



Widows' Rights International

Registered charity number: 1069142

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## Newsletter

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## MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

**WRI is still in the process of repositioning itself to meet the increased challenges which its work for widows has engendered. There is now a greater awareness that the treatment of widows in many countries is totally unacceptable and that Governments where these human rights infringements occur, must now begin to take firm action to eradicate these harmful cultural practices.**

**There is hardly a country in the world in which has not initiated legislation prohibiting harmful practices which dehumanizes or are injurious to the mental and physical well-being of individuals. Yet, the practices which are so cruel to widows persist and in some countries, are actually increasing. This is so in Ghana, but one heartening aspect of this atrocious development is that women – and widows- in particular, are now demonstrating in public and calling on the Government to take tougher action to eradicate these practices.**

**WRI is aware that there is a great deal of sensitivity involved in this issue and that is why we have always been careful to work with well-established partners in the countries concerned. Now, we find that as more local groups are inspired by the work which is being done, we are inundated with requests for assistance. These requests are not for large sums of money, but just enough to get projects started and to train workers who can win the trust of clan leaders in rural areas. Change has to come from these men – sadly also supported by women who see the mourning and other rituals as an important part of their culture.**

**But harmful cultural practices can and must change and WRI will continue to bring this about. In order to do this, we have to seek the support of organizations who are able to fund projects. We have to meet the new guidelines and criteria which they now insist on and we are in the process of preparing ourselves to meet all these new challenges.**

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# A B O U T     W R I

## **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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## Psychological Support for Nigeria's Conflict Widows

The urgent need for psychological, social and economic support for widows in Nigeria has been highlighted in an article by Ngozi U Eze, Director of Women for Women International, Nigeria.

The article was published in Critical Half a bi-annual academic journal published by the Women for Women organization in summer 2006, Volume 4 No 1.\* The article presents an overview of the challenges confronting Nigerian widows, where they are at a particular disadvantage and are often subject to discriminatory ritual, face psychological, social and economic difficulties as women living in conflict regions, and live in communities that embrace harmful widowhood practices.

Ms Eze describes the background of conflict which has been so harmful to women generally in Nigeria. There has been one civil war, multiple military coups and countless communal clashes. The article states: Decades of military rule have led to ineffective social and economic policies, incompetent management of the public sector and corruption at all levels of leadership, resulting in an inefficient distribution of resources and vast income disparities across Nigerian society."

The article continues "In the communities where we work (Enugu and Plateau regions) a woman may be subjected to a variety of injustices in the name of custom and tradition when her husband dies. These traditions vary by ethnic group and region but can include the following examples:

A woman's in-laws may accuse her of causing her husband's death, regardless of how old or ill he might have been when he passed away. Acting under the banner of tradition, in laws may also take a woman's children to raise in their own household as well *all* property she shared with her husband – from their home and farmlands to appliances and clothing.

During the mourning period a woman suffers both subtle and overt acts of torture that serve to identify her as a widow and prove her innocence in causing her husband's death. She maybe forced to drink the water in the bath of his corpse, strip naked in public, shave her head, sleep on the floor and avoid bathing for weeks, have her hands tied together with rags, continuously weep in a ritualised fashion and suffer lengthy periods of confinement.

After the mourning period a woman may be forced to marry her late husband's brother or another male relative who assumes ownership over the property she shares with her husband and guardianship over the children. She is expected to have sex with her new husband and produce children."

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Impoverished and uneducated women have no choice but to succumb to these demands. Relatives, male and female, friends and other community members accept these abusive practices and force the woman into compliance as these practices are viewed as deeply rooted in tradition and culture.

There is therefore a great deal of psychological pressure on these vulnerable women - in shock over a husband's death and then accused of murder. The community turns against them and they become vulnerable to sexual violence and harassment. They have to endure a forced marriage in order to remain in the conjugal home with the children.

## WORK OF WRI

WRI, with other organisations and partners have been working to eradicate these practices. It is now agreed that the only way to tackle these gross violations of human rights is to strengthen the individual and collective capacity of women to bring about change. The article recommends that the way to end these practises is through financial assistance, emotional support, job skills trainings, rights awareness and leadership education.

It also concludes that individuals and organisations working with widows must provide them with holistic programmes that address their psychological, social and economic needs. "Programmes that provide women with the opportunity to build strong support networks and overcome their fears, rights awareness and leadership training ( for women and men) that teach them to recognize and fight gender discrimination and job skills training that help ensure their self-sufficiency can contribute to improving the state of these women.

Women for Women Nigeria is one of the many local organisations working on women's issues in Nigeria. Under the leadership of Ms Eze, over 8000 women have moved from crisis and poverty to stability and self-sufficiency. In 2005, she received the Amelia Earhart Pioneering Achievement Award in recognition of her work in making a difference in the lives of Nigerian survivors

\* The full article can be found on the website: [www.womenforwomen.org](http://www.womenforwomen.org)

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# MORE NEWS FROM AFRICA

## **Widowhood Rites on the Increase in Ghana**

By Oduro Antwi

The 1992 constitution of Ghana explicitly prohibits the practice of "all customary practices, which dehumanize or are injurious to the physical and mental well being of a person". This provision is stated under Article 28 clause 2. Again Article 15 clause 1 of the same constitution guarantees the inviolability of the dignity of all persons. Apart from these and other national constitutional provisions, there are also regional and international human rights laws, which prohibit customary practices that are inimical to the fundamental human rights of all persons in Ghana.

Despite the fact that the customary practice of widowhood rites dehumanizes widows, is injurious to them and also violates their fundamental human rights and dignity, these rites continue to prevail in Ghana. The worrisome and disturbing aspect of this phenomenon is that in contemporary Ghana, the practice of widowhood rites is pervasive and shows no sign of abating in the nearest future. The constitutional arrangements mentioned earlier have proven beyond doubt to be inadequate in protecting widows in Ghana because the practice persists and is on the ascendancy.

Today in Ghana some widows are striped naked before the full glare of the public while others are made to sleep alone with the corpse of their late husbands. One would expect that in an era such as now, obnoxious practices such as those described, should become extinct. Unfortunately, at this time widowhood practices are increasing in Ghana.

This assertion that the practice of widowhood rites is on the increase in Ghana is neither a fabrication nor an exaggeration. It is a fact that no one can contest. Hundreds of both electronic and printed media reports attest to it.

On Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> November 2006, it was not just a coincidence that the two leading newspapers in Ghana, 'The Graphic' and 'The Ghanaian Times' carried reports with the banners 'Campaign Against Widowhood Rites Begins' and 'Widows Hit The Street' respectively. On that same day the editorial of the Ghanaian times was devoted to addressing the widespread custom of widowhood rites in Ghana. The fact that two leading newspapers in the country have devoted articles to this one issue is proof that it is now becoming a major concern for women and the society as a whole.

Apart from the two reports cited above, references can also be made to several others including the recent publication in the 'Spectator' with the banner 'Increase in Widowhood Rites in the Asutifi District of the Brong Ahafo Region' This article was published on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June 2007. A lot of horrific experiences of widows were recounted in this article.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this new media interest – the first is that there is now an awareness in the society at large that these practices are harmful to women and the second is that the time has come to increase the assistance to groups working to eradicate them.

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## Promoting Widows' Rights Through Alternative Dispute Resolution In Uganda

By Women of Purpose (WOP)

Women of Purpose is one of the partner organisations of WRI in Uganda which has been working with specially trained community assistants to resolve disputes between widows and their families. The following example of the work which is undertaken is set out below:

Sixty year old Malisa has been a widow for over fifteen years. She was the second of six wives of her deceased husband, five of whom were alive. Upon their husband's death, his brothers inherited the widows but Malisa refused to be inherited. Consequently, she was persecuted, and told to leave the homestead although she had nowhere to go – her father having died many years before. In any case,, she could not be welcomed back to her late father's home because it is mainly young widows who can go back to their parents because they can easily re-marry and acquire dowry to refund to the relatives of the deceased first husband.

Malisa had only one son, who also passed away 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 get something to live on from the dowry but the dowry too was grabbed by Malisa's brothers in law.

In 1996, one of her elder stepsons appropriated the land she was cultivating. Whenever she tried to reclaim the land, she was told that when she got married, she did not come with any land from her father's home, therefore she was not entitled to the land. She was even threatened that if she continued to protest over the issue of land, she would have to be sent back to her father's home.

Malisa decided to approach the clan leaders, who unfortunately shared the same view of her stepson; that a widow has no right to own land. Malisa continued to agitate 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 is unable to find out 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.

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*Continued ...*

In Malisa's own words:

*"I had the chance to attend a village meeting where people from Woman of Purpose were explaining to us about Widows Rights. I later approached the organisation for financial assistance to enable me to employ a lawyer; but they said they were unable to do so but would help me handle the matter through Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). Representatives 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 five meetings with the clan members. The members from Woman of Purpose, explained many things to my in-laws and told them that I had 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"*

The work of Women of Purpose

Malisa's happy ending 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. They also take time and talk to the community about stress management and communication skills.

The chair of WOP, Jane Opolot who is project director for the Hope for Widows project in Palissa, Uganda said stress management has become an import part of their work. She added "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."

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# NEWS FROM ASIA



## CITY OF WIDOWS

The plight of widows in many countries is beginning to attract world-wide attention. In July, CNN published on its website an article by Arwa Damon on widows in the holy city of Vrindavan, where thousands of widows live on the streets. There was a tremendous response to this article which was brought to our attention by the large number of messages of Interest in our work which WRI received.

The following article is based on the CNN website's coverage: of this issue:

The Indian city of Vrindavan in northern India is the world capital of widows, because Hindus believe that to die in that city gives a believer the chance to escape from the endless cycle of death and rebirth.

India is estimated to have 40 million widows. They are among the poorest of the poor in the country, and suffer the cruelty of being ostracized by their own families. Tens of thousands come to Vrindavan, hoping to die there and thus be freed from the cycle for eternity.

Their dire plight has, like that of many widows in Africa, nothing to do with religion, but everything to do with traditional cultural practices. In addition many families consider them expendable and do not want the burden of extra mouth.

Widows wear only white, and have their heads shaved. They can not remarry. Even their shadows are considered bad luck.

One widow, begging in front of a temple, told CNN, "My son tells me: 'You have grown old. Now who is going to feed you? Go away. What do I do? My pain had no limit.'"

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"Widows don't have many social rights within the family," Ranjana Kumari of the Center for Social Research, a group that works to empower women, told CNN's reporter.

The situation, she said, is much more extreme within some of India's rural community. "There, it is much more tradition-bound; in urban areas, there are more chances and possibilities to live a normal life."

But the majority of India's 1.1 billion population is rural. "The government recognizes the problem," Kumari said. "It can do a lot, but it's not doing enough."

CNN reported on the struggle of one woman, a widow herself, who is working for change. Dr. Mohini Giri has formed an organization called the Guild of Service, which helps destitute women and children.

Giri's mother was widowed when Giri was 9 years old, and she saw what a struggle it was. Giri lost her husband when she was 50, and suffered the social humiliation that comes with being a widow. At times, she was asked not to attend weddings because her presence was considered bad luck.

"Generally all widows are ostracized," she said. "An educated woman may have money and independence, but even that is snatched away when she becomes a widow. We live in a patriarchal society. Men say that culturally as a widow you cannot do anything: You cannot grow your hair, you should not look beautiful." She added, "It's the mind-set of society we need to change -- not the women."

Seven years ago, Giri's organization set up a refuge called Amar Bari, or "My Home," in Vrindavan. It has become a refuge for about 120 fortunate widows, and she plans to open another to house another 500 widows.

At Amar Bari, CNN reported, most widows rejected traditional white outfits and grew out their hair. Along the open air corridors that link the house's courtyard are green wooden doors, leading to dark tiny rooms, home for each widow.

Bent over by osteoporosis, 85-year-old Promita Das meticulously and slowly swept the floor just outside her door and then carefully cleaned her dishes.

"I came here when I couldn't work anymore. I used to clean houses," she says. "Nobody looked after me, nobody loved me. I survived on my own."

She married at 12 and was widowed at 15. Seventy years later, she finds herself at Amar Bari. "I used to live in front of a temple, but then I came here," she says.

Another widow, Ranu Mukherjee, wearing a bright red-patterned sari, showed off her room at the home and wanted to sing for her guests. The lyrics of her song were about a lost traveler. "When did you come here after losing your way?" she sang. "When I remember the days gone by I feel sad."

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# A POEM TO WIDOWHOOD

## **Weeping** by Jean F. Schulz

The heavens have been weeping  
since the death of my beloved,  
crying the tears I cannot cry.

A drop for every life he touched,  
a drop for every sorrow he bore.

The wind's rage measures his very time,  
but nothing can halt what is gone,  
what is done,  
what is foretold.

The sun will come,  
will warm my heart,  
will make me smile.

Always I will look for the rain  
to bring me back to this time,  
beside him,  
to weep for us.

Sleep is  
my lover now.

***February 20, 2000***

***[www.widow-speak.org](http://www.widow-speak.org)***

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## HOW TO HELP WRI

# Donate to WRI

As part of a new approach to fundraising, WRI is now making it easier to donate fund to WRI. We have signed up with through which donations can be sent through our email address, with CAFAmerica and for UK tax-payers through the Gift Aid donations which allows that for every pound donated, WRI will get an extra 28 pence from the Inland Revenue. We are also in the process of redesigning our website to facilitate donations from this source.

**You can also use the form below.**

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**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 .....

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

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Thank you for supporting Widows Rights International.

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