



Women in distress

According to sample registration system, more than 8% female population is widow in India. ■ by Jaweria Afreen Hussaini

Absent in statistics, unnoticed by researchers, neglected by national and local authorities and mostly overlooked by civil society organisations – 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.

Millions of widows around the world are left destitute after being robbed of their inheritance, while

others are enslaved by their in-laws, accused of witchcraft or forced to undergo abusive sexual rituals, research shows.

The crushing poverty and persecution faced by widows worldwide is outlined in a major report on widowhood which was presented to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

"Widows have been suffering in silence for centuries, and yet nobody – no government, not even the UN – has ever attended to this problem," said Lord Raj Loomba, a campaigner on widowhood, who discussed the issue with Ban in New York.

There are more than 258 million

widows worldwide with one in seven living on less than \$1 a day, according to the World Widows Report produced by the Loomba Foundation which works to empower widows.

Newly-widowed women in many developing countries are often plunged into destitution after being disinherited, stripped of property and evicted by their in-laws, sometimes losing their children.

Those who remain reliant on their in-laws are often treated like slaves, abused physically, psychologically and sexually. The deprivation faced by widows is even more devastating

because of the impact on their children who may be pulled out of school and forced into child labour or early marriage.

Loomba said the new UN global development goals, known as the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) would never be met without addressing the problems endured by widows.

“We have got to link this issue to the SDGs. The first goal is the elimination of poverty and the last goal is to leave no one behind - so I want to make sure widows are not left behind,” said Loomba, a member of the House of Lords, Britain's upper chamber of parliament.

Binding rituals

The SDGs also include ending all discrimination and violence against women and girls, and commitments



A widow has no present or future of her child.

regarding women's access to property and inheritance.

Estimates suggest the number of widows has risen 9 per cent since 2010, partly because of conflicts in the Middle East. Child marriage is another cause of early widowhood.

Many girls are left prematurely widowed after being married off to much older men. Young widows who cannot

Incidence of widowhood in rural areas - inter-state contrasts. 1981

State	Widow as Percentage of Rural Female Population	Ratio of Widows to Widowers in Rural Population	Proportion of Rural Indian Widows living in State (Percentage)	Average age Differential at Marriage Years'
Andhra Pradesh	10.5	4.3	10.5	5.7
Tamil Nadu	10.4	3.9	8.2	5.8
Karnataka	9.9	4.6	6.4	6.7
West Bengal	9.5	6.0	9.1	6.5
Maharashtra	9.3	4.4	9.3	5.4
Orissa	9.2	3.7	5.3	5.1
Kerala	8.9	7.7	4.6	5.5
Madhya Pradesh	8.0	2.6	8.0	4.0
Himachal Pradesh	7.7	2.5	0.8	4.7
Bihar	7.5	2.5	11.1	4.9
Rajasthan	7.2	2.4	4.6	4.2
Gujarat	7.0	2.9	4.0	3.6
Uttar Pradesh	6.5	1.4	13.8	4.3
Jammu & Kashmir	5.7	1.4	0.6	5.0
Punjab	5.5	1.6	1.5	3.3
Haryana	4.9	1.5	1.1	3.9
India	8.2	2.9	100.0	5.0

Notes: Difference between the mean age at marriage of males and females (rural and urban areas combined).

Excluding Assam, where the 1981 census was not conducted.

Source: Jean Dreze (1990), the states are arranged in decreasing order of the proportion of widows in the rural female population.

Note: The tables included here are, a selection of tables compiled with Jackie Loh from the conference papers. The intention is both to provide a short statistical background on the situation of widows in India and to highlight empirical observations reported in various studies.

Two of the most harmful traditional practices are “widow cleansing” and “widow inheritance”. Both fuel the spread of deadly diseases. Cleansing rituals in Sub-Saharan Africa requires a widow to drink the water used to wash her husband's corpse or to have sex with his brother.

support their children are in turn more likely to marry off their daughters early, perpetuating the cycle.

Two of the most harmful traditional practices are “widow cleansing” and “widow inheritance”. Both fuel the spread of AIDS, Ebola and other diseases. Cleansing rituals in Sub-Saharan Africa may require a new widow to drink the water used to wash her husband's corpse or to have sex with his brother or a stranger to exorcise her husband's spirit.

Widows may also be “inherited” by their husband's brother as a first or additional wife - a common tradition in parts of Africa, South Asia and

Which country has the largest number of widows?

According to a major report on widowhood presented to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, here are some facts:

India, with an estimated 46 million widows, has overtaken China (44.6 million) to become the country with the largest number of widows.

There are an estimated 258,481,056 widows globally with 584,574,358 children (including adult children).

The number of widows has grown by 9 percent since 2010, partly because of conflicts and disease.

The biggest jump has been in the

Middle East and North Africa where the estimated number of widows rose 24 per cent between 2010 and 2015, partly due to the Syrian war and other conflicts.

One in seven widows globally is living in extreme poverty.

One in 10 women of marital age is widowed. The proportion is around one in five in Afghanistan and Ukraine.

One in three widows worldwide live in India or China.

A significant number of girls are widowed in childhood – a reflection of the prevalence of child marriage in developing countries and the custom of marrying off young girls to much older men.

the Middle East. On the other hand, superstitions surrounding widowhood mean they are often blamed for their husband's death and accused of witchcraft.

Older widows living alone are particularly vulnerable to witchcraft accusations, putting them at risk of violence and even murder. Beliefs that widows bring bad luck can lead to their exclusion from society, limiting their prospects for employment and entrenching poverty.

Utter discrimination

Despite some gains in gender equality worldwide, many women are still among the most vulnerable and marginalised.

Meeting and having read, understood and conversed with lot of women, were found disturbing trends among widows. Some key findings are:

- The global affected population numbers 258 million widows with 585 million children.
- Of these, 38 million widows live in extreme poverty where basic needs are unmet.
- Widows with only female children and child widows aged between 10 and 17 face severe discrimination in

many developing countries.

- Social norms of behaviour remain counterproductive with extreme poverty as a driver of relationships and poor quality healthcare.
- Widows in western and developed countries have also been affected by cutbacks in social welfare and increased insecurity.
- Widows are regularly accused of killing their husbands either deliberately or through neglect.
- Systematic seizure of property and evictions by the late husband's family remains widespread.

Widows are habitually discriminated against, live in extreme poverty, are forced into violent sexual situations, are degraded, and face other terrible realities. In many developing nations, there is a significant age gap between men and the women they marry. Young women are left alone after their significantly older husbands pass away. According to the Research on Women Lifestyle, one third of girls are married before reaching 18, with one in nine marrying before 15 and "Girls ages 15 – 19 are 2 to 6 times more likely to contract HIV than boys of the same age."

Attitudes toward women and their roles in society need to change



before these ladies will be treated with the dignity they deserve. Several organisations recognise that one way to help these women is to

International Widows Day

International Widows Day is

a United Nations ratified day of action to address the "poverty and injustice faced by millions of widows and their dependents in many countries". The day takes place annually on 23 June. The first International Widows Day was observed in 2005. By the sixth International Widows Day in 2010, events were held in Rwanda, Sri Lanka, the United States, the UK, Nepal, Syria, Kenya, India, Bangladesh and South Africa. On 21 December 2010, the United Nations General Assembly formally adopted 23 June as International Widows Day, endorsing by unanimous acclaim a proposal introduced by President Ali Bongo Ondimba of Gabon.



empower them economically, allowing them to support themselves. Many poverty eradication organisations specifically work with women, including widows. One such group Trades of Hope works with female artisans in developing nations; they promote and sell handmade goods that the women have created. The Women Entrepreneurs' Network trains women from all walks of life in business through coaching and mentorship programs. Some Networks educate low income women and teaches them lucrative new trades as well as focusing on improving confidence and self-esteem.

These women are not helpless or hopeless by any means, but their struggles are real and should be recognized.

Let's take this opportunity as we are called to care for the most vulnerable and the most marginalised; we should be appalled by the significant struggles these women face. Today let's recognise the millions of widows and their children. ■



MY PET PEEVE

My pet peeve is against our corrupt politicians of Tamil Nadu, running behind money (bribe) to get name and fame. We, the public feel it is a shame on us to have elected such irresponsible MLAs to power. At least the Governor of Tamil Nadu should be strong and powerful but being temporary, he doesn't seem to have the gumption of using his authority to bring law and order to the state and find out the truth behind millions of public, expressing their displeasure, over the corrupt ministers.

We, the public now feel, only some supernatural power can save Tamil Nadu from atrocious ministers and prevent further crisis and deterioration. An honest, strong and dutiful citizen who will look into and work for the welfare of the state should soon be appointed, as the state faces so many civic issues and drought problems to be taken care of immediately.

— Priya Rajsheshan i

My pet peeve is against our work dedication not having matched with advanced computerisation, nation has resorted to in public offices, banks etc. Whenever, I visit my bank branches at random for routine banking work, maybe as minor as entries in passbook at times, with usual remark "system is not working" or "printer's out of ink". I am advised to wait for indefinite time when computer works or come some another day. Not far ago, SBI's worldwide computerisation system had failed and no transaction could be initiated for 3-4 days. Customer's valuable time and petrol expenses for visiting bank/office gets lost besides financial loss for transaction's not maturing. Office work once got computerised, officials quote helplessness in working manually and no matter if customer's right of getting work

done is also infringed.

Why could not we come remedially on this functional ambiguity?

— MPS Chadha

My peeve is against those village level so-called politicians who in the recently concluded Panchayat Polls 2017 of Odisha trespassed every norms and rules and made a mockery of the PRI-polls. They heavily resorted to country liquors, foreign liquor, whopping amount of money to influence the gullible voters and virtually compelled them to vote for particular candidates. Ward member, sarpanch and samiti member candidates contested polls by collaborating with the major political parties. State Election Commission could hardly check the irregularities. Model code of conduct was flouted at the drop of a hat!

— Jyotiranjana Biswal

My pet peeve is against the 'housewife' system prevailing in Indian society which prevents the women from pursuing their careers or ambitions. In India, most of the men marry either for having a cook or for having a son or both. If not, then why do most of them prefer housewife and not working wife or business wife? Don't they destroy the careers or ambitions of their wives?

Even if we go to the most backward village school in India and ask a primary girl student as to what her ambition is, no girl student will tell us that her ambition is to become a 'housewife'! But the dilemma is that most of the girls are compelled to be housewives in future by sacrificing their careers or ambitions. Just 'cook' and produce children till a 'son' is born or till the 'process' stops naturally! This is India and this is the 'culture' we boast of!!

— Suresh Prasad

Send your entry written neatly on white paper to: ALIVE
Delhi Press, E-3, Jhandewala Estate, New Delhi-110 055.
A prize of Rs 200 is given to — Suresh Prasad