



Widows' Rights International

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Newsletter

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EDITORIAL

This is the last e-newsletter for this year. We hope that you have enjoyed receiving them.

As this is the traditional season for gifts giving in our culture we are asking for any reader who can to support WRI with a gift.

HOW YOU CAN HELP WRI

If you can give us information about recent changes in legislation in your country which protects widows from discrimination, or new social policies which are aimed at supporting widows who live in poverty, this is of great help to our research effort. Just send us an email with the details.

If you can provide us with really good statistics about the number of widows in your country, whether they are in rural or urban areas, and whether they are between 15-29, 30-59 or 60 and over, this is also very useful information.

If you have good and detailed information about struggles widows in your country are waging, or victories they have won through the courts, please let us know. All this information is very helpful for us in compiling our picture of the position and condition of widows and what needs to be done by governments and international agencies to remedy social injustices.

If you would like to help us support more widows groups, **send us a donation**, or ask us for a **gift aid declaration** if you are a UK tax payer. You can also log onto our website where there is a donation facility.

Have a festive season!

The Trustees

Widows Rights International (WRI), Registered Charity no 1069142

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ABOUT WRI

Widows' Rights International supports organisations in South and West Asia and Africa working for social justice and human rights for widows including:

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

Traditional customs in many developing countries, especially in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa - which can deprive a widow of home and livelihood or subject her to social ostracism - lead to dire poverty for widows and their children. Even when modern laws exist to prevent these abuses, ignorance of the law, or cultural habits, impede access.

Widows are young as well as old, because of:

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

WRI works:

- * to promote the recognition of widows' special vulnerability
- * to combat negative social attitudes which lead to their isolation, exploitation and poverty
- * to bring these practices to an end:

WRI mobilises action by:

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

WRI offers resources for:

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

Financial assistance may be available for:

- *pioneering activities by and for widows which provide examples of best practice
- *activities designed to establish legal precedents; heighten public awareness; repeal of laws inimical to widows
- *action to influence international agencies to condemn practices which deny widows their rights
- *action to train widows and legal personnel in rights awareness

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NEWS FROM OUR PARTNERS

THE FIGHTING FUND

Three years ago we set up The Fighting Fund for Widows Rights with funds from the Swedish aid agency SIDA. The idea for this came from listening to the stories told by participants at the first international conference on widows rights which we organised in 2001. Although in many countries laws do exist to protect widows from customary practices which deprive them of access to land, property and a livelihood, it is usually very difficult for widows to get legal protection. Our partners identified the need to have resources to help widows challenge customary but often illegal practices as a priority.

To date we have three Fighting Fund partners – one of them, WiDO in Nigeria, has developed an interesting and innovative method of support for widows.

As soon as WiDO gets to hear of a case of mistreatment of a widow, their Vanguard Team goes to her village and starts to negotiate with the widow's husband's kin as to her rights to home, children and livelihood. The Vanguard Team is composed of a good negotiator, someone who is fully conversant with the law, a photographer and a driver. They involve as many of the local notables – village chief, elders, teachers – as possible so that the agreement eventually reached is more likely to be honoured. The Vanguard Team revisit the widow after some time has lapsed since the agreement to make sure all is well and that she is not suffering from other forms of discrimination.

WiDO are greatly aided in their work by the existence of State level legislation prohibiting discrimination against widows and widowers; WiDO has translated the main provisions of the bill into the local language and published it in a simple illustrated booklet. The Vanguard Team make sure the notables have their copy of the booklet. In their new project proposal they envisage training 4 community focal persons based in rural Enugu State, and giving them each a mobile phone so that WiDO will hear of abuses of widows' rights rather quickly. The Vanguard Team will then be able respond much more rapidly before a widow's possessions and children are dispersed.

WiDO also hold an annual Widows Friendly Day at which widows, collaborating NGOs, lawyers and well wishers hear about recent cases, and commit themselves to spreading the word that abusing widows is against the law.

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One of our Partners, WiDO (Widows Development Organisation), Nigeria

A relevant case

Mrs E. is the second wife of late Mr E. who died in 1999. She has been disposed of her farm land and economic trees assigned to her children by her late husband Mr E.

Her step son B (the son of the first wife) who is now the head of the family has been the major party in the dispute.

B. claims that Mrs E. deserted her husband and her matrimonial home years before her husband died. Mrs E. denies this and claims that she left after a very serious quarrel with her husband and after being beaten up by B. However she returned after her husband died and observed the traditional mourning rites in her matrimonial home. Thereafter she was unwelcome and her two sons were forcefully taken away from her. She decided to return to her father's compound.

WiDO sent out the Vanguard team to verify the allegations on both sides. This was followed by letters to B. concerning the unlawful custody of Mrs E's children. He replied by writing a fake letter pretending to be from Mrs E's daughter who denied writing the letter.

WiDO has since been able to get her two sons back. One was discovered to be disabled after the people he was sent to live with physically abused him. He is now unable to walk properly.

Mrs E. currently lives in a poor place made of sticks and with a thatch roof. On his barrister's advice, B. was in favour of an amicable settlement of the matter. B and his brother have agreed to hand over a portion of land and economic trees to Mrs E. An agreement was drawn up by the lawyer for all parties to sign.

In September 2005, the papers were signed by B. and his brother, on one hand and by Mrs E. on the other hand in the presence of the lawyer and the Vanguard team. Then after further help from the Church and of Mrs E. brother, B. handed over a large parcel of land to Mrs E. under our supervision. In total Mrs E. got two plots of land and thirty two palm trees.

And another

Mrs. C. came to WiDO in November, 2004 to report that she was homeless because of disputes with her husband's family. Before his death in 2002, relations were unsatisfactory because he constantly brought girls to the house, and ordered her to sleep on the floor while he slept on the bed with the girls. At a meeting with welfare officers, her late husband had accused her of flirting with other men and denied that he was unfaithful and the paternity of their daughter.

Before his death, it had been agreed that Mrs C. would stay in the matrimonial home while he worked on and lived in a new house that was being built. On completion of the work, the younger brother of her late husband refused her access to the house and threatened to kill her, forcing her to sleep outside for three days. Because of these disputes, Mrs C. went to stay with her parents.

In 2002, her husband became ill and pleaded with her to return to the matrimonial home, but her parents would not allow her to return. After his death, none of his relative came to inform her. Her son told her and when she went to the house, his sisters refused her access until his remains were brought home for burial.

After the burial rites, she was instructed by her late husband's elder brother to go back to her parent's house, but her elder brother and her son pleaded with her to undergo the full mourning rites, which she did. After these rituals, her late husband's sister warned her not to come into her matrimonial house and asked the family members to threaten her with machetes and sticks, describing her as an enemy. Her husband's elder brother then stated that, as the next of kin, everything that belonged to his late brother was his. This included a house, a car and two motor-cycles. Social welfare officials had also decided that the late husband's salary should be divided into three so that his family members could have a share, but did not deal with the question of the new house.

Mrs C. came to complain to WiDO. Her children, her husband's property and her life were at stake. The Vanguard team went to speak to the Traditional ruler and in-laws. WiDO decided to approach a lawyer for assistance. Eventually in October 2005 agreement papers were signed allowing Mrs C. to move back in her matrimonial home with her children after several months of neglect, abandonment and disinheritance.

If you are interested in knowing the outcome of these cases, please contact us at enquiries@widowsrights.org.

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WOP (Woman Of Purpose), an African Partner, Uganda

GRACE' S STORY

My husband died and left me with two children. He had been sick on and off but strong enough to dig. To survive. Then one time he became very sick for we used to grow cassava; millet, cotton and we were able only a few days and died. I believe he was poisoned because his stomach swell and his skin turned very dark.

The most terrible thing that can happen to any woman is to lose a husband. I live with my widowed mother-in-law in the same compound. Life is hard; it was my late husband who was supporting both of us. The biggest problem I have is accommodation. My house is in a bad state. My husband had intended to repair it but unfortunately, he fell sick before he did it.

When my husband passed away, the Director and the Co-ordinator of Woman of Purpose came to pay their condolences to the family and me. When they saw the state of my house, they promised that through the project HOPE FOR WIDOWS, they would help me with the repair of the roof. I am very grateful because the roof was repaired before the heavy rains started, otherwise, the whole house would have fallen down.

I am also happy that they were able to talk to my late husband's relatives about the rights of widows and told them that they should support me as much as they can. I am happy with this organisation and I hope that they will help many widows because there are a lot of problems faced by widows. A few weeks after my husband's death, I discovered that I was pregnant. Now I am quite heavy with another child and I do not know what to do but I will just leave everything to God. I do not want to think a lot about the future. Sometimes I wish I had also died but again when I think of my children I pray to God to keep me so that I can bring them up. I have seen many orphans suffering a lot and I would not like my children to suffer like that. Even if I cannot give them much, we shall survive with the little I get. My mother-in-law is a good woman, she is a Christian. She helps me care for the children when I go to dig. We cook together and eat whatever we can. I pray she remains like that.

Sometimes when the husband dies, everyone turns against the widow - adding hurt to injury.

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RECENT ARTICLES AND EVENTS

Women's inheritance: next steps – India

The Indian Express
Monday, October 17, 2005



Bina Agarwal, Author of *A field of her own*

The livelihood and empowerment prospects of millions of women who depend on agriculture for survival are affected by their legal rights in land. For many these prospects have been enhanced by the recent Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act 2005(HSAA) which deleted the gender discriminatory clause on agricultural land. But this benefits only Hindu women, leaving intact the disabilities facing non-Hindu women, especially Muslim and tribal women — something that should concern all of us who work for gender justice.

Muslim women in India fall under The Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act, 1937. With this, the Shariat superceded “custom or usage to the contrary” for all property, *except agricultural land*, as the basis of personal law for Muslims in undivided India, except J&K. Earlier, Muslims (like most Hindus before the 1956 Hindu Succession Act) were governed by a mosaic of local customs, laws and practices, some in sync with the Shariat, most at variance with it. The '37 Act, by abrogating custom, enhanced most Muslim women's rights, since typically customs (except among matrilineal Muslims, as in Kerala), were highly discriminatory: some entirely excluded daughters, others placed them (and widows) very low in the succession order. In contrast, under the Shariat, a daughter and widow cannot be excluded by any other heir and are protected by the overall testamentary restrictions, even though their shares are always lower than men's. However, the '37 Act, excluded a critical form of property: agricultural land. Section (2) provides that:

“Notwithstanding any custom or usage to the contrary, in all questions (save questions relating to agricultural land) regarding intestate succession, special property of females, including personal property inherited or obtained under contract or gift, or any other provision of Personal Law, marriage, dissolution of marriage, including Talaq, Ila, Zihar, Lian, Khula and Mubaraat, maintenance, dower, guardianship, gifts, trusts and trust properties, and wakfs (other than charities and charitable institutions, and charitable and religious endowments) the rule of decision in cases where the parties are Muslims shall be the Muslim Personal Law (Shariat).”

Later the southern states extended the '37 Act to include agricultural land by deleting the phrase “save questions relating to agricultural land”. TN, Karnataka and AP did so in '49. Kerala followed in '63. Elsewhere, however, succession to agricultural land continues to depend variously on customs, tenurial laws, etc, with differing implications across the unamended states.

In some, e.g., Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Bengal, there was no strong presumption in favour of custom even before the '37 Act. Here, even without amendment, the Shariat could be presumed to cover agricultural land.

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Continued ...

The same holds for the parts of AP and Karnataka which were earlier in the former Hyderabad state, and where custom at variance with Mohammedan law was not admitted even before 1937. But in many other states, e.g., Delhi, Haryana, HP, Punjab, UP and J&K, highly discriminatory tenurial laws and customs, at considerable variance with the Shariat, continue. These virtually exclude women from rights in agricultural land. For instance, in UP, with one-sixth of India's population, non-Hindu women's land rights are still subject to the UP Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act '50. Section 171 of the Act, which defines succession to a man's land, gives primacy to the male lineal descendants in the male line of descent. Only in their absence can a widow qualify. Daughters come lower. Tenurial laws in Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, HP and J&K give similar primacy to male heirs. This is contrary to the rights promised to Muslim women by the Shariat.

Notably, on agricultural land, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslim women are better off. In Pakistan the '37 Shariat Act was superceded by later laws. Finally, the West Pakistan Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act of 1962 included agricultural land and extended the Shariat to all of West Pakistan, except 'Tribal Areas' in the NWFP. The Act entitled Muslim women to inherit all property, including agricultural, with shares as prescribed by the Shariat. Pakistani women's groups played a key role in this reform.

Muslims of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), however, continued to come under the '37 Shariat Act. But here women were not disadvantaged since even before this Act customs contrary to Islamic law were not enforced in (undivided) Bengal: here the Shariat (by presumption) applies also to agricultural land, as outlined in Mulla's *Principles of Mohammedan Law* 1990, and confirmed by my discussions with Bangladeshi lawyers.

Surely in India too it is time to remove this anomaly. Deleting the phrase "save questions relating to agricultural land" in Section 2 of the Shariat Act, would bring all property, including agricultural, in line with the Shariat. Although, women would be entitled to smaller shares than men, still this amendment would go a long way in enhancing Muslim women's rights in this critical livelihood source. Vast numbers of Muslim women depend on agriculture for subsistence, many as de-facto household heads, as more men move to non-farm jobs. Indeed one of the earliest grassroots demands by Indian women for land rights came from poor Muslim women in West Bengal who, in '79, told their panchayat: "Please go and ask the government why when it distributes land, we don't we get a title? Are we not peasants?" These women and millions like them deserve an answer. But government land distribution is limited, and inheritance remains the main source for women's land access.

On other aspects of inequality, the only Muslim countries with full gender equality in inheritance laws are Turkey and Somalia. In some others, like Bangladesh, women have debated whether the constitution should define personal law. My aim here is, however, more modest and the reform suggested vis-à-vis agricultural land is doable within the purview of the Shariat. The precedent for such amendment already exists in southern states.

Tribal women are the second major category facing substantial disabilities in inheritance. Given the non-codification of their laws, tribal communities are governed by customs which (except under matriliney) discriminate against women. And even the limited customary land rights many tribal women enjoyed historically have been eroding. Attempts at gender-unequal codification in some north-eastern states have been opposed by women's groups there. It is critical that any codification is along gender-equal lines.

There is a window of opportunity today for reform-minded political leaders, activists and intellectuals to work together, to correct historically embedded gender disabilities. Let this chance not be missed.

The writer is professor of economics, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi

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Women's Inheritance Rights in Nigeria

Transformative Practices

Vanessa Emery JD/MSW, former student of the University of Toronto

Nigeria, with its complex tripartite legal system, faces a particularly challenging legal situation in the face of the Aids pandemic in maintaining a harmonious and equitable balance amongst its over 250 different diverse peoples. With an HIV prevalence rate of 5.4% amongst the adult population, and approximately 3,600,000 adults and children currently HIV+¹ the ability of the legal framework to provide support to those affected needs to be critically assessed.

Widows rights are a good entry point into a critical re-examination of Nigeria's legal framework. Widows, as a set of individuals who are particularly vulnerable in the face of HIV, are beginning to come to public attention. As many AIDS widows have limited rights to inheritance, their ability to subsist in a land-based economy is placed in jeopardy. At the same time, widows play a pivotal role in caring for AIDS orphans and sick relatives. Research into the complex topic of widow's inheritance rights is therefore a necessary step in developing a holistic approach to combating the pandemic.

The paper has five sections. In the first section a normative framework is developed which recognizes that solutions must come from within a cultural framework that stems from the people themselves. Working with community leaders to reinterpret customary law for example has greater legitimacy than attempts to impose reform from above.² The importance of the cultural transformation approach is stressed. While culture may be seen as a barrier to reform, it can more fruitfully be seen as a dynamic site of tension and resistance that can provide for differing interpretations and potentialities to expand opportunities for women. While both customary laws and the common law have developed to protect particular world views, they must evolve in order to remain relevant to the needs of the people.

The second section focuses on the interaction between common law, customary law and sharia law as the living law of the nation. It also explains how land and marriage impact upon the bundle of rights that individuals possess regarding inheritance. The third section surveys inheritance laws for both testate and intestate succession in all three systems, and the fourth section provides a brief survey of the key social factors that impact upon widows' ability to access, enforce, and advocate for inheritance rights.

The final section explores both top-down attempts at reform; through legislative reform, adoption of international conventions and judicial intervention, and grass roots options, focusing on cultural transformation rooted in the work of women in developing normative community frameworks, local judicial processes, and revitalizing customary values. The author argues that there is no simple prescription for how to make cultural transformation work. Any successful approach must be multi-faceted in order to engage with different audiences and loci of power, and also negotiate difficult value judgements about the relationship between women, human rights, and culture.

This is a shortened version. Vanessa Emery's report is 76 pages long. If you would like a copy please send your request to vanessa.emery@utoronto.ca

¹ UNAIDS, 2004 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic, Table of country-specific HIV/AIDS estimates and data, as of end 2003, (July 2004). Accessed at <http://www.unaids.org/bangkok2004>.

² For development of this framework, see Abduhalli A. An-Nai'im, ed., *Cultural Transformation and Human Rights in Africa* (New York: Zed Books Ltd., 2002).

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Role of Conflict Widows in Healing a Hurting World

Declaration

India Women's United Nations Report Network (WUNRN) Workshop Organised by The Guild of Service and Supported by UNIFEM

Preamble

This assembly of organisations and individuals involved in the process of prevention of conflict, reconstruction, peace reconciliation and empowering widows and other victim groups reiterates that:

While entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict and terrorism, women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society as well as their sex".

Women are on the one hand, the main civilian victims of conflicts, they are, on the other hand, often powerless to prevent them, excluded from the negotiating tables when it comes to their resolution and marginalised in the post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation efforts. The general exclusion of women from decision-making positions prior to, during and following violent conflict reinforces their victimization.

Women are more than just victims, they are fighters. Widows are survivors. Mothers are peace builders.

A vast majority of women affected by conflict are widows as a direct or indirect consequence of the violence. To the process of peace building they bring sensitivity tempered by their personal loss, a sense of immediacy since their families' futures are at stake and surviving skills against all odds. These qualities once tapped while accelerating the ownership of the process of reconstruction will help them individually to overcome their personal traumas.

The peace-building process comprises several stages including conflict prevention, conflict resolution and post-conflict peace-building and reconstruction. Sustainable peace requires the full participation of women particularly those affected by conflicts at each of the stages of the peace process.

The assembly called on governments to provide a range of diverse support for women and widows. To see the full declaration please go to our website www.widowsrights.org.

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SUCCESS STORIES ON NEGATIVE TRADITIONAL AND CULTURAL PRACTICES

By Madam Betty Ayagiba
National Director, Widows and Orphans Ministry, Ghana

The Widows and Orphans Ministry (WOM) carried out research on inheritance in four communities near Bolgatanga in the Upper East Region of Ghana and uncovered the following human rights issues among widows and reasons for their poverty:

- Widows must bear the cost of the husband's funeral and some widows even come to the WOM office to borrow money to perform their husband's funeral rites.
- The ritualist takes the clothes the widow wears during the funeral rites
- Widows have to feed the ritualist with nutritious diet and other items like cooling drinks, alcohol, and tobacco (depending on what she/he takes) during the course of the funeral
- Widows must supply the ritualist with all kinds of foodstuffs to take home after the funeral
- The widow is stripped naked during the funeral
- The widow is bathed naked before the crowd of mourners
- The widow is forced to choose somebody in the husband's family to marry and to continue bearing children to the dead husband's name
- A relative of the deceased inherits his property including the widow herself

Recommendations from the research were that WOM should work with Chiefs, opinion formers and group leaders to bring about change in attitudes. So WOM enlisted the support of the Commission of Human Rights and Justice (CHRAJ) and Women and Juvenile Unit (WAJU) to run a series of workshops to educate the community on property laws, to adopt positive cultural practices and to eliminate or change negative cultural practices. Facilitators used various Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools to ensure the success of the workshops

The workshops brought together more than one thousand participants from four communities and included Chiefs, elders, opinion formers and group leaders, and widows.

At each workshop for the chiefs, community men and women, the Director of WOM gave participants the findings of the research on the causes of widows' poverty, after which widows shared with the community their experiences when their husbands died.

At one location a widow spoke of how she was driven out of the house she and her husband had toiled and built, and slept under a tree for three months. Another widow told of how her dead husband had left bullocks yet his relatives are using these bullocks to farm whilst she and her child weed with their hands. Another woman could not control her tears as she told the story of how she and her children were maltreated; she said her children refused to eat food for four days.

A young widow confessed how a young man was seriously looking at her when they stripped her naked. She asked the man why he was looking at her and he replied that he felt bad for her. Another widow said she refused to strip naked at the first of her husband's funeral rites, but then everybody in the village were against her saying that she had committed adultery and killed her husband which was the reason why she refused to strip naked. So during the final funeral rites she had to strip herself naked. One widow told of her pain when her children saw her nakedness at her husband's funeral.

One ritualist said that they could only stop these practice if they are supported to rear goats or guinea fowls instead of performing funeral rites for employment.

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The second part of the workshop on educating chiefs, community men and women on property law was handled by WAJU and CHARJ. The facilitators were taken to the four villages and the community was educated on laws concerning inheritance of property. Participants were also told there are laws protecting women and children and, therefore, a person who dehumanizes another person's dignity could be reported for punishment.

In our view this style of workshop is the best to combat or reduce negative cultural practices. The community was exposed to the plight of the widows and some of the practices such as drinking of concoctions made from contaminated leaves worn by a widow during a previous funeral.

When we were asked to send our contribution to the U.N Secretary General's paper on violence against women, we mentioned that this is an effective method to reduce violence against widows.

TWO SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES

- A workshop was held in Kongo. After the workshop the Kongo Chief and all the elders agreed that from the day onward they would not strip widows naked during funerals and would end the drinking of any concoctions. They also agreed that after the death of the husband, the widow and her children should use the husband property and when a widow's daughter gets married, a portion of the bridewealth or the cows should be given to the mother. One of the elders also spoke of how only girls are trained in cooking and doing all household jobs leaving the boys behind. All agreed that boys should also be trained in cooking in the home.

Kongo was exceptional because they took immediate action to stop some of these negative funeral practices. The other three villages asked for time to think about possible changes but at the same time there was no doubt of how badly they felt to the exposure.

- BA, about 30 years old, was her husband's second wife, and they had three children. His first wife had five children. Three years ago he died after a short illness.

During his lifetime BA's husband was able to put up six rooms for himself and his two wives. After his death, life was so hard for BA that she had to move to town to look for a job to take care of her children. Through the WOM she was trained in baking bread.

One day she decided to visit her in-laws and to clean her rooms; while she was sweeping, her husband's brother came in and asked why she had come to the house. He beat her so severely that she had to go to hospital. She reported this to WOM, and he was arrested and imprisoned. After two months he was given the option of paying a five hundred thousand cedis fine or spending a further six months in prison.

This case has scared a lot of in-laws from beating widows.

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Dr. Mohini Giri of The Guild Service, Delhi at the University of New England

October 27, 2005

By Laura Slap-Shelton, Psy.D.

Dr. Mohini V. Giri addressed a standing room only crowd of approximately 200 at the University of New England (UNE) in Biddeford, Maine on October 27, 2005. Her appearance was co-hosted by GriefandRenewal.Com and UNE's Office of Multicultural Studies and Women's Studies Departments. As people were coming into the lecture, excerpts from White Rainbow, the new film about widows in Vrindavan, were playing. Dr. Giri opened her talk noting that what happens to women in India is relevant to people in America, particularly as technology brings us all closer together. Throughout the talk she emphasized the global importance of the problems faced by the widows and other marginalized women. Using a power point presentation she reviewed the status of widows in India. Her first person portrayal of what happens to a woman when she is widowed brought home to the audience, mostly female, the reality of the Indian woman's plight when her husband dies. Dr. Giri described the transformation of a vibrant woman to a non-person. "Imagine in front of a group of my relatives as large as this one", she said, "my bangles are smashed, my hair is shaved, my bindi removed." She went on to state that widows are allowed only one meal a day and are not allowed to eat food with spices. They are forced to wear white saris. Saddest of all is that they are often removed from their children and families, and abandoned. She described how the Guild of Service has been helping to connect the widows to their now grown children in recent years. Showing pictures of widows in different Guild of Service homes, she described three types of widows: religious widows, war widows, and riot widows. The audience responded to her talk with questions about the legal protections for widows vs. society's practices, the technology boom in India, widowhood in cities vs. rural areas, child brides and widows, AIDS, and even Indira Gandhi. Dr. Giri reported on several pieces of legislation she introduced to parliament which will help widows in her country, but emphasized the need for the culture and particularly men's attitudes to change so that the laws will be enforced. Pointing out that even in the United States only a small percentage of women are in Congress, she spoke about her goal of having a mandate to have 33 percent of India's Parliament allocated to women. In discussing women in leadership, Dr. Giri noted that she is the daughter-in-law of one of India's presidents and could have accepted a ministerial position in the government. Instead she chose a path of leadership which allowed her to follow her heart "and bring many women along with her."

Widows Rights International (WRI), Registered Charity no 1069142

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Position of Mrs X in the hands of Indian Courts

A case sent by Mr Anukul Nayak, Managing Trustee of Sradhanjali Charitable Trust Bhubaneswar, India.

For centuries women not only in India but all over the world have been treated as occupying a secondary position to men. In India many social reformers look up the cause of injustice against women. As a result during the colonial administration period laws like Abolition of Sati (1829), Widows Remarriage Act (1856), Civil Marriage Act (1872) etc. were enacted

These laws need to be activated and utilised by concerned interests. The first requirement is awareness of the law by widows themselves and how to use it.

In Bhubaneswar, Orissa 3 years back a lady was tortured by her in-laws because of the sudden demise of her husband. After the expiry of her husband Mrs. X tried to stay in her home but to her ill fate she was compelled to vacate her late husband's house with her small kid. Now the house is being enjoyed by her in-laws.

Although she tried to use the shelter of law to fight against her in-laws to get her property back there were many rumours that her husband had gifted the said property to his younger brother who is insane. The question is who will take care of the wealth if the younger brother is an insane man and also why the property is not going to the widow who has a small child who will ultimately inherit the property. The case is at the court of law but unfortunately Mrs .X is unable to pay the fees to her Attorney to fight the case against her in-laws.

See the cases histories of our partner ASHISH for similar injustices.

A POEM

BECAUSE I CAN READ - MOTHER TO DAUGHTER

Because I can read,
I can understand. I can write a letter.
I can fill out a job application.
I can finally get off welfare.

Because I can read,
I can learn. I can help my daughter
With her homework.
I can inspire her to be better.
I can be a role model.

Because I can read,
I can succeed, I can
Contribute. I can live
My life without fear,
Without shame.
I can be whatever
I want to be.

Because I can read.

From the US Center for Family Literacy, <http://www.familit.org/>

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