

Young Widows: A neglected Gender and Human Rights Issue

A Speech by Ruby Goddard

Good Afternoon Ladies and Gentleman. My name is Ruby Goddard. I am a Sixth Form Student and member of the NAWO Youth Caucus and I am delighted to be speaking today on the particularly pertinent global issue of young widows.

Widowhood is one of the most neglected gender and human rights issues. Widows are a group that have long been invisible in many countries, and within that group, young widows are among the most vulnerable. This issue needs continued voicing because currently there are an *estimated 250 million widows globally*. A significant proportion of that number are child widows.

This group is largely neglected. Young widows are mostly found living in remote rural areas, especially in Africa and South Asia where traditions, customs and discriminatory interpretations of religious codes often dominate and where there is a blatant lack of the modern 'age of marriage' legislation. Widowhood in these contexts is deemed a "social death". The issue of widowhood is rarely talked about in places such as the South Asian Region, let alone the consequences of widowhood which include social ostracisation, economic dependency and marginalisation, legal discrimination, political insensitivity and human rights violations. All these consequences are intensified by the fact that they are being faced by young child widows who are extremely vulnerable.

There is little reliable data available on child widows. Why? Because they have received little attention from the UN, from their governments, and from international human rights monitors. All of these organisations are organisations that could make a real and lasting change.

I admit that prior to this speech my own knowledge of young and child widows was limited. So I was understandably alarmed that in a global society priding itself in taking steps to empower women, we still have young girls, widowed as children, who are deprived of their basic human rights to health, education, and protection from sexual violence and economic exploitation. Some are as young as eight years old. These violations persist in spite of their rights being enshrined in the CRC, the CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action which

have been agreed by almost all UN member states. I doubt that there is anyone here that can justify this flagrant abuse of these young widows' rights.

Young and child widows are everywhere, particularly in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East. In Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Iraq, Uganda, just to name a few. And in many of these countries, these young women and girls are subject to abhorrent treatment, in more cases than not at the hands of their own family members. The startling fact is that the abuse of young and child widows today is a global issue. According to a survey by Women for Human Rights of the widows they support in Nepal, more than 40% of Widows get married before the age of 20 and around 67% of them are 20-35 years. They also have an average of 3 to 4 children. If these figures are an average, then think how young some of these widows must be, who have to support not only themselves but potentially three or four dependent young children. This should dispel any preconceptions of widows as old.

I'd like to use Nepal as a case study for the discrimination young widow's face. Nepal is believed to have the highest number of child widows in the world. According to Nepal's Demographic Health Survey over 63% of girls marry before 18 and 7% marry before reaching 10. This leads inevitably to young and child widows. The life-styles of these widows are severely restricted: they cannot wear coloured saris or decorations; they must wear white. They are prohibited from attending festivals or family celebrations like weddings and they may not eat fish or meat. This is purely because their husbands have died. This is wrong.

Through my research, I discovered that the plight of young widows does not end there. In 2010 Yana Mohammad reported to UNCSW that in rural Iraq prostitution and trafficking rings are targeting widows' daughters. In Afghanistan and Iraq, young girls, including young widows who have fled forced re-marriages, can find themselves in prison, without charge. In many countries, 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.

My second case study was sourced from an article in the guardian newspaper. It tells of Rounaq, a young Iraqi woman who, at the age of 14, was taken out of school by her father and married off to a man from the same tribe. By the time she was 17, her husband had left her with a three-year-old daughter and no education or prospect of supporting herself or her child. As the marriage wasn't registered because she was under-age, her daughter was left without the necessary paperwork for an education. According to the Iraq country director of Women for Women International, Rounaq's situation typifies the problems that girls face a

year after the second gulf war officially ended. The Iraqi women's affairs ministry says that there are more than one million widows in Iraq — 400,000 in Baghdad alone — while the UN puts the figures even higher.

In all honesty, I could throw any number of names and figures at you, of young girls and women who have suffered abhorrent treatment through no fault of their own. So I'm going to say that I am 17, like Rounaq, and the thought that I could stand here, a widow with three children and limited future prospects, is terrifying. I am young; I still have a lifetime of education, opportunities and aspirations for the future. And my vision, a vision that is shared by so many, is a future where every young girl can stand and say the same. That they have prospects, that they have a voice. That they will not remain subject to physical, sexual and mental abuse which goes against their basic human rights. That they will not allow themselves to be ostracised from society and that they will not suffer this exploitation any longer.

So, to simplify the actions being taken by many amazing organisations to reduce the hardships faced by these young widows, I have come up with an action plan consisting, in essence, of three words. Inform, engage and empower.

We need to amalgamate the efforts made so far and allow all those advocating for young widows to work collaboratively to end their plight. It is essential that we create synergies among these organisations in order to ensure sustainability.

The first step is Inform. Many organisations have already made vital advances towards achieving this. Informing consists essentially of educating young widows on their rights. In many cases, lack of education is the cause of traditions that violate and discriminate against young widows. Therefore, education is crucial if we hope to make a lasting change. Of course, young and child widows stem inevitably from child marriage and this is an issue that equally needs addressing with the upmost of urgency. Informing also incorporates collecting reliable statistics. One of the major blocks to progress of young widows is that so little is known about them. We need to collect, analyse and utilise concrete information on young widows, in order to inform others of the atrocities they face. We need to raise this issue to as many people as we can, using local, national and international platforms to stimulate action.

The second step is Engage. Engaging with the widows who suffer this violence and discrimination. Engaging with their governments and supranational organisations such as the UN and human rights monitors. This is a crucial movement for optimum change. To engage with these young widows, support groups must be set up throughout any country where they are. Young and child widows are among the most vulnerable, and the most susceptible to violent abuse and exploitation. It is vital that they are offered support, in the form of counselling and guidance, in order for them to move on and to realise that the abuse they have faced is not condoned by international human rights legislation. Setting up these groups will allow young and child widows to actively engage with one another, in order to alleviate the sense of isolation surrounding the young widow. We must also look towards mobilising young men and boys to change attitudes towards young widows.

We must support and provide legal aid to young widows wherever there is a need. Young widows cannot be forgotten in society; therefore we need to be looking towards vocational training for widows, to reintegrate them, and to give them prospects in later life. We need to make them aware of the help available in the future, for example economic empowerment projects like those being set up by the UN women and Loomba Foundation partnership in Guatemala, Malawi, and India.

We must engage too with the governments of countries where young and child widows are an issue. We need to improve their rights 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. We need to address this to ensure that the rights of young and child widows are enshrined in law, and that this law is implemented to full effect. It has also been recommended that CEDAW consider monitoring the status of widows of all ages.

The final step is Empower. This means banding together, and giving widows a platform for their voice to be heard. We must protect, respect and fulfil the rights of widows to access justice. We must allow young widows to tell their story, to become visible both within their own countries and globally. For this to happen, it has been recommended by Widows for Peace through Democracy that a fund should be created to enable widows' organisations to mobilise and ensure the voices of widows are heard on their issues related to peace

negotiations and legal reforms.⁸ This fund will also allow NGOs and governments to focus on reaching young and child widows.

I understand that this plan will not be easy, and that for many, it may seem there are more pressing issues that must take priority. Therefore, as recommended by many NGOs, we need to establish a special desk on widows, and appoint a UN special representative on widowhood, who can prioritise young and child widows, and ensure that these recommendations are implemented in full force. This representative and the widows desk will act as monitors, to ensure that all countries are doing enough to support their young widows and end their suffering. Through this, we can stop young widows being treated in a manner that is blatantly in violation of their human rights.

A positive change requires everyone's engagement. Therefore we need those countries that do instill widows with their full human rights to support and set a standard for those who still discriminate against and ostracize their young widows. A few weeks ago, I knew almost nothing of the atrocities faced daily by young and child widows, many younger than myself. Now, I feel empowered to help them. All that was needed to get me on side was a little bit of research, which revealed the true extent of the plight of young widows. It has taken me but a few weeks to realise how urgently something needs to be done, and so put into this context, surely we can aim to empower young and child widows with their full human rights in the very near future. All that is needed is the combined efforts of all countries of the UN, under the guidance of a UN special representative on widowhood who must be appointed with the utmost urgency, to follow the three step plan to Inform, Engage and Empower young widows. And, by following this framework, we can eliminate the violence and discrimination that this vulnerable group faces. I look forward to being a part of this effort.

Thank you.