

Violence in Widowhood: Hidden and Unaddressed; How to protect and Prevent

Monday 4 March 2013

The aptly named event “Widowhood: Hidden and Unaddressed’ which took place on Monday 4 March 2013 was chaired by Margaret Owen OBE who opened with a statement that widows are both the most vulnerable and the most neglected group when it comes to the issue of violence against women and girls.

Margaret Owen, director of the NGO Widows for Peace through Democracy (WPD), proceeded to highlight the proposed recommendations on widowhood, which are hoped to be taken up by the UN and respective governments. These recommendations which can be found in more extensive detail on www.widowsforpeace.org/Pages/852794994/publications include the need to appoint a UN special representative on widowhood, the suggestion of commissioning a United Nations Report on Widowhood in Conflict and the recommendation that CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) consider monitoring the status of widows at country level and adopting a “General Recommendation” to State Parties on this issue. Margaret Owen also added the need to mobilise men and boys to change attitudes towards widows. Although there is work to be done, some valuable progress has been made. The chair expressed excitement that there is now a widows charter that is used in South Asia as a result of SANWED which came into existence in 2003.

Lily Thapa who is the Ex-Director and Founder of Women for Human Rights (WHR), a group that gives widows a voice, started proceedings and discussed best practices from Nepal. There are many thousands of widows in Nepal and this country is believed to have the highest number of child widows in the world. She described the common transition of a woman from daughter and sister to wife and mother and then, increasingly, to widow. These widows face much discrimination and physical, sexual, mental and vocal violence. These widows are often ostracised from their societies and Thapa stressed the need to challenge these cultures and traditional practices that condone this abhorrent treatment of female widows. According to Thapa, there are approximately 100,000 widows in Nepal and almost 60,000 young widows. As much as 10,000 young girls are married at the age of 10 or below. Thapa also stated that more than 67% of these young widows are between 20 and 35 years of age.

Thapa's key point was the need to make widow's issues a regular feature on the national agenda and she called for "No discrimination on the basis of marital status". More than 100,000 young widows have been mobilised due to the establishment of groups in communities, door-to door campaigns, economic empowerment and access to information at a local level.

The need to target males in order to change public perceptions was clear in the words of Thapa, who stated: "we can't do anything without changing the mind-set of men". Another popular remark was the need to identify widows as change-makers in communities. WHR have worked closely with the government and the importance of this was stressed as Thapa exclaimed: "If governments are not sensitised to this issue then we will never have success". Close work at policy level with men and religious leaders who can also be change-makers and advocate for the empowerment of widows is vital.

The second speaker, the inspiring **Dr MohiniGiri** of Guild for Service, hails from India and highlighted the tragedy of the widow. He described this issue as unsung, unknown and something that few people talk about. Advances have been made, however, as she recalled a CSW meeting 18 years ago where only 3 people attended a speak about widowhood. However; it is clear that there is still progress to be made because male superiority continues to exist even as women have been empowered in many other ways. This is reflected in the statistics: in the Indian Senate only 8% are women and in America only 10% of senators are women. In the midst of this flagrant inequality, widows are the worst hit irrespective of their age and the circumstances under which they were widowed.

In terms of policies, Giri recommended an increase in social security by way of pensions and advocacy for widows' rights in both government and society as it is difficult for the widows to advocate for themselves. Very few women have land in their own name. Land is vital for equal rights; it enables the owner to work equally and have a say in policy making. Mind-set is the key change to make, and how can the male mind-set change if policy doesn't facilitate it?

Giri asserted that we must see that this message is taken forward and spread across the world as "A widows' rights are human rights" and "She [a widow] can speak. She is no longer a silent sufferer. She will create a new world for her". As such, there was much talk of emphasising that the issue of widowhood is not a women's issue but everyone's issue and, in fact, "a world issue".

This theme of the vital need for the empowerment of women was continued by **Salma Dawood** (Women and Child Association Iraq). After the fall of the former dictatorship, the situation was dire. 40% of people were unemployed and 50% of this group were women. More disturbingly, there were now 4 million orphans. It is very difficult to allocate who is most in need of the aid a country can offer when the annual budget of a country is \$100 billion. The Iraq widow is a victim of the tragedy of the country. This is compounded by the absence of a clear vision which creates ineffectiveness. Key strategic solutions, as highlighted by Dawood, are to fight against illiteracy in order to achieve economic and social empowerment. The support of civil society and social law to provide adequate services and empowerment will be vital in this endeavour.

Dalwood also emphasised the role of the media that has long since neglected the issue of violence faced by widows when she spoke of the need to involve the media in the widowhood arena in order to focus on and highlight their plight. But perhaps more important than this was the significance of establishing a centre for research, the need to emphasise positive characteristics, outline the importance of self-esteem and follow up curriculars.

Finally Dalwood expressed her feeling that there was a need to look to the CSW forum and esteemed organisations to support Iraqi women, ensure freedom of human rights and widow women in Iraq and provide a voice for Iraq.

Eleanor Nwadinobi, a Nigerian Doctor, took a similar line in her speech which gave an insight into the situation of widows in Nigeria. Nigeria has come a long way as it has seen its first female governor, for example. Nwadinobi outlined best practices with the quote that it is the “collective that works, not the individual”. She also spoke about the situation of disinheritance and highlighted a simple solution of getting the property documented in both names with the wife rather than her brother-in-law being listed as next of kin. This would be a small change but would mean that she is guaranteed a home in the event of her husband’s death.

She spoke about UN security resolution 1325 in relation to the women’s office in Nigeria which hopes to ensure that widows are properly represented in the National Action Plan. In her words, we “need more than picking of teeth to fill our bellies”.

Bridget Sleet of Help Age International took a More Niche approach by focusing on violence against older women. She drew on accusations of witchcraft to exemplify the discrimination and violence faced by widows. This harmful traditional belief and practice has remained

largely unknown and is particularly prevalent in Kenya, Tanzania and Nepal. It is usually the most discriminated against and marginalised that are accused and, in many cases, this refers to older women. Although figures vary, it is estimated that as many as 1,000 women are killed every year across Tanzania as a result of witchcraft accusations. Allegations are often linked to neighbour disputes over issues such as land.

It is time to provide protection by ensuring that legislation to criminalise witchcraft accusations is effective in eliminating accusations and subsequent violence. Accusations must be investigated, prosecuted and punished. The need for community intervention to empower older widows was clear, for example, through influencing traditional behaviour. On the practical side, we also need to improve sanitation and build more houses as poverty causes more the suffering. According to Bridget, there has been a 99% reduction in killings in programme areas where they are working.

She also called for action at international level and said that data is often only collected until the age of 49. She proposed that more substantial data was essential to the progression of widow's rights. She suggested targeting the international human rights system as international human rights standards are currently not strong enough to protect older widows. She proposed a new convention, stressing that nothing short of strong will solves the abuse of elderly widows. She also stressed the need of preparing a report on violence against older women.

The final speaker, **Kristin Hetler** from of UNWOMEN, stressed the fact that in order to progress we must "Try to be receptive to different views in the women's movement". She reiterated the point that widowhood is not just a women's issue and stated that "the loss of a spouse is something that happens to us, not something that defines us". We need to aim for a society where becoming a widow is more a sense of personal loss than something that changes people's lives in such a disastrous way. She emphasised the need to lift the issue of widows to an international level and to gather concrete data. She stated that she was "committed to working with all stakeholders to improve the rights of widows as enshrined in international law". She spoke of a UN women project in Guatemala to support widows as survivors of conflict-related violence. She also stressed the need to end the stigmatisation of widows and integrate them into both the community and their families and the need to overcome marginalised status.

It was recommended that a UN special representative on widowhood be appointed to work on a mandate which is as "all-encompassing as possible but still focusing on specific groups and issues, a fine balancing act." A big problem in the international community, however, is a lack of funding and support and this is the main impediment in expanding work.

The success of these six speakers and chair was highlighted perhaps most profoundly by the discussion of the audience who engaged in posing questions and comments. Later comments were made on the success of highlighting the issue of Widows at this CSW57. In the first week alone, there has been approximately 6 events focusing entirely on widows compared with the meagre two events at the last CSW. This shows some progress in raising awareness of the issue of Widowhood on an international scale. Much more must still be done if we are to eliminate and prevent the violence and discrimination that this vulnerable group faces.

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