



Widows' Rights International

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EDITORIAL

Efforts by WRI to garner international support for action against harmful traditional beliefs and practices surrounding widowhood continue. This year, WRI is seeking ways to engage the United Nations to undertake research into the conditions and status of widows, particularly in Asia and Africa, and to promote commitment by Governments to end abuses against widows.

This is especially important because in the Secretary General's proposals for the agenda of the CSW over the next few years, widows are mentioned only in the context of HIV/AIDS prevention. No mention is made of widows in sections devoted to inheritance and property rights, the rights of the child, or any of the other issues surrounding gender equality.

Much work seeking support for WRI's activities was undertaken at the recent meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, held in New York from February 27 to March 10. The WRI delegation met with representatives of Governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and human rights practitioners working on widowhood issues. At a special event, Widows Rites and Wrongs, organised by WRI to raise awareness of the issues, testimonies from widows in Africa and India were read out and served to highlight in a personal but painful way the suffering which so many widows undergo in many countries.

Expressions of support for WRI's work have encouraged us to widen our outreach to prominent legislators in African countries as well as in India and Nepal. We will also be working to sponsor a resolution at the United Nations which will facilitate the inclusion of widowhood issues in all aspects of the work for gender equality being undertaken by the entire UN family.

On a personal note, it is with regret that we announce the resignation of Dr Kate Young, our indefatigable Chair for the past five years. Kate brought to WRI years of experience of working at the highest levels in the fields of women's rights and gender equality. She will remain a Trustee to give me, her successor, the benefit of her support and wisdom.

Patsy Robertson

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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 AFRICA

Woman Of Purpose (WOP), our Ugandan Partner

Promoting Widows' Rights Through Alternative Dispute Resolution:

Sixty year old Malisa has been a widow for over fifteen years. Her deceased husband left six women, of which she was the second wife. The first wife died before their husband. Upon their husband's death, his brothers inherited the four widows. However, Malisa refused to be inherited. Consequently, she was persecuted, and told to leave the homestead although she had nowhere to go. Because her father had passed away many years prior to the death of her husband, she would not be welcomed back to his home because only young widows are allowed to go back to their parents because they can easily re-marry and obtain a dowry to refund the relatives of the deceased husband.

Malisa had only one son, who had died in the mid-nineties, and his wife also passed away a year later. It is believed that they died of AIDS but Malisa claims her son and daughter-in-law were bewitched by her co-wives. Malisa persuaded her deceased son's first born girl to get married so that they could in order to obtain a dowry but the dowry was appropriated by Malisa's brothers-in-law.

In 1996, one of her elder stepsons took away the land she was cultivating. Whenever she tried to reclaim the land, she was told that when she got married, she did not bring any land from her father's home, therefore she was not entitled to the land. She was even threatened that if she continued her efforts to regain her land, she would be evicted and sent back to her father's home.

Malisa decided to approach the clan leaders, who unfortunately shared the same view with her stepson; that a widow has no right to own land. Malisa continued her efforts and after some time, the case was forwarded to the sub county chief, and later appealed to the Magistrates court. Unfortunately, the case has been in court for seven years and she does not know how long it will continue since she is not even represented by a lawyer. She is growing old, with no land to cultivate. The result is that she now has to go digging in other people's gardens in order to get food for subsistence. She was told by her friends that the only way she could succeed was for her to employ a lawyer, but she does not have enough money for a lawyer.

In Malisa's own words:

"I had the chance to attend a village meeting where people for Woman of Purpose were explaining to us about Widows Rights. I later approached the organisation for financial assistance to enable me employ a lawyer; but they said they are unable to do so but would help me handle the matter through Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). These members of Woman of Purpose came and met my deceased husband's clan-mates. Although my step son was first adamant and even refused to attend the first meeting, he later softened and agreed to attend subsequent meetings. In all, the negotiations totalled to five meetings with the clan members. The members from Woman of Purpose, explained many things to my in-laws and told them that I have a right to own and dig in my gardens. They later gave me back my piece of land together with the rice that was growing on it and my life changed for the better"

Malisa's story is a result of the work of the Community Resource Assistants, trained by Woman of Purpose, who are now doing a tremendous job within the community! Each Assistant is allocated to be in charge of a specific area of operation although they are encouraged to consult each other and work as a team. The Community's response to these Community Resource Assistants has been very encouraging. The organisation is literally overwhelmed with the number of requests we receive to handle disputes and explain human/widows rights. The Alternative Dispute Resolution mechanisms of mediation and negotiation have helped many widows get favourable treatment from their in-laws. We also take time and talk to the Community about Stress Management and Communication Skills. We discovered that some of these disputes are aggravated by stress and poor communication e.g. a stressed widow goes shouting at a stressed brother in law resulting in a serious quarrel or fight, yet the situation could have been handled amicably if both parties had managed their own stress and communicated their concerns effectively.

Jane Opolot, Project Director, HOPE FOR WIDOWS, Pallisa, Uganda.

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Widows Development Organisation (WiDO), Nigeria

This story was pieced together over time by WiDO as they tried to help Mrs. Ani in her battle with the dreadful brother-in-law.

Mrs. Ani was widowed in March 2003 when she was 30. Her husband, who was not on good terms with his father and brother, had died from a long illness during the course of which they ignored him totally and didn't contribute anything to his medical costs. Before his death, he instructed his wife, in the presence of two witnesses, that should he die, his car - parked in church premises for safe keeping - should be sold and the money used to pay off his high medical bills.

Immediately he died his father and brother came to the house and seized all her husband's property - but not the car. As soon as he was buried they ordered Mrs. Ani to leave the matrimonial home and go back to her parents. She told them of the N150,000 hospital bill which had yet to be paid. They ignored her and told her to leave which she did at the end of April 2003.

Ever since Mrs. Ani has been harassed by her husband's brother Mabuabuchi.

In December 2003 he accused her of stealing property and money worth N70,000, and she and her mother ended up in gaol. In her words "My late husband's brother also claimed that my husband's will was in his favour alone. The police summoned us and after going through the will, the Police did not agree with him and advised him to take the matter to the court of law." After court session, Mr. Maduabuchi accosted Mrs. Ani at her mother's shop and threatened both of them in the presence of her mother's trading neighbours. He demanded she give him the car and said he had a will signed by his brother in which the car was given to him. Mrs. Ani was distraught because she needed to sell the car to pay for the hospital bills.

He then wrote another petition against her, alleging that she and her mother had beaten him up. The police detained him at the Area Command on the charge of making frivolous claims. He was however given bail and continued to threaten Mrs. Ani and her mother both physically and also by alleging that she and her mother had assaulted him, and that her brothers had stolen N30,000 from him. The police again found this to be untrue.

Mrs. Ani went with her mother to her father-in-law to refund the Bride Price paid by her husband, so that she could remarry in the future. He however refused to accept it saying that as he was not in good terms with his son before he died, he would not touch anything that belonged to him.

Maduabuchi however continued to claim his dead brother's car and again took Mrs. Ani to court, but after a number of adjournments of the case, the car was released to her. He then demanded that the court issue a warrant so that he could retrieve the car. The Court ruled that both parties should maintain the peace and warned him that he could be charged for making false allegations concerning the car.

In August 2004 Mrs. Ani went to yet another hearing of a case Maduabuchi had brought against her for theft. He did not appear at the hearing so the case was adjourned, but while she was waiting for the date of next hearing he came in with a policeman from the State CID. The policeman arrested her for stealing a fridge, radio cassette and some money from him. The magistrate, who was about to leave the court, told the policeman to let her go as the case was already in the court. Nonetheless, the police detained her for three days demanding N5,000 for bail. The charge included stealing a panel van and a bus, an 18" TV set, a Korean radio cassette player, and a big fridge. When the police searched her home they found a 14" TV set and a small fridge but Maduabuchi then pointed to a baby bed and stabilizer which the police took but later released.

By the end of September Mrs. Ani, who had just had a baby, heard that Area Command had instructed the State CID not to get involved in the case, and that they have charged Maduabuchi with making false allegations. Maduabuchi remains defiant and has threatened to go to yet another police station to report the case.

Analysis: the case clearly shows up the problem of the ways in which men can use their influence or just bribe the police so as to continue harassing a widow, in the hope that she will just give up any claim to property belonging to her or her late husband which is rightfully hers. Individual policeman are complicit in the hope that they too will benefit from her despoilment. Mrs. Ani's situation was also difficult as she was childless and therefore her husband's family had paid, in their terms, bride wealth for nothing. Despite this her father-in-law refused to accept her offer to return the bride wealth thereby making it difficult for her to break all customary bonds with her in-laws.

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

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Widows and "Professional inheritors"

We give below a short excerpt from a paper By Nancy Luke (Assistant Professor at Brown University), presented at the Population Association of America Annual Meeting, May 2002 entitled Widows and "Professional Inheritors": Understanding AIDS Risk Perceptions in Kenya. It provides an excellent example of how customs do change over time but not necessarily to women's benefit.

". . . in light of AIDS, the institution [of widow inheritance] has changed considerably and has resulted in a dangerous and unsatisfactory arrangement. . . Widows remain under great social pressure to continue the tradition by finding an inheritor and being cleansed, and many believe deviation from this responsibility will still be punished with chira (*eds* a wasting disease). At the same time, widows believe they have lost their rights to a responsible, respectable inheritor who assists them financially or materially.

. . . it appears that the traditional economic support supplied by many inheritors has diminished. Although this support did not always amount to much, many respondents say that today widows receive nothing from inheritors. Moreover, the tables have turned so that inheritors now expect widows to support them. Inheritors insist on receiving food, clothing, and domestic upkeep, and many respondents noted that they have become a financial burden to widows. For example, one woman noted: "Widows are suffering ... The inheritors are mainly idle and just come to eat in these homes" (Widow 333, age 26). One male respondent explained how he had inherited his sister-in-law after the first inheritor gave her no support. He remarked, "Inheritors are opportunists who are looking for a good, easy life where they get good food, clothes etc., while he wastes your money. Otherwise there is nothing good the woman gets in the whole arrangement" (Man 407, age 22). Finally, an NGO representative explained: "It is very rare to find a situation the way it is supposed to be [inheritance in the traditional manner]. Inheritors have the upper hand. Tradition has favored them, and they can take from widows."

It is also evident that inheritors are no longer good men. Brothers-in-law and other clansmen who live in the neighboring community want to preserve the Luo customs and often are the most insistent that widows complete the rituals. But due to their fear that widows have AIDS, these local men refuse to inherit. This compels the widow or her family to search for someone else to complete the practice, and this person is usually a "stranger" from another village or part of Luoland. The fact the new inheritors are strangers to the local area means their backgrounds are unknown. In general, Luos often blame strangers for bringing disease or immoral behaviors to a region—even if they are Luos from another location. In short, traditional inheritors are married, respectable, related men, while widows do not know or trust the new variety of inheritor. This new development leaves widows with the feeling that they are "forced" into inheritance with men they have not chosen.

The demand for unrelated men to inherit local widows has led to the phenomenon of "professional inheritors." These are young, often single men who inherit numerous women with the benefits of acquiring the wealth of the deceased husbands and enjoying numerous, legitimate sexual partners.

The phenomenon of professional inheritors is the most likely explanation for widespread fear that inheritors transmit AIDS. From the widows' perspective, these men are particularly risky because they travel from widow to widow to fulfill the sexual rituals. Widows also agree that cleansing would not be legitimate if a condom were used. Moreover, inheritors are inherently risky types who "don't accept" condoms in any case. Thus, widows fear that inheritors have HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases and they cannot protect themselves from these risks. Nevertheless, widows are under great pressure to be cleansed and inherited by these available men.

Nancy Luke, PhD, Assistant Professor at Brown University

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NEWS FROM ASIA

From our Partner ASHISH, Secunderabad, India

The story of Esther, a member of ASHISH

Esther is an illiterate widow about 65 years old. She had five children - three daughters and two sons - one of whom died. She lives with her eldest daughter Pushpa in one room of the house left to her by her husband.

Esther's husband Raja was a fitter on the railways. One day after he retired he went to hospital for a medical check up and that same day wrote his will - his children were aware of this. He died during the night. Esther called a family meeting because there were debts to be paid off - mainly to do with expenses incurred in the marriage of the two younger daughters and medical treatment for her son who died. But, despite having a job at the Railways and being the only financially sound person in the family, her only living son refused to help. He told his mother to sell the two rooms of the house to pay off the debts. He then turned round and filed a suit for partition of the property into eight equal shares!

Esther was asked to appear in court but her poverty meant she could not engage an advocate. So ASHISH agreed to help her contest the case. Our basic argument was that Esther's late husband acquired the property through his own earnings and left it to his wife, therefore the children are not entitled to have the property partitioned. Unfortunately the witnesses to the will gave contradictory statements. One confirmed that he had witnessed Esther's husband sign the will, but the notary testified that Esther's late husband had executed the will in his presence but that he did not see anyone else sign it. This was bad news for us, because if the witness had signed the will after the will was notarized the Court might set it aside.

The judgement: Esther's plea that the will was executed in her favour was not accepted. The court took the view that the will was fabricated on the grounds that it was executed by Raja on the way back from hospital on the day he died. This judgment is curious since all the parties agreed that Raja had written a will. An appeal has to be filed against the order by the Court ordering partition into eight equal shares.

ANALYSIS :

The case has caused ASHISH considerable pain as it is a prime example of property being manipulated by the son of a widow. Esther is fighting for a roof over her head. She has sold one of the two rooms and is left with a small room. During the course of the trial she became bed ridden and is unable to even to get up. Her daughter Pushpa is taking care of her. If she is able to retain the small room, Pushpa will continue to help her in the expectation of getting the room on her death. If she loses it, she has nothing to fall back upon and Pushpa will withdraw support. This is the general condition of all widows in India; they are looked after as long as they have property to give. When that property or its proceeds are gone, they are thrown out on the street.

The stand taken in the judgment by the Learned Judge that the will could not have been executed on the same day as Esther's husband's death displays the inherent prejudice society shows towards women inheriting property from their husbands.

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From our partner The Association of Strong Women Alone (ASTHA), Rajasthan

Ramibai's story

Ramibai was widowed when she was 24 years of age and the mother of 3 children by her husband Hajari. He had been ill for some time – “this illness has stuck to you like a leach” Ramibai said to him and his sad reply was “I think it will accompany me to the day I die”. “That same night he called his children to his bedside and gave each of them 1 rupee to spend on sweets of their choice the next day. But they never did spend the rupee as he died early the next morning.”

“Two years later my son followed his father and my in-laws threw me out of the house.”

I was now alone with 2 young daughters to care for; no place to go to and no-one to turn to. How are we going to survive?? I decided to go to the village leaders (Panch) to tell them what had happened. They ordered my in-laws to take responsibility for my well-being and that of my daughters, and to provide us with a room to stay in and food grain twice a year. The Panch warned my in-laws that if they did not heed their advice, my in-laws would be punished. They obeyed but very unwillingly and made sure that I felt the stings of their displeasure. What could I do but suffer in silence? I had to shelter and care for my poor fatherless daughters.

One day in 1980 I heard that there was a Statewide Widows Pension Scheme and as I possessed nothing I was eligible for a pension. It was such a balm to my heart to know I wouldn't have to depend on my in-laws and more; that I had a better future ahead of me in which I wouldn't be treated as a slave. My daughters too could start to lead a normal, healthy life free from fear. I completed the pension form and waited impatiently for the pension. But can you imagine my astonishment when they told me I was not eligible because I'm down as owning of 22 bighas of land!! I had no idea that I owned any land far less 22 bighas of land – me a tribal widow!!! My joy knew no bounds.

But when I asked my in-laws about my land my husband's brothers told me with a sneer that it had been sold long ago by their father to a man named Kirpal Singh for Rs.25,000. I was stunned. But I did not want to be denied everything, so next day I went to see the Patwari (Land Registry official) and asked him about my land. To my relief he told me that the land is still officially in my name – Ramibai wife of Hajari Meena. He also said that legally no non-tribal can purchase, mortgage or in any way acquire and own land owned by a tribal. Kripal Singh is a Sikh. He said I should file a case against Kripal Singh. But how could I, a penniless widow, do this?

Well I got to hear of an organisation called the Association of Strong Women who live Alone (ASWA) so I went to one of their meetings and told them my story. They said they would help me get all the papers I needed and so in 1982 I filed a case against Kripal Singh for illegally occupying my land.

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Continued ...

Many years later the court gave its decision in my favour but Kripal Singh appealed to the Revenue Court. He knew that I would not be able to stand up against him for long and he was right. At the beginning I went to all the hearings of the Revenue Court but then came the day when I couldn't afford the bus fares any more so I stopped going.

By 2000 I still hadn't heard a thing from the Court so ASWA decided to make an in-depth study of my case and to try to understand all the legal intricacies involved. Through ASWA I got an opinion from a Revenue Board lawyer as to my rights. One of the members of ASWA came with me to the Revenue Board hearings. But that just got nowhere. In August 2001 my case went to the State Commission for Women. Someone on the Commission advised us to approach the Chairman of the Revenue Board. Having looked at the case he gave a favourable decision in 2002.

So 20 years after I started fighting for my rights, I got legal possession of my land!! But the story doesn't end there – legal right to possess and possession as I found to my sorrow aren't the same...

Immediately after the judgement I went with a member of ASWA to the office of the District Collector (the relevant bureaucrat) and showed him a copy of the Chairman's decision. We asked him to make arrangements for the land to be handed over to me but Kripal Singh was not about to give up 'his' land so easily. He managed to get a stay order from the Revenue Board. We went back to the Chairman of the Revenue Board to ask why he had gone back on his original decision. We threatened that we would come with many, many ASWA members to the court to make a hubub until the case was properly dealt with. The Chairman got frightened and referred my case to the Judicial Court. The judge at that court told me that since the case had been under process since 1982, Section 175 of the Revenue Act had come into force. This Section states that if a tribal landowner accepts money from a non-tribal in exchange for land, then the tribal loses ownership of the land. Further, since a non-tribal, according to the Constitution of India and law of the land, cannot own tribal land, then any tribal land held by a non-tribal is deemed to have become the property of the government.

So my land now belongs to the government. Since 2003 Kripal Singh has been paying rent each year for the land to the government – in 2003 he paid 90,000 rupees, and in 2004 he paid 130,000 rupees. How can I, a daily agricultural labourer, pay this amount of money? My dreams lie in shards around me and my in-laws treat me with even less respect.

Note: Recently (2006) at a convention of ASWA members, a group of lawyers working on tribal land issues said that they would recommend that this case be taken right up to the Supreme Court. Part of the argument would turn on the fact that it is all too easy for non-tribals to entice tribal men into festive drinking with them; once drunk tribals are easily persuaded to hand over their land for a pitifully small amount of cash. But if any man attempts to sell tribal land registered in a woman's name the sale should not be recognised as a legitimate transaction. Only if the woman herself sells her land should this be recognised as a bona fide transaction.

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The widows' survey by our partner in Afghanistan (AWEC)

The survey programme has finished. We surveyed about eight hundred widow women in five provinces of Afghanistan, that is, Kabul, Mazar, Herat, Maidan Wardak and Paktya. We have finished the coding, and soon we are going to finish the data entry.

We faced some problems during survey. For example some widows' families wouldn't let us to talk with them but rather demanded "what will you do to help us?" Some even said that "lots of organisations have come here and told us that they will help us but, they didn't?"

The project activities are going very well. We have arranged additional training for all the women; after receiving the trainings, all of them got small loans and started their own businesses.

We also started a bead weaving program, which has proved to be very successful. The women are very happy to have learned bead weaving and most of them have even started small and private businesses selling their woven beads.

From Zainab Abassi
Project Manager,
Widows' Rights & Support Project
AWEC

Good news for widows in Kabul.

CARE International with funding from the Canadian government has been providing widows with much needed food rations - split peas, powdered milk and soya oil - since 1996. But suddenly this year they heard that the \$2.5 million annual funding had been withdrawn.

"We are widows. We are all wondering what will happen to us without this food," said one Afghan woman, speaking through an interpreter in Kabul. "We appreciate receiving this food," said the woman, who would not give her name. "We don't want it to end. We pray all the time for the government of Canada to continue our food."

The widows planned to stage a public rally in Kabul to draw attention to Ottawa's decision to stop funding the program. Before it could take place the Canadian government changed its mind and has agreed to continue the CARE feeding programme for another year. WRI is delighted to hear of this wise reversal of the decision, but also of the determination of the widows to demonstrate in public against the decision.

CARE also provides widows with skills training and micro-credit projects; widows are given chickens to sell eggs, or sewing machines to open their own seamstress businesses. Groups of widows with small businesses have been organized into savings co-operatives, through which members can apply for modest loans.

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India to place new ruling on child marriages

By Jo Johnson in New Delhi

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The seemingly ineradicable practice of child marriage in India will face new legal obstacles following a Supreme Court decision requiring marrying couples to register their age and consent with local authorities.

"This has been a longstanding demand of the women's movement and it's a great step forward," said Ranjana Kumari, director of the Centre for Social Research, an organisation dedicated to female empowerment based in New Delhi.

When India amended its Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1978, setting 18 as the minimum age for a woman to marry and 21 for a man, lawmakers hoped in vain that the threat of fines and imprisonment would curb under-age marriages.

But, according to a National Family Health survey, 56 per cent of girls in rural India are married before they turn 18. Experts warn that even when the new law is approved, many under-age couples will still marry without registering.

"If the decision is to have any impact on perpetrators, it needs to be backed by legislation and punitive action for those not registering marriages," said Anu Dixit, a child protection programme officer at Unicef, the United Nations agency.

A further difficulty is that birth certificates, although now mandatory, are rare in rural areas, leaving marriage registrars with little means of verifying the age of girls they suspect to be under 18.

The centuries-old practice has complex and deep-rooted social causes, including the desire to guarantee the bride's virginity and the need for poor families to keep often ruinous marriage expenses to a minimum.

Campaigners say the Child Marriage Restraint Act is an ambivalent piece of legislation in that it prohibits the solemnisation of child marriages but does not declare them illegal or invalid.

A draft bill before parliament will enable a person who was married as a child to file a petition asking for the marriage to be nullified. The petition must be filed within two years of attaining majority or by a guardian when the petitioner is a minor.

Lawmakers were jolted into action last year after extensive media coverage was given to a social worker whose hands were reportedly chopped off by villagers because she tried to stop child marriages in the Dhar district of Bhopal.

In extreme cases of underage marriage, a prepubescent bride will usually stay with her family until puberty, after which a consummation ceremony is held to mark the start of her new married life and departure for her new conjugal home.

According to civil rights workers, there have been many instances in which prepubescent girls' in-laws have refused to wait for the onset of sexual maturity, putting children as young as five to work as unpaid servants and field hands.

Women's groups have also argued that making marriage registration compulsory will improve the legal position of wives who have been deserted by their husbands and deprived of maintenance payments but lack proof that marriage took place.

"Since courts do not admit photographs as evidence of marriage, wives and widows of men living in bigamous relationships have found it very difficult to prove that they were married and to assert their rights," Ms Kumari said.

Widows Rights International (WRI), Registered Charity no 1069142

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Widows shame Canada into restoring food aid: Silenced by Taliban, women reclaim their voice

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KABUL, Afghanistan

In a country where women couldn't speak out in public until recently, let alone show their faces on the street, a small group of Afghan widows has persuaded a foreign government to backtrack on a multimillion-dollar spending decision made half a world away.

Thousands of poor women, whose husbands were killed during the civil war that preceded the U.S. invasion, have helped pressure Canada into restoring \$2.5 million in annual funding to a project that's supplied them with food aid since 1996.

The widows planned to stage a public rally in Kabul today - astonishing in itself - to draw attention to Ottawa's decision, made this year, to quit funding the program as of next month.

When word of the protest reached officials in Ottawa on Friday, the Canadian International Development Agency abruptly announced it would finance the program for another year.

"We are widows. We are all wondering what will happen to us without this food," said one Afghan woman, speaking through an interpreter in Kabul yesterday while collecting food rations - split peas, powdered milk and soya oil - from boxes stamped with the Canadian government logo.

Many of the widows had not yet been told by CARE International, the aid agency that administers the food project, that Canada had reversed its decision to pull funding from the program.

"We appreciate receiving this food," said the woman, who would not give her name. "We don't want it to end. We pray all the time for the government of Canada to continue our food."

CIDA's initial decision to stop supplying food - to focus instead on skills-training projects for the widows - had alarmed aid workers at CARE. More than 7,000 Kabul widows, many of them destitute and illiterate, rely on the monthly rations to feed themselves and their children.

The project had been popular in Canada. It even drew a visit to Kabul four years ago by the wife of former deputy prime minister John Manley.

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Paul Barker, a U.S. aid worker who directs CARE operations in Afghanistan, said he first heard about Ottawa's change of heart on Saturday. He said it was probably the result of weeks of pressure from several sources, including the widows' own plans for a public rally.

"I suspect a demonstration would have been an embarrassment for Canada," he said yesterday.

"When the Canadian government learned about it, I received a call from a CIDA official in Kabul, who was very concerned about this demonstration, and said to me, 'Please, try to head this off.' "

Although CARE officials had encouraged and organized the rally, the fact that a group of poor Afghan women would take part in an all-female public protest shows a startling change from the bleak years when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan.

Girls and women were barred from schools and workplaces, and forbidden from going out in public without a burka, which covered them from head to toe.

On Kabul's dusty streets today, many women still wear the burka. But there are also signs of transformation: young girls walking to school with books under their arms, women working in stores, hotels and markets, and others wearing stylish dresses and high heels, their faces uncovered.

Among the widows in CARE's food program, a painstaking process of empowerment is under way. With additional funding from Canada, CARE is running skills training and micro-credit projects, where women are being given chickens to sell eggs, or sewing machines to open their own seamstress businesses.

Groups of widows who are now making small income, have been organized into savings co-operatives, where members can apply for modest loans.

"There's freedom now for women," said Rana Haidari, one widow who belongs to a savings co-op.

"We send our children to school. We can work outside our homes. We can wear the burka, but it's our choice."

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Iraq: Widow numbers rise in wake of violence

BAGHDAD, 26 Apr 2006 (IRIN) - More than 90 women become widows each day due to continuing violence countrywide, according to government officials and non-governmental organisations devoted to women's issues.

"Hundreds of households are losing their heads due to ongoing violence, causing a drop in living standards," said Mayada Zuhair, a spokesperson for the Women's Rights Association (WRA). "More women now have to search for work to support their children."

"In addition to being widowed, these women don't get any government support," Mayada added, "nor are their rights respected."

Although few reliable statistics are available on the total number of widows in Iraq, the Ministry of Women's Affairs says that there are at least 300,000 in Baghdad alone, with another eight million throughout the country.

Officials point out that at least 15 police officers' wives become widows every day because police constitute major targets for the insurgency. "Every married police officer is concerned about what he will bequeath his family," said senior police officer Major Khalid Maruf. "They fear that death is around the corner."

Thousands of Iraqi women lost their husbands during the ten-year war with Iran in the 1980s. This number rose further during the 1991 US-led war with Iraq following the latter's invasion of Kuwait.

Local NGOs say the situation has become even more critical since the 2003 US-led invasion of the country, which has given rise to increasing violence and sectarian killing. "Saddam Hussein was responsible for killing thousands of men during his 25 years of brutal rule," said Ibtissam Kamal, a member of a local organisation that works on the issue but which prefers anonymity for security reasons. "But more people have died during the past three years, most of them men whose families are now without support."

Ibtissam's NGO, which has received threats more than five times in the past three months, is devoted to empowering women by preparing them for employment. "We're looking for funds to support these women and try to reintegrate them into society," Ibtissam said. "We want to empower them by getting them jobs, instead of having them rely solely on remarriage as a means of raising their orphaned children."

The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is also looking into ways of helping widows who have lost husbands as a result of violence. According to a senior ministry official, projects currently being studied include the creation of more job opportunities and the establishment of free day-care centres.

As is common with many of the government's more altruistic plans, however, funding remains an overriding concern. "A lot of investment is required to implement these projects, and the ministry lacks funding for new initiatives," said Sinan Youssef, an official at the social affairs ministry's strategy department.

Youssef added that many marginalised groups were suffering from a lack of government assistance. "We expect international NGOs to help us provide these widows with the necessary support to raise their children," he said.

Under the Saddam Hussein regime, widows of "martyrs", particularly during the Iran-Iraq war, were provided with compensation and free education for their children. In some cases, they were provided with free homes.

Under the current system, however, no such safety net exists, and widows have few resources at their disposal. "I lost my husband six months ago, and don't have parents to help me, because they died in the Iran-Iraq war," said recently-widowed Yusra Ibraheem, 38. "My late husband supported me, but left me with no means of sustenance."

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FUNDERS FOR GENDER ISSUES

The Women's Funding Network (WFN)

The Women's Funding Network, based in USA, is a world-wide membership of over 100 women's and girls' funds. Our members support the solutions of women and girls through local, national and international grants. WFN advances this movement by supporting these funds through innovative programs and capacity-building expertise. Together, we are creating a safer and more secure world by investing in women and girls.

WFN's programs are some of the most innovative in philanthropy. They help women's and girls' funds:

- *Raise more money* through our fundraising training
- *Run their organizations more effectively* through our Smart Growth tool
- *Collaborate* and capture peer-to-peer knowledge on key initiatives through WFN's conferences, shared training sessions, and access to our cutting-edge research
- *Measure results* on how women's funds make a difference through our innovative Making the Case: Social Change Measurement Tool
- *Reach out to new donors and the media* with the shared fund>>forward brand logo and messaging.

We also bolster women as leaders in society and in philanthropy by

- Raising the profile of women as spokespersons in the media through the SheSource campaign
- Raising the profile of women in philanthropy through our fund>>forward brand and buzz initiatives
- Broadening the leadership base in philanthropy and social change through our Women of Color/International Development Incubator

OUR MISSION

As a worldwide partnership of women's funds, donors, and allies committed to social justice, the Women's Funding Network seeks to ensure that women's funds are recognized as the "investment of choice" for people who value the full participation of women and girls as key to strong, equitable, and sustainable communities and societies.

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OUR VALUES

Our core values guide all endeavors of Women's Funding Network. Furthermore, we believe that in order to create a just and sustainable society we must:

- Fully engage women and girls in defining societal goals and strategies to reach those goals.
- Promote and support women and girls of diverse classes, races, sexual orientations, and other identities/experiences in shaping, leading, and implementing economic and social change.
- Make use of women's and girls' creative, financial, intellectual, and spiritual resources in change processes.

OUR GOALS

To accomplish our mission, Women's Funding Network has set these specific long-term and short-term goals. In partnership with women's funds, donors, and allies, we will:

- Promote recognition of the essential role of women's funds, women, and girls in influencing philanthropic, economic, and social systems' work to foster equity.
- Test and share strategic grantmaking models by and for women and girls.
- Increase the assets of Women's Funding Network members' funds to \$250 million by 2004 and to \$450 million by 2008.
- Sustain WFN's core values in its operations and in its members.

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Creation: Founded in 1985, the Women's Funding Network (WFN) is an international organization with over 100 member funds (and 20 associate members) that are committed to improving the status of women and girls locally, nationally and globally. WFN works to strengthen and empower member funds.

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The Urgent Action Fund (UAF)

As the only international women’s fund in the world designed to respond on short notice, UAF collaborates with women activists in three primary contexts: peace building in situations of armed conflict, escalating violence, or politically volatile environments; potentially precedent-setting legal and legislative actions; and protection of women human rights defenders.

UAF joins with local women to build civil societies that honor their experiences and include women at every juncture, especially in areas of armed conflict and war, where they are most at risk.

While UAF focuses on broad societal issues, we recognize that women’s human rights go beyond the civic and political arenas and encompass women’s everyday life in the personal realm—in the home, the neighborhood, the village, and the workplace. UAF advocates for women’s equality, not only as a matter of human rights, but also as a fundamental prerequisite for social justice, global security, and sustainable peace.

Overview of the Fund

Rapid Response Grantmaking

When urgent unanticipated situations arise that provide an opportunity either to advance an ongoing strategy for strengthening women’s human rights or to prevent backsliding in that struggle, women activists look for effective, innovative ways to respond. In these situations, waiting for financial support from funders unable to act quickly can be detrimental.

UAF exists to enable women to mobilize and act within these brief windows of opportunity by approving emergency funding of up to \$5,000 USD within 72 hours of a request. Whether grant recipients use the funds to fly in an expert witness for a groundbreaking women’s legal rights case, to evacuate an activist whose life is threatened as a result of her work, or to mobilize women to vote in an unexpected election, UAFs rapid response grants support women activists’ efforts to create sustainable structural change

Collaborative Regional Initiatives

UAF expanded its initial role of rapid response grantmaking in 2000 to include planning and implementing collaborative initiatives to support women in armed conflict regions. These projects, which have become another fundamental aspect of UAF’s work, aim to: deepen women’s understanding of particular conflicts; provide women with the tools needed to initiate strategic actions in their situation; build advocacy skills through training; and encourage ongoing information-sharing and networking.

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UAF's first collaboration, partnering with local women's groups and the US-based Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, resulted in a gender audit of reconstruction policies and programs of the major international bodies involved in post-conflict work in Kosovo. Activists still use this report, Gender Audit of Reconstruction Programmes in Southeastern Europe, to lobby for women's participation in the reconstruction.

More recent initiatives include several consultations initiated by UAF-Africa: Kenyan Women Speak on the Proposed Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission; Regional Consultation on UN Security Council Resolution 1325; and Engendering Regional Instruments and Mechanisms of Peace Building. Full reports of these consultations are available upon request.

**Synergy: Program Components
Working Together**

Rapid response grantmaking and collaborative regional initiatives inform and strengthen each other, resulting in the creative synergy that builds an effective and strategic support mechanism for women's human rights efforts. Grant requests from a particular conflict region increase UAF's awareness of the need for more in-depth work in that area and enhance understanding of women's activism in armed conflict situations in general. These grant requests ultimately may lead to a consultation or training. UAF's participation in collaborative regional initiatives strengthens partnerships, networks, and trust between the UAF team and local women. Likewise, UAF-sponsored initiatives inform program participants and partners about potential funding and how to make appropriate grant requests. Engaging in both grantmaking and programmatic work maximizes UAF's ability to evaluate effectively and respond quickly to these requests.

UAF's Vision of the Future

As UAF looks to the future, two realities stand out clearly: the need to delve more deeply into existing situations and initiatives, and the wisdom of continuing to expand outward into additional regions of the world where emerging conflicts threaten to undermine the peace, security, and human rights of women and girls.

Going deeper will mean gaining further understanding of the nuances and complexities of situations, which will allow UAF to refine programs to maximize their effectiveness and strategic impact. It also will mean expanding the role of UAF-Africa. Current plans are now underway to move UAF's rapid response grantmaking for the Africa region to UAF-Africa by the end of 2004.

UAF will continue to explore the appropriateness of developing formal presences in other world regions. In our ongoing efforts to support women in situations of armed conflict and its aftermath, we believe our work can be achieved best by establishing other regional groups, such as UAF-Africa, which will be led by women from the area. This decentralized growth will facilitate direct working relationships with local women's groups, which have been essential to fulfilling our mission.

For more information, please visit www.urgentactionfund.org

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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.

It 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.

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