

Widows, Social Stigma and the Capacity for Change

A Speech Sorrel MacLeod

Good Afternoon/Morning/Evening, my name is Sorrel Macleod. I'm here with NAWO Youth and today I'll be talking about Widows, social stigma and the capacity for change.

In all cultures with recognition of marriage, men and women are, naturally, widowed. And throughout those cultures we see widows in their fairytales and folklore, from the second Rane in the Indian Punchkin to the Widow Ho of Chinese legend, the light in the window at the Casablanca Inn, Florida and the widow Twankee of British pantomime. Through them we see some common themes: they are evil or they are greedy. They are almost never relatable characters. And when a widow is good, what is she good for? For remarriage only, as even children learn: Spanish speakers may have played Arroz con Leche where a 'widow' chooses from their group of friends which she will take as her second partner.

And what have we as results? According to Fasoranti et al in 2007, the disorganization and trauma that follow the death of a spouse seem to be greater in women than in men whenever either loses their partner. JK Trivedi, Himanshu Sareen and Mohany Dyani go on to say that, particularly in India, 'Widows' deprivation and stigmatization are exacerbated by ritual and religious symbolism. Indian society, similar to all patriarchal societies, confers social status on a woman through a man. Hence, in the absence of a man, she herself becomes a non-entity, ultimately suffering a social death. The days of Sati may be long gone but widows, as 'unblessed', still face exclusion socially, spiritually and even in the clothes they may wear. Most disturbing of all are the eventual fates of the women themselves. HelpAge international has found that hundreds of Tanzanian widows have been killed because they are believed to be witches. The increased economic difficulties and serious health risks faced by widows cause more stress and, at worst, lifelong trauma.

It's clear that we, as women, as people, as entities, have a problem. A long term solution is needed. Counselling is a good start and it needs to be widely available, free – or at least affordable, persistent, non-judgemental, and most of all: effective. Support is vital for as long as it is needed. This is available in some parts of the world – Person to Person Counselling in

Secunderabad is one example and they are often successful in helping women to ‘cope and later come out and lead emotionally well adjusted lives’.

But support alone is not enough: education is vital if widowed women are to be kept out of prostitution, the only path open to many with no other way of making money. The problems faced by an uneducated woman are magnified when she is widowed – with no spouse to be the breadwinner, she alone is now forced to find some means of supporting herself and any other family. In areas where women are less common than men at the higher education levels, widows are known to face discrimination – for example in sub-Saharan Africa an average of just 47% of Widows have received any form of inheritance, as low as 22% in Sierra Leone. Happily, college education for women is on the rise: according to UNSECO, the number of female students in tertiary institutions has grown almost twice as fast as that of men since 1970. In Iceland, almost two thirds of students in higher education are women; and the Arab states, along with East Asia and the Pacific have reached equal numbers of male and female students.

After an education a woman can start her own business and support herself and her family legitimately and safely. Micro finance schemes are increasingly becoming an option for widows around the globe: interest free loans to help them begin businesses of their own are offered by Islamic relief. Afghan poverty relief and the Fountain of Hope are just some of the organisations offering the training, money and guidance needed to give widows financial independence. It is clear that as a woman’s independence and skill set grows so do her horizons. It is that which will be key in overcoming the largest obstacle which is to changing society’s expectations.

Change in society needs to happen and it must be deep rooted. Long held perceptions must be reviewed and reconsidered for their meaning in today’s world and parents must be made aware of the dangerous messages they may pass to their children – preaching tolerance and acceptance is the way forward. Widows in modern fiction, when mentioned, should be approached with care. They should be treated as people and developing characters rather than a collection of tired and presupposing tropes – and this *is* happening. There is hope but only if the global community is willing to re-examine itself, its views and its expectations. Which brings me to the final point: global co-operation. Today I am young and the world is at my feet but tomorrow... tomorrow is something I hold in my hands. You hold it in yours. And

everybody outside holds it in theirs. If we all work together, I think we can get this right. I look forward to being part of the effort.

Thank you.