



Widows' Rights International

Registered charity number: 1069142

******* Newsletter *******

N°16 December 2009

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Message from the Chair

As we near the end of the first decade of the 21st century, it is gratifying that the issue of widows' rights is now well established globally. We have devoted this issue of the newsletter to a roundup of information about the work which is being done to eradicate the deep-rooted cultural practices which still prevail in many countries. It is instructive to note that the material that we have collected below gives a picture of the campaigns which are being waged to secure the rights of widows, not only in developing countries, but also in the United States. But, we have to continue working assiduously at the grassroots level, which WRI has consistently encouraged because our contacts with pioneer partners have convinced us that action needs to be community-based and supported.

While respectful of the culture which underpins people in patriarchal societies, we have never wavered in our belief that some of these practices have no place in the modern world, and that their eradication would enhance rather than harm the lives of many women. This ideal is demonstrated by a training programme in Eastern Nigeria led by the Widows' Development Organisation, and supported by the London-based Commonwealth Secretariat. This programme brought the traditional, religious and community leaders to examine the current inheritance laws in Nigeria against the background of long-standing customary practices.

Finally, it has given me a great deal of satisfaction to let our supporters know that WRI is still in business, and that we are planning to increase our advocacy role at the national level in the coming year. We send New Year greetings to all our supporters, and hope that we can continue to work together towards our common goal of eradicating the violations of the human rights of widows.

Patsy Robertson

We are urgently seeking funds to support our partners in Africa – please support our work!

Go to www.widowsrights.org and press the Paypal button to help us help these disadvantaged women in their struggle for their basic human rights.

WIDO Workshop: Inheritance Reform in Nigeria



(l to r: Organisers of Workshop—Dr Eleanor Nwadinobi, President of WIDO; Mrs Esther Eghobamien and Dr Meena Shivdas of the Commonwealth Secretariat)

A workshop to eliminate Nigeria's disinheritance practices affecting widows was held in Enugu State, Nigeria, in May, by the Widows' Development Organisation (WIDO), WRI's partner in the region, led by Dr Eleanor Nwadinobi. The two day event entitled, "Building Bridges: Faith, Customary Practice and Law in Nigeria", which was a collaboration with the Commonwealth Secretariat, focused on persuading traditional officials (Igwes) and local religious leaders—Christian and Muslim—to join inheritance reform campaigns.

Out of approximately 90 participants, which included widows, and authorities from the legal, governmental and civil society fields, 35 were community leaders (9 traditional and 26 religious).

The meeting was seen by its organizers as desperately necessary, because, despite the downward trend in misogynist activities in Nigeria, disinheritance of women in the region remains prevalent. For example: in that country, a patriarchal society in which women are regarded as property, particularly in the rural areas and in customary relations, it is common for wives to be stripped of their rights to matrimonial land and housing upon their husbands' deaths; the beneficiary status in this arrangement is typically awarded to the husband's family or son who will carry on the male lineage. This practice has been increasingly condemned by

humanitarian groups for its fundamental inequity and division of the family, not least because the majority of household heads in modern Nigeria are women.



(Igwe Tony Ojukwu in cultural exchange with Dr Meena Shivdas)

The aims of the WIDO workshop were to sensitize community leaders to widows' inheritance rights, and to help raise subject awareness by training them in the rudiments of will writing, partnership building and the dissemination of information to their people. The Igwes and the clergy have been viewed by women's human-rights groups as critical, even if unnatural, allies to a change process to fight ingrained sexism since they are effectively the custodians of moral standards and arbiters of socio-cultural behaviour in the society. In a land of legal pluralism, with its intersection of statutory, religious and ever-changing cultural laws, there is recognition that purely legal reforms are not sufficient; only the victory on the cultural battle front will win hearts and minds.

The organisers of the event emphasized the need to prioritise statutory laws on inheritance, while also encouraging the influence of religious and traditional leaders. This delicate balancing act is seen as vital especially to undermine the argument from detractors, some of whom were present at the workshop, claiming that change is symptomatic of the invasion of

a foreign culture, a result of returning daughters having been schooled abroad.

The WIDO workshop, which featured men and women as presenters, impressed that traditional and religious structures have their place in Nigeria, but must be altered to support an egalitarian society and human rights concerns. The report of the workshop, published in a booklet to be disseminated worldwide, stated that it was critical to have continued dialogue with local leaders on widows' issues. Significant numbers of the target audience in the workshop were receptive, and agreed, to: promote will writing, celebrate the birth of girl babies, and support the education of and equal opportunity for girls and young women in their communities.

Major Global Activities Affecting Widows

The summer and autumnal months of 2009 have witnessed significant mobilization on widows' issues at the multilateral and local levels.

Multilateral:

- A resolution by the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR), a coalition of feminist groups, which proposes the creation of a new women's rights entity at the United Nations, was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly on 14 September. The calls issued to improve women's living conditions globally included the GEAR campaign urging member-states and the Secretary-General to commit to systematic and on-going participation of women's organizations at the global, regional, national, and local levels.

(See link)

<http://www.un-gear.eu/>

- On 5 October, the UN Security Council (UNSC) reviewed the implementation of Resolution 1325 (2000) which was to facilitate the participation and improvement of women in post-conflict areas (where the vast majority become widowed) so as to facilitate peace and maintain security. The UNSC reiterated that it was vital that member states support women's role in post-conflict reconstruction and reintegration, elections, justice, security reforms, nation-building, governance and policy-making.

(See link) For copy of concept paper, see

http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/wps/2009/Final_concept_paper_for_5_October_Open_debate.pdf

- A UN resolution on women, peace and security, which was discussed and adopted on 30 September, was meant to reinforce the 2008 UNSC Resolution 1820 on sexual violence. This new resolution seeks to confront and eliminate sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict areas, perpetrated by men usually armed with guns, where there are a high proportion of widows.

(See link) For draft resolution, see

<http://www.gaps-uk.org/docs/Draft%20Resolution%20on%20Women%20Peace%20and%20Security.pdf>

- In July the UN Human Rights Committee (UNHRC), upon evidence presented by a consortium led by the South African Human Rights NGO Network, examined the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in Tanzania. The UNHRC determined that Tanzania fell massively short, most notably in terms of violence against women (particularly marital rape and female genital mutilation), and the disinheritance of widows which violated Article 3 of the ICCPR.

(See link) For details, see

<http://www.africa4womensrights.org/post/2009/08/04/Tanzania:-Immediate-Steps-to-Protect-Women-Are-Requested-by-the-UN-Human-Rights-Committee>

- A 'traditional values' text was adopted by vote at the 12th Human Rights Council Session Roundup between 14 September and 2 October. The resolution "promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms through a better understanding of traditional values of humankind in conformity with international human rights law," was passed with 26 out of 47 'Aye' votes. It has been viewed by various humanitarian groups in developed countries as problematic because it seems not to "recognize the many instances that harmful traditional practices [such as treating women as second-class citizens] are justified by invoking the 'traditional values' of a group or society." It is worth noting

that the vast number of the 26 countries (88%) in favour of the text were from Asian (Central, South and East), Middle Eastern and African countries, i.e. all but 3 countries. Countries which abstained from voting on the resolution included Ghana.

(See link) For details, see

<http://stop-stoning.org/node/718>

National:

South Africa

The Mzansi Widows Forum (MWF) of South Africa has made commendable efforts to enfranchise local widows by organising a series of interactive events aimed at the women and/or their surrounding communities. Mzansi has especially focused on the young widows who tend to be doubly afflicted with HIV/AIDS and the stigma of their marital status: according to one woman interviewed by the MWF, "It is not HIV/AIDS that is killing me but it is the unacceptance [*sic*] by the community as well as poverty which [hurts] me."



(MWF-sponsored funeral for widow, Kwa-Zulu Natal)

Mzansi has done significant work in legislative areas, pushing the government of South Africa to review inheritance laws, but the crux of its labour has been at the grassroots level. In addition to organizing and paying the cost of a widow's funeral so that she "was buried in a

dignified manner”, the MWF visited two orphanages, one of which the group adopted, giving the children of widows food and clothes.



(Children of widows at the Khayaletu Orphanage, Tsakane, with food and clothes donated by the MWF)

Mzansi’s most prolific project has been its ‘Healing, Empowerment and Awareness Conference’ held in Engoje on 1 August 2009. Attended by 2000 women—most of whom were the breadwinners of their families—the conference promoted education on HIV/AIDS, skills-building and engagement in entrepreneurship. It built on earlier MWF initiatives, which stressed self-sufficiency in business by training women in computer and management skills, hairdressing and beauty therapy skills, and sewing for widows in the 45-65 years old age group.



(Cross-Section of widows at the MWF's 'Healing, Empowerment and Awareness Conference')

For further information on Mzansi, please contact mzantsiwidow@gmail.com

Liberia

The moves to make reformed inheritance laws in Liberia impactful on widows have gathered speed in recent months. The Association of the Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL), which in 2003 pushed through legislation which gave the country's widows "the right to 1/3 total of their [husbands'] property", is leading the initiative to spread awareness of the law and inject it into the cultural consciousness of the people. The application of the AFELL legislation, which covers women in both civil and customary marriages, is part of the group's wider work with government and civil society partners on poverty reduction. Fatu

Bonah, a widow in a customary marriage from rural Liberia, whose in-laws—upon her husband’s death—expelled her from the matrimonial home and land thus damaging her livelihood, typifies the woman who the campaign targets.

(See link)

<http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=47147>

Iraq

The Iraq Foundation (IF), a US-based human rights group dealing with Iraq, which was formed in 1991, has recently launched a ‘Widows’ Empowerment Project’. The project seeks to train disadvantaged Iraqi widows in skills that will equip them politically, and increase their economic independence. Items on the project agenda include: educating women of their rights in the constitution and laws of Iraq, and informing them of their rights in international agreements ratified by Iraq, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

(See link)

http://www.iraqfoundation.org/projects_new/wep/wepindex.htm

Nepal

The Women for Human Rights (WHR), a widows’ rights group based in Nepal, with the support of the European Union, held a ‘Sensitization Workshop for Media Personnel on the Issues of Single Women (Widows)’ in Baluwatar on 27 October 2009. The event sought to make known the experiences and challenges of widowhood in Nepal, and raise public awareness of those issues.

(See link)

<http://www.whr.org.np/event/event.php?id=10>

United States

In October 2009, the United States Senate approved a measure that will end the 'widow penalty', the government's practice of annulling non-Americans', usually women's, applications for permanent residency when their American spouses die before the marriage is two years old. Prior to the bill, which is expected to be passed into law, these widows' rights to be considered for US residency had been largely rescinded, thus opening the door to deportation.

(See link)

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/21/us/21widows.html?_r=1

Women's Rights, the Paramount Issue of the 21st century

The WRI's own Victoria Brittain has written an excellent article observing the awakening of mainstream society to the important role women, in egalitarian and interdependent positions, must play in social and economic progress worldwide. She attributes this increasing consciousness to the extraordinary women from all backgrounds, and significantly men in positions of cultural power, who throw their weight behind campaigns to educate women in developing countries, as evidenced in recent widows' rights activities.

To read article, see

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/aug/26/women-development-new-york-times>

Help Needed

The number of charities working with widows in Africa and East Asia has grown and WRI receives regular applications for assistance. Because of WRI's current inability to fund projects directly due to the world economic crisis, we list below selected charities for the attention of possible donors, who can exercise an option of either asking us to carry out necessary checks on these charities or corresponding directly with these groups. Importantly, all donors should understand that a listing here does not mean that WRI has investigated their activities.

Association Avenir NEPAD-Congo

Association Avenir NEPAD Congo, part of a humanitarian network involving largely Francophone developing countries, is based in Brazzaville in the Republic of the Congo. Established in 2004, Avenir NEPAD Congo works on protecting, defending and endorsing various human rights, but takes special interest in promoting social justice for women, particularly widows, who live a dire existence in the region. The group has launched campaigns in the Congo to end violence against women, to increase female awareness of HIV/AIDS, and to facilitate their capacity building.



(Workers at Association Avenir NEPAD Congo and European Commission Monitors)

The project for which the Avenir NEPAD Congo requires help, "Projet d'Appui aux Femmes veuves/Project to support Widows' rights", which is approved by the European Commission, proposes a collaboration

with local NGOs and community leaders on the issue of widows' legal rights. The coalition seeks to educate women and their communities on legal matters implicating widows, offer widows redemptive legal aid and supply them with skills training sessions to improve their employment prospects.

For more information on this charity please
e-mail: avenirnepad_congo@yahoo.fr

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**

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

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

PLEASE SUPPORT OUR WORK!

Go to www.widowsrights.org and press the Paypal button to help us help these disadvantaged women in their struggle for their basic human rights.



Yes, I want to support WIDOWS RIGHTS INTERNATIONAL's struggle for social justice for widows in South and West Asia and Africa.

Name

.....
.....

Address

.....

..... Postcode
.....

Telephone e-mail:

.....

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

Please debit my account

Bank sort code

Once Monthly Quarterly Half year Annually

Starting on (date):/...../..... Signature

.....

YOUR bank name and address

Name Address

.....

..... Postcode

.....

Gift Aid Declaration

Using Gift Aid means that, if you are a UK taxpayer, for every pound you give, we get an extra 28 pence from the Inland Revenue, helping your donation to go further. To qualify for Gift Aid, what you pay in income tax must be at least equal to the amount we will claim in the year.

Tick the box if you are a tax payer and would like us to reclaim tax on this:

Date of Declaration :/...../.....

Please return this form to:

WIDOWS RIGHTS INTERNATIONAL, Room 405, Davina House, 137-149
Goswell Road, London EC1V 7ET. Tel: 020.7253.5504

E-mail address: administrator@widowsrights.org

Thank you for supporting Widows Rights International.