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**Widowhood:
invisible
women,
secluded
or excluded**

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Widowhood: invisible women, secluded or excluded

"We are considered bad omens. We are excluded from all auspicious events."

(Lakshmi, Rajasthan, India, Aparajita Newsletter 1995)

"I am accused of being a witch who killed her husband."

(Terezinha, Zambesia Province, Mozambique, 1997)

"We have no shelter, my children can no longer go to school."

(Ishrat, Bangladesh, 1995)

"We are treated like animals just because we are widows."

(Angela, Nigeria, 1999)

"I and my children were kicked out of the house and beaten by the brothers-in-law."

(Seodhi, Malawi, 1994)

"As soon as my husband had died, they took everything away, even the pots, blanket and sacks of maize."

(Renana, Gujarat, India, 1995)

"My husband died of AIDS and slept with many women; I am now dying, but his family blames me for his death."

(Isabel, Kenya, 1996)

I. INTRODUCTION

It can be said that there is no group more affected by the sin of omission than widows. They are painfully absent from the statistics of many developing countries, and they are rarely mentioned in the multitude of reports on women's poverty, development, health or human rights published in the last twenty-five years. Growing evidence of their vulnerability, both socio-economic and psychological (evident from the quotes cited above), now challenges many conventional views and assumptions about this "invisible" group of women.

This issue of *women2000* is an overview of an aspect of women's lives which receives varying treatment within different regions and

countries. Whereas for developed countries substantial statistical information exists on the ages and numbers of widows, the data available on the subject of widowhood for developing countries are extremely limited.¹ This report focuses on widows in developing countries rather than in developed countries since, according to available information, it is in these regions that there has been the most neglect and where the need for action to eliminate discrimination is most urgent.

In many developing countries the exact numbers of widows, their ages and other social and economic aspects of their lives are unknown. Almost worldwide, widows comprise a significant proportion of all women, ranging from 7 per cent to 16 per cent of all adult women. However, in

some countries and regions the proportion is far higher. In developed countries, widowhood is experienced primarily by elderly women, while in developing countries it also affects younger women, many of whom are still rearing children. In some regions, girls become widows before reaching adulthood.

Although social rules differ greatly, all cultures have rules which govern women's lives. Across a wide range of cultures, widows are subject to patriarchal customary and religious laws and confront discrimination in inheritance rights. Many of these widows suffer abuse and exploitation at the hands of family members, often in the context of property disputes. Few cases proceed successfully through the justice system, perpetrators go unpunished, while oth-

ers remain undeterred and undetected. Even in countries where legal protection is more inclusive, widows suffer from the loss of social status and marginalization.

Neglected by social policy researchers, international human rights activists and the women's movement, and consequently by Governments and the international community, the legal, social, cultural and economic status of the world's widows now requires urgent attention at all levels of society, given the extent and severity of the discrimination they experience. This urgency is increased by the fact that, in all countries, North and South, widows far outnumber widowers, due to longer life expectancy and the frequent age disparity between partners. Therefore, the ageing trend of the population globally implies that the majority of the elderly in all countries will be made up of females, many of them widows requiring support.²

Widowers, even when elderly, are far more likely to remarry, but this is not the case for widows who, if they do remarry, rarely do so of their own free will. In some communities, widows may be forced into new conjugal relations with a male relative or be forbidden to remarry, even if they wish to do so. As a result, many women may spend a long period of their lives in widowhood, with all its associated disadvantages and stigmas.

Today, millions of the world's widows, of all ages, endure extreme poverty, ostracism, violence, homelessness, ill health and discrimination in law and custom. A lack of inheritance and land rights, widow abuse and the practice of degrading, and life-threatening mourning and burial rites are prime examples of human rights violations that are justified by "reliance on culture" and "tradition".³

Widows are usually, but erroneously, assumed to be elderly. However, many widows in developing countries, in areas of conflict or in

communities ravaged by HIV/AIDS are young or middle-aged. Widows, of all ages, are often evicted from their homes, stigmatized and physically abused—some even killed. Widowed mothers, as sole supporters of their offspring, are forced to withdraw these children from school and to rely on their labour. The daughters of widows may suffer multiple deprivations, increasing their vulnerability to abuse. The extreme plight of child widows in Asia and Africa has yet to be researched and addressed by agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) committed to safeguarding the rights of the child.⁴

While the problems are worse in the developing world, recent conflicts elsewhere have created a new class of widows—the product of

armed conflict and ethnic cleansing.⁵ The disintegration of social security systems and the dismantling of the welfare state in Eastern Europe have produced a further sub-class of impoverished older widows.

This issue of *women2000* describes the situation of widows across the globe, particularly in parts of the developing world where the problem is more acute. Some suggestions are also provided on what can be done to protect women and publicize one of the most hidden and veiled areas of violation of women's human rights. However, before doing so, this article will review the existing knowledge gap on the situation of widows, in an effort to identify where research is most needed to guide informed action.

Older women are far more likely than older men to be widowed

Percentage of those aged 60+ who are widowed, 1985-1997

| | Women | Men |
|--|-------|-----|
| Africa | | |
| Northern Africa | 59 | 8 |
| Sub-Saharan Africa | 44 | 7 |
| Latin America and the Caribbean | | |
| Caribbean | 34 | 12 |
| Central America | 36 | 12 |
| South America | 37 | 13 |
| Asia | | |
| Eastern Asia | 49 | 14 |
| South-eastern Asia | 49 | 14 |
| Southern Asia | 51 | 11 |
| Central Asia | 58 | 13 |
| Western Asia | 48 | 8 |
| Oceania | 44 | 15 |
| Developed regions | | |
| Eastern Europe | 48 | 14 |
| Western Europe | 40 | 12 |
| Other developed regions | 39 | 11 |

Source: *The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.00.XVII.14).

II. THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

Although widows make up a significant proportion of the female population in all societies, with a few laudable exceptions comprehensive research concerning their status in developing countries is lacking.⁶ Research on the elderly—the majority of whom are widowed women—has been undertaken by NGOs such as HelpAge International Studies, and poverty-alleviation programmes have been directed at female-headed households.⁷ Such work, however, ignores younger widows and widows who do not head households. Even the number of widows as a percentage of the female population is often unknown. In addition, there is a lam-

enable dearth of knowledge and reliable data on widowhood in the context of armed conflict and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It has become apparent that adequate quantitative and qualitative information is needed to inform and guide policy makers and planners. Data are more available for the industrialized or more developed countries than for the developing or least developed states.⁸ A lack of reliable hard data is one of the biggest obstacles to influencing policies and programmes that address the situation of widows.⁹

Methodologies utilized for gathering census data in many developing countries are often not designed to identify the inequalities inherent in widowhood, or to reveal the unpaid

economic contribution widows of all ages make to society. Widows may in fact be excluded from national censuses because they are homeless or constantly moving among a number of different households headed by relatives. Moreover, the poverty experienced by individual widows residing within households is often hidden, since poverty surveys tend to obscure the inequitable distribution of cash, land and other critical resources within a family and between households.

The women's movement has long been fighting to remove "marital status" from identification cards and official documentation, on the grounds that such information can make women easy targets for discrimination. However, it can be argued that if data are not disaggregated by marital status as well as by sex and age, Governments are then without the vital information needed to develop effective policies to guarantee women of different status, particularly widows, their human rights to access basic services and resources. However, the use to which such data are put needs to be carefully determined.

This gap in knowledge about such facts as numbers, ages, coping strategies and the basic needs of widows can be illustrated by reference to widowhood in armed conflict, and in the context of HIV/AIDS. Women bereaved through war and ethnic cleansing, in countries like Angola, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Congo, Indonesia, Kosovo, Mozambique, Rwanda and Sierra Leone, have never been officially counted. Estimates vary widely. In Rwanda, it has been suggested that as many as 70 per cent of all children are dependent on widowed mothers. In Mozambique, around 60 per cent of adult women are widows. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, none of the international humanitarian agencies have identified the numbers of widows. According to local Kosovar NGOs, a high percentage of adult

Widowhood at younger ages is not uncommon for women in some regions

Percentage of those aged 45-59 who are widowed, 1985-1997

| | Women | Men |
|--|-------|-----|
| Africa | | |
| Northern Africa | 19 | 1 |
| Sub-Saharan Africa | 16 | 2 |
| Latin America and the Caribbean | | |
| Caribbean | 8 | 2 |
| Central America | 10 | 2 |
| South America | 10 | 3 |
| Asia | | |
| Eastern Asia | 9 | 2 |
| South-eastern Asia | 16 | 2 |
| Southern Asia | 17 | 5 |
| Central Asia | 16 | 3 |
| Western Asia | 13 | 1 |
| Oceania | 13 | 3 |
| Developed regions | | |
| Eastern Europe | 12 | 3 |
| Western Europe | 7 | 1 |
| Other developed regions | 5 | 1 |

Source: *The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.00.XVII.14).

women are now widows, or do not know whether their missing husbands are dead or alive. These women continue to be under-represented in the process of peace-building and democratization.

So far, the richest source of information comes from the widows themselves, and a wealth of narrative and anecdotal material exists within many traditional communities, gathered through the initiatives of small grass-roots groups of widows or through the efforts of dedicated individual researchers. In Ghana, India, Kosovo, Nigeria, Rwanda and Sri Lanka, groups of widows are organizing and undertaking their own surveys, conducting research and identifying needs.

The data and information gathered in this way have been presented in a number of forums: during the United Nations General Assembly special session, "Women 2000: Gender equality, development and peace for

the twenty-first century"—also known as Beijing+5 (New York, 5 to 9 June 2000)—the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) organized a panel on widowhood to provide an opportunity for the voices of widows to be heard. The World Bank has acknowledged the need to listen to widows in its publication *Voices of the Poor*.¹⁰ In addition, an international NGO, Empowering Widows in Development, supported by the Swedish and United Kingdom Governments, provided widows of the South with a platform to express themselves at the Widows without Rights Conference, held in London (6-7 February 2001). However, these initiatives need further support from Governments and intergovernmental bodies in order to put the issue of widowhood on the public agenda of the new millennium.

III. PROFILE OF WIDOWHOOD

Widows across the globe share two common experiences: a loss of social status and reduced economic circumstances. Even in developed countries the older generation of widows, those now over 60, may suffer a dramatic but subtle change in their social position. The monetary value of widows' pensions is a continuing source of grievance, since the value often does not keep up with fluctuations in the ever-changing cost-of-living indices, or with expectations that the older generation may have had of what life would be like in retirement. The relative poverty of older widows and young widowed mothers and their children, due to the dismantling of welfare systems in the North and in Eastern Europe, while not comparable to the pauperization of widows in Asia and Africa, marginalizes them from mainstream society and

Widowhood common among older women but not among older men

Most women and men marry and live as partners for at least part of their adult lives. However, higher mortality rates for men leave many women living alone in their later years, especially since most widowed women do not remarry. In contrast, older men generally live with a spouse.

Widowhood for women aged 60 or over is most prevalent in Northern Africa and Central Asia—59 and 58 per cent, respectively. The prevalence is high in Northern Africa, probably because women tend to marry older men and because remarriage after the death of a spouse is less common than in other regions. In the countries of Central Asia, the high proportion of widowed women is largely due to high levels of male mortality. In all other parts of Asia, around half the women aged 60 or over are widowed,

probably because young women tend to marry older men.

Older women in Latin America and the Caribbean have the lowest prevalence of widowhood—about 36 per cent of women aged 60 or over, on average. This is thought to be due, at least in part, to women who, in informal unions, refer to themselves as "single" rather than as "widowed" at the loss of a partner.

Widowhood among women aged 45 to 59 is relatively rare in Western Europe and the developed regions outside Europe (5 and 7 per cent, respectively). In contrast, in Africa and Southern, South-eastern and Central Asia, on average, between 16 and 19 per cent of women in this age group are widows.

The proportions widowed among older men are generally low and always much lower than among older women. The prevalence of

widowhood for men aged 60 or over ranges from an average of 7 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa to roughly 14 per cent in Eastern Europe and parts of Asia.

Widowhood among middle-aged men is uncommon. Overall, percentages of 45- to 59-year-old men who are widowed range from 1 to 5, with the highest in Southern Asia. Low rates of widowhood among men are probably due to a combination of factors: they tend to marry younger women; they generally have higher mortality than women; and they are likely to remarry if they are widowed.

Source: The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.00.XVII.14, pp. 29-30).

increases their vulnerability to depression, ill health and violence. However, it must not be forgotten that many widows are enormously resourceful and resilient and go on to manage successful creative lives, both personally and professionally.¹¹

A. GLOBAL OVERVIEW

South Asia

India has the largest recorded number of widows in the world—33 million (10 per cent of the female population, compared to only 3 per cent of men), and the number is growing because of HIV/AIDS and civil conflicts. “Fifty-four per cent of women aged 60 and over are widows, as are 12 per cent of women aged 35-39. Remarriage is the exception rather than the rule; only about 10 per cent of widows marry again.”¹² India is perhaps the only country where widowhood, in addition to being a personal status, exists as a social institution. Widows’ deprivation and stigmatization are exacerbated by ritual and religious symbolism. Indian society, like 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 and suffers a social death. *Sati* (widow burning) is the ultimate manifestation of this belief. Widow remarriage may be forbidden in the higher castes, and remarriage, where permitted, may be restricted to a family member. Further, a widow, upon remarriage, may be required to relinquish custody of her children as well as any property rights she may have. If she keeps her children with her, she may fear they will be ill-treated in a second marriage. Indian widows are often regarded as “evil eyes”, the purveyors of ill fortune and unwanted burdens on poor families. Words in the vernacular are crudely pejorative: “witch”, “*dakan*” and “whore” (similar verbal abuse is common in Bangladesh as well as in some coun-

tries in Africa). Thousands of widows are disowned by their relatives and thrown out of their homes in the context of land and inheritance disputes. Their options, given a lack of education and training, are mostly limited to becoming exploited, unregulated, domestic labourers (often as house slaves within the husband’s family) or turning to begging or prostitution.

The sexual and economic exploitation of widows, abandoned by their families to the temple sites such as Mathura, Varanasi and Tirupati, has been sensationally documented in the media. Thousands of India’s widows live in abject poverty and degradation in these centres. In Vrindavan alone, an estimated 20,000 widows struggle to survive. Younger widows are forced into prostitution, and older ones are left to beg and chant for alms from pilgrims and tourists. Older widows may have lived the greater part of their lives in these temples, having been brought there as child widows many years before.

The ordeals of the temple widows and the occasional *sati* are publicized in the international press. But the day-to-day suffering of Indian widows, who are emotionally, physically and sexually abused by relatives, who or migrate to cities to live on the streets and beg, remains largely hidden.

In spite of the 1956 Hindu Succession Act, widows’ lives are still mainly determined by reliance on local customary law, which does not permit them to inherit. Only six states in India have made amendments in their respective laws to recognize coparcenary (joint ownership) rights of women. Legislation criminalizing child marriage, *sati* and violence against women has not succeeded in eliminating such traditions, which persist in villages of some Indian states. Lack of legal literacy, threats of violence and the insensitivity of the legal profession to women’s issues bar widows from seeking justice. As in other regions of the world, bitter disputes occur between widows and brothers-in-law and sons

and daughters-in-law over inheritance, residence and support, often resulting in physical and mental violence, including sexual abuse. Restrictions on residence, dress, diet and social intercourse force a widow to a life in the shadows affecting both her physical and mental health. Cruel mourning rites may confine the widow within a designated residence for many months or years.

However, two factors distinguish India’s treatment of its widows from that of other developing countries. First, a number of states have set up widows’ pension schemes, and it should be noted that although the criteria and complex bureaucratic arrangements for distribution open the way for delay and corruption, the principle of social security for the destitute has been established and can be improved. Indeed, the debate for reform is active and the Government is committed to reviewing present policies.

Secondly, India is home to a vibrant and dedicated women’s movement, which is fighting intensely for the protection and empowerment of all women, and offers special programmes for widows. The Guild of Service and the Women’s Joint Action Programme have held national seminars on social action for widows.¹³ In 1994, a national conference on widows, held in Bangalore, was a major event in promoting awareness of the need for social action. It drew participants from a wide range of disciplines and organizations. In addition, 47 widows representing 14 different states were present. Some of these women had never left their homes before, but were able to tell of their ordeals and to provide a unique and enriching grass-roots contribution to the proceedings. As a result of this conference, a new consortium of widows’ organizations was established and is now active, collecting testimonies, data and making policy recommendations.¹⁴ Such recommendations include the introduction of stronger legislation on inheritance

rights; automatic transfer of property to a widow upon her husband's death; the registration of land both in the husband's and wife's names; preference given to widows in land distribution schemes; compulsory registration of marriages; revision of pension systems in both value and administration; and positive actions and incentive schemes to keep the children of widows in school.

In Bangladesh, the Muslim widow is, in theory, better off than the Indian Hindu widow. The *Koran* encourages remarriage and a widow cannot be disinherited. Under sharia, a woman is entitled to one eighth of her husband's estate, and half her male siblings' share of the parent's estate. In practice, however, many Bangladeshi widows, especially those who are illiterate and live in rural areas, are subject to oppressive patriarchal traditions. Widows are the poorest and most vulnerable group since they are often deprived of their rightful inheritance. According to a recent report, many rural widows receive nothing from their in-laws and are often victims of violence, evicted from their homes and robbed of their household possessions.¹⁵ A 1995 survey on property inheritance in Bangladesh revealed that only 25 per cent of the widows sampled had received their rightful share from either of their parents, and only 32 per cent from their husbands.¹⁶ The common story is of corruption, exploitation and violence at the hands of the husband's relatives. In return for shelter, many Bangladeshi widows are forced to work long hours as unpaid domestic servants in a relative's house. Others may be brutally forced out into homelessness and thus are statistically uncoun-
 counted.

Because arranged child marriages still occur in rural areas in Bangladesh, and age differences between spouses can be great, child widowhood is not uncommon. Polygamy enables second wives to be brought into a marriage when the first is considered too old for sex or

childbearing. Daughters of poor widows represent an economic liability and are most likely to be given away in such arrangements. They commonly encounter problems with the new family and the adult sons. Before long, they may find themselves child widows in a hostile setting, encountering abuse or eviction. Illiterate, young and vulnerable, they may be passed on to a series of older, frail or disabled men, thus enduring serial widowhood.

Bangladesh, like Nepal, is allegedly a major centre for trafficking young girls to the brothels of India.¹⁷ Widows' daughters who are without male protectors and not enrolled in school are especially at risk to this trade. The numbers of young Bangladeshi girls disappearing in this way is purportedly reaching astronomical proportions. Anecdotal material points to a linkage between widowhood and child prostitution.

Poor, homeless Bangladeshi widows make up a sizeable percentage of women marketed as domestic servants, forced to leave their children behind in the hope that the meagre income which they send home will be used to feed, clothe and educate them. Women's NGOs in Bangladesh are actively addressing such practices as acid-throwing and violence in the context of marriage, but widow abuse, widespread as it is, has received less attention. In addition, widows have not yet "banded together" to form their own self-help or lobbying groups. Recently the Government agreed that destitute widows should be eligible for pensions, but so far amounts are inadequate to secure basic necessities.¹⁸

In Pakistan, destitute widows are reported to be supported by a small pension or *zakat*.¹⁹ But, as in India, the allocation system is often corrupt, and the most needy widows are frequently neglected. Furthermore, the Honour Codes oppress all women, with a blanket of silence hiding the cruelty; and sometimes imprisonment, or even death, is

inflicted on young widows who are suspected of bringing dishonour to the family.²⁰ Muslim widows, like those in Bangladesh, are also often deprived of their rightful inheritance by a male relative.

In Sri Lanka, war widows from both sides of the conflict experience poverty and marginalization. The Small Fishermen's Federation lobbies for the rights of wives of fishermen drowned at sea, and through its advocacy work has been creating awareness among other sections of society of the plight of widows.

In Afghanistan, it is estimated that approximately 40,000 widows live in Kabul, most of whom lost their husbands in the war that killed an estimated 50,000 civilians.²¹ In January 2001, the United Nations estimated that about 2 million war widows live in Afghanistan, who are the sole providers for their families.²² The Taliban, who in 2000 were estimated to control 95 per cent of the country, espouse a fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic Law that forbids women to work outside the home or to leave their houses unaccompanied by a male relative. Girls cannot go to school, and those who infringe the strict codes concerning dress and behaviour are severely punished.

Under the Taliban, widows have been doubly victimized.²³ Denied paid employment, these widows further lost access to international food aid, since it was decreed by the Taliban that such aid had to be collected by a male relative, which these widows do not have. The Taliban ban on women working outside the home has drastically increased the numbers of widows and children begging in the streets. Widowed mothers' children suffer malnutrition, ill health and depression, which in many cases leads to suicide. The situation is continually raised at United Nations meetings, and the Economic and Social Council passed resolution 2000/9 on the situation of women and girls at its 2000 session in New York. "The majority of these widows

are unemployed, unskilled and live well below poverty levels. In 1999, the Taliban authorities issued an edict allowing needy widows with no other means of support to seek employment in the health and social service sectors. However, the opportunities in these sectors are extremely limited and many recent reports have noted an increase in impoverished women who are reduced to begging to help them survive. The plight of widows who cannot support themselves because they are not permitted to work or benefit from humanitarian assistance is cause for particularly deep concern within the assistance community."²⁴

South-East Asia

This is a region where decades of armed conflict have caused a huge explosion of widowhood for women of all ages. Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia and Viet Nam are home to war widows in every generation.

In East Timor, for example, human rights groups estimate that, since the invasion in 1975, one third of East Timor's population has been killed, disappeared or died of war-induced famine. In many cases, widows were internally displaced, seeking refuge in the hills, or moved at gunpoint to camps in West Timor, becoming victims of rape. They have often been reluctant to speak out, fearing retaliation or ostracism by their communi-

assist these widows not only are inadequate but also fail to protect their human rights.

In Myanmar, there are huge numbers of widows who are struggling to bring up their children and to care for sick and disabled victims of the conflict. Malnutrition among widows is widespread and they are particularly vulnerable to violence, particularly the sexual harassment by soldiers. The phenomenon of trafficking, common to many developing countries, is worsened by the economic crisis in Myanmar and the halt of international aid. A thriving sex industry, both in the country and across the border in Thailand, presents many widows with their only option for employment. The pressure on widows to provide for their children and the dearth of alternative employment opportunities override Burmese widows' strongly socialized tendency to protect themselves from extramarital relationships. What is worse is that some destitute widows are forced to sell their daughters to trafficking agencies for money.²⁵

Africa

African widows, irrespective of ethnic groups, are among the most vulnerable and destitute women in the region. Common to both francophone and anglophone countries in the region is the concept that death does not end a marriage. While the

widows stem from discrimination in inheritance custom, the patriarchal nature of society, and the domination of oppressive traditional practices and customary codes, which take precedence over constitutional guarantees of equality, modern laws and international women's human rights standards.²⁶

Debt in the developing world, structural adjustment policies, land shortage, natural disasters, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and armed conflict have had a multiplier effect on all poor people in the region, but especially on widows and children. A widow's husband's brothers can be covetous and unscrupulous. "Chasing off" and "property-grabbing" are common features of widowhood everywhere in this region, and even newly reformed laws have been ineffective in protecting the victims. Widow abuse is visible across ethnic groups, income, class and education. Legislative reform in compliance with international treaties, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, has largely failed to take precedence over local interpretations of customary law. Widowhood may deprive women of their home, agricultural land, assets and even their children. The poverty of widowhood causes children, especially girls, to be withdrawn from school. In some ethnic groups, degrading rituals such as ritual cleansing by sex, widow inheri-

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