



BACKGROUND

INTERNATIONAL WIDOWS' DAY

Absent in statistics, unnoticed by researchers, neglected by national and local authorities and mostly overlooked by civil society organizations – the situation of widows is, in effect, invisible.

Yet abuse of widows and their children constitutes one of the most serious violations of human rights and obstacles to development today. Millions of the world's widows endure extreme poverty, ostracism, violence, homelessness, ill health and discrimination in law and custom.

To give special recognition to the situation of widows of all ages and across regions and cultures, the United Nations General Assembly declared 23 June 2011 as the first-ever International Widows' Day.

INVISIBLE WOMEN, INVISIBLE PROBLEMS

Once widowed, women in many countries often confront a denial of inheritance and land rights, degrading and life-threatening mourning and burial rites and other forms of widow abuse.

Widows are often evicted from their homes and physically abused – some even killed – even by members of their own family. In many countries, a woman's social status is inextricably linked to her husband's, so that when her husband dies, a woman no longer has a place in society. To regain social status, widows are expected to marry one of their husband's male relatives, sometimes unwillingly. For many, the loss of a husband is only the first trauma in a long-term ordeal.

In many countries, widowhood is stigmatized and seen as a source of shame. Widows are thought to be cursed in some cultures and are even associated with witchcraft. Such misconceptions can lead to widows being ostracized, abused and worse. Research by HelpAge International, for instance, has found that in Tanzania hundreds of older women – mostly widows – have been killed because of accusations of being witches.¹

The children of widows are often affected, both emotionally and economically. Widowed mothers, now supporting their families alone, are forced to withdraw children from school and to rely on their labour. Moreover, the daughters of widows may suffer multiple deprivations, increasing their vulnerability to abuse.

Such cruelties are often seen as justified in terms of cultural or religious practice. Impunity for abuses of the rights of widows is rife, with few perpetrators ever successfully brought to justice. Even in countries where legal protection is more inclusive, widows can suffer social marginalization.

POVERTY

Across a wide spectrum of countries, religions and ethnic groups, a woman is left destitute when her husband dies. Poverty is often made worse by little or no access to credit or other economic resources, and by illiteracy or lack of education. Without education and training, widows cannot support themselves or their families.

¹ *WOMEN 2000: WIDOWHOOD: INVISIBLE WOMEN, SECLUDED OR EXCLUDED*, UN DIVISION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN/DESA, DECEMBER 2001, PAGE 10: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/wom_dec%2001%20single%20pg.pdf

Many widows in traditional societies have no rights, or very limited rights, to inheritance or land ownership under customary and religious law. Without inheritance rights, including a lack of rights to the property of their birth family, widows find themselves financially insecure and totally dependent on the charity of their husbands' relatives.

In India, where widowhood constitutes a low status social institution as well as a personal condition, thousands of widows are disowned by relatives and made homeless, forcing many women to seek informal work as domestic labourers or turn to begging or prostitution.²

Widows in developed countries may also face particular difficulties, ranging from loss of insurance coverage to difficulties in accessing credit to becoming solely responsible for childcare. In some cases, widows can become liable for the debts of a deceased spouse.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WIDOWS

Violence against women is one of the most widespread violations of human rights, affecting women of all backgrounds, ages, cultures and countries. Widows are no exception and may in fact be at particularly high risk of violence.

In many countries, but particularly across Africa and Asia, widows find themselves the victims of physical and mental violence – including sexual abuse – related to inheritance, land and property disputes. With no rights to ownership of her husband's property, a widow may be subject to abuse and cast out of her home altogether. In Africa, widow abuse cuts across ethnic, class and income boundaries, rendering widows among the most vulnerable and destitute women in the region.³

Widows are coerced into participating in harmful, degrading and even life-threatening traditional practices as part of burial and mourning rites. In a number of countries, for example, widows are forced to drink the water that their husbands' corpses have been washed in. Mourning rites may also involve sexual relations with male relatives, shaving of the hair and scarification.⁴

IMPACT ON HEALTH

Poor nutrition, inadequate shelter and vulnerability to violence, combined with a lack of access to health care, can impact the physical and mental well-being of widows. The sexual and reproductive health needs of widows may go unaddressed, including the fact that widows are often the victims of rape.

Widows are particularly vulnerable in the context of HIV and AIDS. Women may be kept unaware of the cause of their husband's AIDS-related death and made to undergo ritual cleansing through sex with male relatives regardless of HIV status. The economic insecurity stemming from widowhood also drives some women and girls to sex work.

WIDOWS AND CONFLICT-RELATED SITUATIONS

Vast numbers of women are widowed due to armed conflict. In some parts of eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, for instance, it is reported that around 50 per cent of women are widows, while there are an estimated three million widows in Iraq and over 70,000 in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Widows struggle to care for themselves and their children in their own countries, refugee camps or countries of asylum. In several post-conflict situations, high numbers of children depend on widowed mothers – often young women, sometimes children themselves – as their sole support. Widowed grandmothers are also left caring for orphaned and sick grandchildren.

2 WOMEN 2000: WIDOWHOOD: INVISIBLE WOMEN, SECLUDED OR EXCLUDED, P. 6.

3 WOMEN 2000: WIDOWHOOD: INVISIBLE WOMEN, SECLUDED OR EXCLUDED, P. 6.

4 WOMEN 2000: WIDOWHOOD: INVISIBLE WOMEN, SECLUDED OR EXCLUDED, PP. 10, 14.

Prior to being widowed during conflict, many women see their husbands tortured, mutilated or suffering other cruel and inhuman treatment. Widows may themselves be subject to conflict-related violence – including sexual violence as a tactic of war – with violence against women during or after armed conflicts reported in every international or non-international war-zone. Having been raped and mutilated, many widows are infected with HIV during conflict.

Widows in countries coming out of conflict are vulnerable to ongoing abuse and often experience further violence and discrimination in the post-conflict period. Mistreatment of widows can have a negative impact on investments in peace and security, feeding the cycle of poverty, breeding unrest and insecurity, and ultimately challenging democracy and sustainable security.

Widow survivors of the genocide in Rwanda

AMONG THE SURVIVORS OF THE 1994 RWANDAN GENOCIDE WERE THOUSANDS OF WOMEN – BOTH HUTU AND TUTSI – WHO WERE WIDOWED IN THE COURSE OF THE CONFLICT. ALL TRAUMATIZED, MANY HAD SUFFERED RAPE, SOME WERE INFECTED WITH HIV AND MANY HAD WITNESSED THE KILLING OF FAMILY MEMBERS.

SINCE 1994, THESE WOMEN AND ORGANIZATIONS THAT SUPPORT THEM HAVE BEEN FIGHTING TO CHANGE ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN IN RWANDA, ADVOCATING FOR THEIR BETTER ACCESS TO MEDICAL, FINANCIAL AND COUNSELLING SERVICES, AS WELL AS FOR CHANGES TO LAWS REGARDING THE PROPERTY, MARITAL AND INHERITANCE RIGHTS OF WOMEN.⁵

TOWARDS PROGRESS FOR WIDOWS

A dearth of reliable hard data remains one of the major obstacles to developing the policies and programmes to address the poverty, violence and discrimination suffered by widows. There is a need for more research and statistics disaggregated by marital status, sex and age, in order to help reveal the incidence of widow abuse and illustrate the situation of widows.

Furthermore, Governments should take action to uphold their commitments to ensure the rights of widows as enshrined in international law, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁶ Even when national laws exist to protect the rights of widows, weaknesses in the judicial systems of many States compromise how widows' rights are defended in practice and should be addressed. Lack of awareness and discrimination by judicial officials can cause widows to avoid turning to the justice system to seek reparations.

Programmes and policies for ending violence against widows and their children, poverty alleviation, education and other support to widows of all ages also need to be undertaken, including in the context of action plans to accelerate achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

In post-conflict situations, widows should be brought in to participate fully in peacebuilding and reconciliation processes to ensure that they contribute to sustainable peace and security.

Empowering widows through access to adequate healthcare, education, decent work, full participation in decision-making and public life, and lives free of violence and abuse, would give them a chance to build a secure life after bereavement. Importantly, creating opportunities for widows can also help to protect their children and avoid the cycle of inter-generational poverty and deprivation.

International Widows Day is an opportunity for action towards achieving full rights and recognition for widows – too long invisible, uncounted and ignored.

⁵ LESSONS FROM RWANDA: THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE PREVENTION OF GENOCIDE: <http://www.un.org/preventgenocide/rwanda/>

⁶ "ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL LAW" IN *WOMEN 2000: WIDOWHOOD: INVISIBLE WOMEN, SECLUDED OR EXCLUDED*.