlighted concerns about the flawed economic model that was perpetuating gender inequality and the need to repurpose it to serve gender equality and social justice.

WRI has now been working for over a decade to bring these ideals down to a practical level, with the goal of achieving legal and social justice for some of the most disadvantaged women in the world. Progress has been slow, but as reports in this newsletter will underline, many countries are now trying to bring about change by using all the social and legal powers that are available.

Widows have benefitted from this, and it is right that, despite all the difficulties which widows still face in many countries, the lives of thousands of disadvantaged women and their children have been changed for the better

Women's Day Celebrated Around the World

International Women's Day 8 March was marked this year by special events in Nigeria and India which underlined the efforts of many organisations and individuals working to end the stigma of widowhood.



Image and article available from www.sopar-balavikasa.org/blog/2017/02/international-womens-day-deconstructing-rather-harmless-picture/

In India, where widows were not customarily invited to a lamp lighting ritual, a charity has broken with tradition to enable a widow to light up the ceremonial lamp.

This lighting ceremony is full of symbolism as it is believed to repel misfortune. Having a widow perform this ceremony publicly would normally be a major scandal.

This year, the organization Sopar-Bala Vikassa has achieved this breakthrough

by inviting religious leaders from all faiths to meet with widows and speak publicly on their behalf.

Over 4000 women were present at an annual conference on empowerment. These women belong to self-help groups set up by the charity in many poor villages of India.

The organisation has been working for social justice for over 40 years in the state of Telangana, supporting over 15,000 widows.

In Nigeria, Mrs Betsy Obaseki, wife of Edo Governor initiated poultry production programme as part the Edo Women for



Edo Governor; Godwin Obaseki, his wife Mrs Betsy Obaseki. Image from Daily Post.

Image and article available from <http://pulse.ng/local/international-women-s-day-edo-first-lady-empowers-500-widows-id6339782.html>

Agriculture project, in collaboration with the Bank of Industry and Bank of Investment Trust Company.

The programme aims to collaborate with professionals to train 500 widows on poultry production and to teach them how to make money from the poultry business.

As poultry production demand exceeds the current supply, the opportunity to empower women workers also includes widows.



<https://www.businessdayonline.com/edo-first-lady-empowers-100-widows-edo-4000-birds/>

At a special event held in the capital Benin, Mrs Betsy Obaseki, presented 100 widows with 40 chickens each. She asserted that pilot project hoped to galvanize the productive energies of rural women in the state to tackle the problem of food shortages and poverty.

International Spotlight on India's Temple Cities

National Geographic has also published an excellent article on widows in the temple city Vrindavan, a city which WRI has highlighted over many years. Many widows are exiled to these cities by their families where they eke out a living working in the temples which abound there.

In a shelter in Vrindavan, known as a "city of widows,"

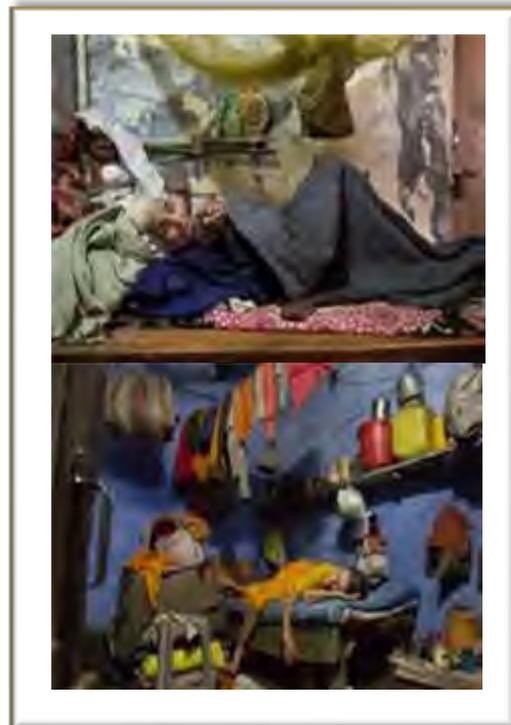


Lalita (at right) bears the cropped hair and white wrap her culture once considered obligatory for widowhood. Shelter manager Ranjana, a much younger widow, is less constrained by traditional customs. Photograph by Amy Toensing



Communities of widows in temple cities draw Hindu women from Nepal and Bangladesh as well.

Bangladeshi widow Bhakti Dashi, 75, has lived for a quarter century in the back of a temple in the riverside spiritual center of Navadwip, West Bengal. Alongside others who have left home or been pushed away by their families, she sings prayers inside, for hours at a time, in exchange for her lodging and food.



Above: A widow's belongings surround her in a Varanasi ashram that for generations has taken in women from Nepal. Usually run by religious charities or social-aid groups, widows' shelters in temple cities offer a roof overhead, a surface to sleep on, and enough food to keep a lean woman alive.

Women who outlive their husbands are often seen at home as tainted and burdensome, so shelters also provide an escape from hostile relatives.

Right: Subhadra Pai was

given a place to sleep in this Vrindavan shelter when she arrived a decade ago.

Unclear about her exact age (at least 95, the attendants believe), she does know she was married at 13 and widowed at 30. The shelter is identified by a battered sign as "Short Stay Home for Women," but its occupants look settled in. Says another resident widow in her 70s: "*Here there is no one to say nasty things to me.*"

Widows in the Punjab

Since April 2015, Widows in the Punjab have been receiving cattle free of charge under a Punjabi government scheme.

The director of livestock, Dr Ghulam Muhammed Hill, stated that the scheme was meant to alleviate poverty. The cattle was allocated to widows from rural areas, with minimal agricultural land and who had children receiving education in schools.

In addition, the Delhi government has increased the monthly pension of senior citizens, widows and disabled peoples in 2017. The eligibility criteria for the beneficiaries of the scheme were also revised and this has meant that more people will benefit from the pensions.

What it is like to be a Widow in Africa

Despite the tremendous support which many governments and organisations in Africa have given towards the realisation of widows rights and elimination of harmful cultural practices, there are still many challenges throughout the continent. WRI has kept a watching brief on these issues and here follow some short pieces on the issues.

Nigeria

The conflict between Boko Haram and the Nigerian Army has left a legacy of thousands of destitute widows, who have had to beg for a living. Their plight has attracted international concern and the International Red Cross is now working with local associations to provide them with food for their families, as well as grants to enable them to set up small businesses.

In a response to this crisis, the Nigerian Government has passed a "**Violence Against Persons Act**" in 2015 which outlaws widowhood harmful traditional practices and states that "*A person who subjects a widow to harmful traditional practices commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a term of imprisonment on exceeding two years or to a fine not exceeding N500,000.00 or both*".

The Act is also wide ranging, banning violence in public and

public life, prohibiting all forms of violence – sexual, psychological, domestic, discrimination against persons and provides for effective remedies for victims and punishment of offenders.

Tanzania

Two years ago, the Committee for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination of Women (CEDAW) ruled that the Government of Tanzania had violated the rights of two widows who had been denied the rights to inherit or administer property following the deaths of their husbands. The CEDAW Committee further found that the Government has denied them "*equality in respect of inheritance and failed to provide them with any other form of redress.*"

The Tanzania Courts were also castigated for denying them the right to access to justice and effective remedies. The Committee recommended that the Tanzania Government compensate both widows for the violation of their rights, and called for constitutional and customary law reform and practical measures to eliminate this discrimination.

While the Tanzania Government has yet to implement this recommendation, in a recent interview Tanzania Lands Minister William Lukuvi said that the "*Government strongly believes that both men and women have equal rights to use or own land without any discrimination*".

Ethiopia

The stigma attached to HIV and cultural practices have led to widows being rejected by their families, stripped of their property and treated as outcasts. However a local association helping widows living with HIV was created as part of a National Network of Positive Ethiopians, which has developed a Mother Mentors scheme to tackle HIV-related stigma and discrimination.

The scheme is a support network that trains women to help other women living with the virus. Advice on issues such as how to prevent transmission and how to deal with related health problems is given, as well as mental health support so that these women can begin to vision a future after diagnosis and discrimination.



South Africa

In South Africa widows have been particularly disenfranchised because women were not recognized as parties in traditional courts. A bill on Traditional Courts was first introduced to South African Parliament in 2008 but rejected and reintroduced in 2012. The first and second draft of the Bill were rejected following criticism from women's rights groups, opposition parties

and provincial governments as it would have created a separate legal system for 18 million rural South Africans with Chiefs in traditional societies becoming the judges in legal disputes amongst residents within their jurisdiction.

Furthermore, the Bill did not allow for individuals to choose which court they wanted their case to be heard in. In addition, these courts do not allow for legal representation

In August 2015, the South African Parliament officially called for the reintroduction of a redrafted Bill on Traditional Courts. The new bill was introduced at the end of 2016.

The redrafted Bill now permits a choice of jurisdiction and is taking into account the need to strengthen equality. Women and vulnerable members of Society are now able to participate freely both as litigants and members of the courts.

There are still some concerns with the new Bill which does not include any checks on the powers exercised by traditional leaders. It also does not provide any additional resources for the implementation of the bill or for any outreach programmes aimed at ensuring that rural people are made aware of their rights under the Bill.

Malawi

In November 2016, an HIV positive man was condemned to 2 years in prison having

admitted that he had slept with over 100 widows who were victims of the outlawed practice of "widows cleansing".

Unfortunately the charge of defiling young girls was dropped when none of the victims came forward. Instead he was tried for "harmful cultural practices" under Section 5 of the Gender Equality's Act.

Ebola: It's Effects on Widows

The Ebola epidemic has infected 28,000 people and killed 11,300 in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone since December 2013. The outbreak and subsequent infection created over 3000 widows in Liberia alone. These widows not only face financial hardships but also rejection from their communities.

As a result, many non-governmental groups have had to launch programmes to provide vocational training and grants, so that these widows could gain skills, such as rearing animals, selling livestock at markets, pastry and soap making, to help them and their families survive.

In Sierra Leone women's advocacy groups have been urging leaders to address the disproportionate effect of Ebola on the female population. Women were adversely affected by putting themselves at greater risk of infection as the primary care-

givers. In addition, they were responsible for performing funeral rites (including touching highly infectious corpses) when relatives died.

It has been suggested that rituals such as widow inheritance, cleansing rites and the eviction of women from their homes may have also contributed to the spread of the world's worst Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

In an interview with Thomson Reuters Foundation in 2016, WRI Trustee, Dr. Karen Brewer pointed out that: *"Widows are damned if they go through the rituals and damned if they don't. If you accept these inhumane and degrading rituals, you run the risk of disease. If you don't, you are condemned for not saying goodbye to your husband, and are abused and ostracised."*



In Sierra Leone, women were encouraged to wash stones instead of corpses during the Ebola outbreak to avoid spreading the virus, *"Traditional cleansing rites helped spread Ebola until they were halted and changed ... there is no reason these alternative mourning rites could not become common"*, Dr. Brewer suggested. <http://uk.reuters.com/article/us-africa-widows-rituals-idUKKCN0Z80LE>

Widows in Conflict in Africa

Somalia

Two decades of civil conflict and state collapse in Somalia has created a large population of displaced persons and other people vulnerable to sexual violence. This, partnered with medical services and a justice system that are ill-equipped to support such victims, will leave many women at risk.

The conflict has resulted in the death of relatives, displacement, loss of property and the destruction of homes. For many Somali women this means they have to assume the role of breadwinner. However, one widow pointed out that having been raped, they are now unable to do the same work or lift heavy things. As a result, they will be unable to provide for their children.

Nigeria

The conflict between Boko Haram and the Nigerian Army has left thousands of women widowed. This has resulted in them having to turn to begging as they are unable to feed their children due to their lack of formal education. The International Committee of the Red Cross is working in conjunction with local widows associations to provide food for widows and their families.

The ICRC has provided grants that enable these widows to set up small businesses and become self-

sufficient. This has allowed widows to regain their dignity and provide for their families.

The **"Violence Against Persons Act"** was passed with a view to eliminating violence in private and public life, prohibiting all forms of violence sexual, psychological, domestic, harmful traditional practices; discrimination against persons and providing maximum protection and effective remedies for victims and punishment of offenders.



Researched Articles

There have been many articles which provide detailed information about the harmful cultural practices which destroy the lives of widows and their children in many African countries. The following articles are detailed and provide excellent background information on what it is like to be a widow Africa with particular information on the mourning rites in Kenya, Tanzania, Togo, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi.

These articles should be of interest to researchers and other interested groups, as they provide detailed information on the practices which have governed the lives of vulnerable women from time immemorial.

1. **How one Kenyan widow fought to return home after being banished for 13 years**

The National, World
September 30, 2016

<http://www.thenational.ae/world/africa/how-one-kenyan-widow-fought-to-return-home-after-being-banished-for-13-years>

2. **Widow cleansing, inheritance still rife among the Luo**

By [Joel Muinde](#) For Citizen Digital
Published on **8 October 2016**

<https://citizentv.co.ke/news/widow-cleansing-inheritance-still-rife-among-the-luo-144585/>

3. **What It's Like to Be a Widow in Africa**

August 31, 2016 by Tolulope Ajiboye

Ms. Blog Magazine

<http://msmagazine.com/blog/2016/08/31/what-its-like-to-be-a-widow-in-africa/>

4. **The cost of widowhood in Igboland**

June 8, 2016

<http://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/06/cost-widowhood-igboland/>

5. **Community Volunteers Help Tanzanian Widows Access Land Rights**

IDN-In Depth News
11 Jan 2017

<http://www.indepthnews.net/index.php/the-world/africa/899-community-volunteers-help-tanzanian-widows-access-land-rights>

6. **Ending harmful traditional widowhood practices in Togo**

UN Women

Date: 25 January 2017

<http://unfpa.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2017/01/ending-harmful-traditional-widowhood-practices-in-togo#sthash.zDKCNvn5.dpuf>

7. **Widows Deprived of Property Rights**

Property Grabbing Leaves Many Older Women Destitute
January 24, 2017

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/24/zimbabwe-widows-deprived-property-rights>

8. **Why African widows get evicted by their in-laws**

They're old, they're weak and they can't prove they were married

The Economist

Jan 26 2017

<http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21715669-theyre-old-theyre-weak-and-they-cant-prove-they-were-married-why-african-widows>

9. **The plight of widowhood in Africa**

Times Group

October 07, 2016

<http://www.times.mw/the-plight-of-widowhood-in-africa/>

The Red Tika Challenge In Nepal

In January 2017, Women Human Rights (WHR) launched a new campaign to highlight the plight of widows in Nepal. The Challenge was explained on WHR's Facebook and on Twitter **#RedTika**

Colors have their own significance and are believed to be the right of every person to inherit since birth. When talking about the colors that single women (WIDOWS) can involve with, we can see mass of people giving their prejudice opinion. They are the only ones that are refrained from using bright colors, especially "Red Tika" and "Red Attires".

While, the color Red symbolizes the color of life and of passion. Girls wear bright colors even before they are married, so why not after they are categorized into single women (widow). Let us not be judgmental and, all have the privilege of empowering colors according to one's personal choice. Let not gender nor orthodox, be a hindrance to embrace colors.

The Social Media Campaign has proved effective in that the response received had surpassed the 500 target and thousands of supporters across the globe sending in pictures as requested by WHR of themselves wearing a red tika and nominating three friends and relatives to take the challenge. as well as men have responded.

There has also been support expressed by men of the campaign to highlight the plight of widows in Nepal who are not allowed to wear the colour Red.

Ideas? Suggestions? Comments? Contributions?



We would like to hear from you. If you have comments, suggestions, ideas, or concerns please send us an e-mail to

administrator@widowsrights.org

If you have an interesting story to tell, please send these

About Widows Rights International

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

WRI promotes: right to keep their home and property, right to inheritance, land ownership and possession, right to keep their children, right to not be forcibly married to deceased husband's kin, and the right to work outside the home.

WRI works: to promote the recognition of widows' specific vulnerability, to combat negative social attitudes which lead to isolation, exploitation and poverty, to bring these practices to an end.

WRI mobilises action through:

International organisations, national governments, legal and other civil society organisations.

Contact:

administrator@widowsrights.org for further information about WRI or consult our website: www.widowsrights.org

PLEASE SUPPORT OUR WORK

Please go to WRI's
website:

www.widowsrights.org

.....and follow the steps to
donate