



Action on Child
Early and Forced Marriage

MILLIONS OF CHILD WIDOWS FORGOTTEN, INVISIBLE AND VULNERABLE

REPORT BY ACTION ON CHILD,
EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Widowhood can occur at any age. Of the 258 million widows around the world, the author estimates over 1.36 million are child widows (girls under 18 years of age) but the true number is probably much higher due to under-reporting. Child widows are the most vulnerable of all widows as many will have experienced an accelerated journey through major life stages from being a child to a wife, a mother and a widow, all whilst still children themselves. Child widows, a direct consequence of child marriage, face triple disadvantages of gender, marital status and immaturity. Already robbed of their childhood, becoming widows they suffer the trauma of bereavement whilst undertaking all family responsibilities for which they are ill-equipped.

Child widows often experience physical, mental and sexual violence including under-age and forced sex. Often accused of their husband's death, labelled 'inauspicious' and perceived as promiscuous, like adult widows they are relegated to the margins of society where, in India, they are conspicuous by their distinctive white clothing and lack of marriage symbols such as the tikka (red dot on the forehead), makeup and colourful jewellery. Hindus represent 74% of India's 1.35 billion population, many of whom follow 'widows codes of conduct' set out in ancient religious texts. Some African communities like in South Asia also engage in a very public display of grief but follow other mourning rituals such as 'widow cleansing,' where widows are forced to have sex with a relative or total stranger to free themselves of their dead husband's spirit.

Invisible in statistics, child widows are often denied their inheritance rights, evicted from their homes and in the absence of any social security, they are exploited by others, usually their own family members or gangs. These child widows have little or no access to justice and are not adequately protected in human rights instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women nor in the Beijing Platform for Action. Child widows are a result of child marriage, a harmful traditional practice like FGM and dowry-related violence, which all are forms of discrimination.

The number of child and adult widows in the world has escalated due to armed conflict, genocide, political and ethnic unrest and violent extremism. The insecurity created by poverty, the collapse of the rule of law and government services affects girls' safety, education, and human rights. Often the marriage of girls cannot be postponed until adulthood as parents use child marriage as a survival strategy, to protect girls from sexual violence or to gain citizenship. These child brides are often uneducated and financially dependent on their husbands, so when their husbands are killed, they are often left as destitute child widows. Without male protection, a pension or social security, these children become vulnerable to violence and discrimination.

This report recognises in its recommendations that widowhood occurs at all ages, even amongst children and that this neglected group must be brought to the top of the UN Agenda. Child widows should be granted greater legal protection under all relevant UN human rights instruments and in all settings. National laws should be implemented and harmonized with international standards to protect child widows' human rights including inheritance rights, protection against violence and discrimination and access to education. Compulsory birth and marriage registration systems must be introduced and there is an urgent need to gather reliable data disaggregated by sex, age and marital status in peacetime and conflict settings.

Whilst widows in developed countries also suffer from discrimination, the focus in this report is on developing countries, mainly South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, and shines the spotlight on the most vulnerable and neglected group of all widows, child widows.

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Publication Date 9 July 2018, Geneva Switzerland.

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BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT

Although the importance of the issue of child widows became evident during research we conducted on child marriage in 2015, it was not until this year that I was inspired to produce this report following a meeting with the Chair of CEDAW in March 2018 in New York during CSW 62. This meeting also eventually resulted in a CEDAW briefing on discrimination against widows. Initial findings from this report were presented by the author on 21st June 2018 on a discrimination against widows side event panel during the 38th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva. They were also presented at a CEDAW briefing in July 2018 at the Palais des Nations, Geneva.

It is hoped that these findings will accelerate change that has been in the making for over 20 years. The plight of widows will remain unchanged unless urgent action is taken to prioritize the issue on the human rights agenda, giving this group of suffering women and girls the support they need and deserve.

Mohinder Watson.



Photo: CEDAW briefing July 2018. Left to Right, Mohinder Watson, Founder Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage/International Council of Women; Dahlia Leinarte, Chair UN CEDAW Committee; Margaret Owen, Director, Women for Peace Through Democracy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Ban Ki-moon's 2014 Secretary-General's Message for International Widows Day 23 June he stated:

“No woman should lose her status, livelihood or property when her husband dies, yet millions of widows in our world face persistent abuse, discrimination, disinheritance and destitution. ...”

This statement encapsulates the plight of millions of widows around the world, yet they are portrayed as a homogeneous group of adult women, paying insufficient attention to the diverse experiences and backgrounds of an estimated 258 million widows worldwide. Widowhood is a gendered experience but the different ages, geographical locations, ethnicities, classes, castes, religions, literacy levels and socio-economic backgrounds of these women and girls must also be considered to reflect the heterogeneous experiences of widowhood.

Recognizing that widows are of all ages has led some authors to subdivide widows into: child widows, middle aged widows and elderly widows (Patri in Giri 2002). The Global Widows Report (2015) commissioned by the Loomba Foundation goes one step further and divides widows into the following four status categories based on age, socioeconomic activity and dependents:

- 1) child widows without children;
- 2) widows with young children under the age of 18;
- 3) widows who are not yet elderly (especially those of reproductive age, below 50);
- 4) elderly widows, including those who are no longer economically productive.

These subdivisions are important as they confirm the existence of child widows, who are mostly absent from widows' dialogue. The Global Widows Report (2015) estimates that around 50% of the 258 million widows are under the age of 50, dispelling the widespread myth that widowhood occurs mainly in later years. There are multiple recognised definitions of both 'a child' and 'a widow', but for this report, a child widow is a girl under 18 years whose husband has died, and who has not re-married.

“Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage” estimates there are over 1.36 million child widows, (calculated from statistics in the Global Widows Report 2015) who represent a small, but significant group of highly vulnerable children under the age of 18. This figure is rather conservative and is probably just the tip of the iceberg. The true figure is likely to be much higher due to the unreported nature of illegal child marriages, many being religious or customary and not civilly registered and parents are known to falsify the age of their girls. Therefore, little reliable data is available, particularly on girls under the age of 10, whereas those child widows who remarry, and destitute child widows without a permanent residence at the time of a census, are excluded from statistics altogether.

2. CHILD WIDOWS FACE TRIPLE DISADVANTAGES: GENDER, MARITAL STATUS AND IMMATURITY

Child widows are the most vulnerable of all widows as they are often burdened with adult responsibilities for which they are ill-equipped and unlike older widows, they experience an accelerated journey through the major life stages of childhood, wifehood, motherhood and widowhood, while still a child themselves. They suffer a triple disadvantage of gender - due to the low status of women and girls, marital status as a widow (they are often looked down upon), and immaturity - due to their young age, they lack the necessary psychological maturity, life experience and knowledge to survive in an adult world (Owen, 2012).

The death of a husband is a shock to any woman, causing loss, grief and requiring major adjustments in their socio-economic status in society (Yadav, 2016), but this shock is exacerbated when it happens to a widow who is still a child herself, possibly already a mother with young children.

Child widows are a consequence of child marriage, a tradition driven by poverty, ignorance, social customs and beliefs. The illegal nature of child marriage, and the difficulty in accessing these girls to understand their life stories and to gain more accurate data mean that child widows are not included in human rights instruments.

It must also be recognised that child widows are of all ages ranging from birth to 18. The life circumstances and needs of a 4-year-old child widow will be different from that of a 17-year-old girl who may be a widow with two children. It is said that Mahatma Gandhi found 600 widows under the age of one which started the 'Vidhwa Kumari Movement Act' which eventually led to the Sardar Act 1929 which raised the legal age of marriage of girls and boys in India (Giri, 2002).

3. CHILD WIDOWS - A SMALL BUT VULNERABLE GROUP

Although the number of child widows is rather small compared to adult widows, there is no justification for excluding them from the international dialogue on women's and children's human rights.

Magoke-Mhoja, author of 'Child Widows: Silenced and Unheard' emphasizes the importance of undertaking research on child widows, despite their relatively low numbers stating: "The gravity of the problem must be judged by the social injury caused to girl-children, rather than by its frequency" (Magoke-Mhoja, p.3, 2006).

Upon widowhood a girl child is forced to assume the heavy burden of adult responsibilities – economic, social, and parental (if she has children). She is expected to earn a living, though ill-equipped due to insufficient education and limited skills. If she has children, she instantly becomes a single parent, serving both as mother and father to her children, responsible for providing food, shelter, healthcare, discipline, protection, religious instruction and education, while deprived of many of these herself.

4. WHY ARE CHILD WIDOWS MORE VULNERABLE THAN OLDER WIDOWS ?

The following points highlight some of the reasons why child widows are more vulnerable than other widows and deserve special attention in human rights instruments:

- Due to their young age, child widows are often cheated out of their inheritance rights, evicted from their husband's property or even murdered. Child widows are highly vulnerable without a male to protect them and their children (Magoke-Mhoja, 2006).
- As a young and inexperienced child widow, she may be less able to assert her inheritance rights or custody rights over her children. For example, in Tanzania, access to the courts is difficult, so child widows' problems

are mostly resolved at clan level, but even at clan level these young widows do not have a voice and must abide by the decision of the village elders. The complicated Tanzanian legal system is difficult for any widow to navigate, but even more so for a child (Magoke-Mhoja, 2006).

- Widows sexually experienced yet free from male control, are often perceived as readily available for sexual relations (Mahy *et al.*, 2016). The younger and more attractive a child widow is, the more she will experience unsolicited advances due to notions of purity and beauty associated with youth. This makes child widows vulnerable to abuse, sexual harassment and violence (Parker and Creese, 2016).
- Bereavement is traumatic at any age, but child widows are not psychologically mature enough to cope with such trauma and the myriad of adult responsibilities they must assume. If the child widow was a child bride, she is probably isolated without any friends to offer her support. Furthermore, due to the patrilocal nature of society she will have moved to her husband's home, away from her own family and community leading to a 'drastic alienation' from her family (Chen, 1997, Khanna, in Giri 2002). This trauma will be felt more acutely by a child widow making them prone to psychological stress and mental health problems.
- Young widows with children will have to raise a family without the support and protection of a husband and must make all family decisions alone. They may have to work long hours, leaving them little time for their children. This contrasts with older widows whose children may have already left home. As child widows are young themselves, they will not have adult sons on whom to rely for support, which is a common practice in South Asian and Sub-Saharan African rural communities.
- In the case of a polygamous husband, child widows may suffer even more as he may leave behind two or more widows and their children. A child widow can suffer from the jealousy of co-widows for having been more attractive to the late husband and punish her by treating her like a slave and subjecting her to violent behaviour (Magoke-Mhoja, 2006). In Guinea, almost half of the women aged 15 to 49 are in polygynous unions (The World's Women, 2015). The World Bank (2018) reports that polygamy is legal in 25 countries.
- Child widows are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and many are forced into prostitution to survive (WHR, 2010, Dutt, 2010, Khanna, in Giri, 2002). Due to little life experience, they may also be unaware of the health risks of unprotected sex and less able to insist on protection. A child's young body may also be more susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS, which she may contract from her husband, through prostitution or funeral rituals.
- Prior to widowhood, these children may suffer from malnourishment and pregnancy-related health complications such as obstetric fistula as their body is not ready for childbirth (Nour, 2006). If the child widow then must fast or emaciate her body as a mourning ritual, her health is at risk, especially as she may not be able afford the health care she needs.
- Re-marriage is likely to have a greater impact on child widows than older women because of their young age. Child widows from high caste Hindu families may not even have the option to re-marry and must remain alone and in celibacy (Chen, 1997). In contrast, a woman who is widowed aged 70 may have led a fulfilled life through motherhood and other life events.
- Widowhood can be a life sentence of misery and suffering. A child wife who becomes a widow at 16 or less will have to suffer the stigma attached to widowhood for her whole life, compared to a woman who is widowed at 60.
- Although child widows from lower Hindu castes in India can re-marry in theory, in practice their chances are limited, especially if they have young children (Patri, in Giri, 2002). Concern for their children's welfare may also prevent them from entering another marriage.

Alternatively, a child widow may be forced into a levirate union in which she is ‘inherited’ like a chattel and must marry her dead husband’s brother, designed to keep wealth in the husband’s family, afford protection and take care of the sexual needs of the widow (Patri, in Giri, 2002). She may also be expected to have children in the name of her dead husband (Dutt, 2010). Her inheritor is usually an unmarried brother-in-law, but it can also be a married brother-in-law, which can create jealousy and family tensions, putting the child widow at risk of abuse. As she is young, she is less able to defend her rights, rendering her vulnerable to violence and abuse from family members. If a child widow marries outside the family, she may lose the rights to her husband’s property and custody of her children.

- Older widows are usually more knowledgeable about life’s circumstances: in India specifically, they may be aware of Ashrams and holy cities where help is provided for destitute women. Such places cater for older widows who want to reach moksha (salvation) but young girls are likely to be forced into prostitution or child labour (Giri, 2002).
- Some children are widowed without ever stepping into their husband’s house and having their marriage consummated, yet these “virgin widows” are still expected to follow the same mourning rituals as older widows (WHR, 2010).
- There can be long term intergenerational implications for child widows, where the cycle of child marriage is perpetuated. Child widows cannot afford to pay large dowries when marrying their daughters and may have no choice but to marry them to an older, disabled or sick man who will settle for a low dowry. The child widow may not be able to afford schooling for her children, in which case they are destined for child labour. She may also marry her own daughters early to avoid sexual harassment and violence (Owen, 2012).
- With limited personal, financial and social resources, such tragedy renders child widows vulnerable to multiple forms of violence including trafficking and prostitution as well as to physical violence and abuse from in-laws or other family members.

The connection between child widows and child marriage is important but has been largely overlooked by most organisations working on child marriage. It is therefore useful to consider the links between child marriage and child widows.

5. MAKING THE LINK BETWEEN CHILD MARRIAGE AND CHILD WIDOWS

Despite international and national legislation banning child marriage (where one or both spouses are under 18), the practice persists, especially in rural communities in the areas covered by this report. Child marriage is a harmful traditional practice like FGM, son preference, female feticide, and dowry-related violence, which all are forms of discrimination.

Child widows are a direct consequence of child marriage; if girls did not marry under 18 (the international minimum age set in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international instruments), there would be fewer child widows (Kane, 1941, Owen, 1996, Magoke-Mhoja, 2006). The causes of bridegroom deaths include childhood diseases, HIV/AIDs and Ebola, alcoholism, accidents, conflict, suicides, famine and natural and man-made disasters (Surkan *et al.*, 2015).

Although child marriage is decreasing, change is very slow. According to World Bank data from over 60 countries, the rate of child marriage has only declined by 11 percent over the past 30 years (Wodon *et al.*, 2015). Even today, almost 50% of women in South Asia and 40% in Sub-Saharan Africa were married before the age of 18 (UNFPA, 2012). In absolute numbers, almost half of all child brides in the world live in South Asia with 1 in 3 child brides in India (UNICEF, 2015). Over half the girls in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Niger, South Sudan and Nepal are still married before 18, (The World’s Women, 2015).

The practice is mainly driven by poverty, the desire for large families - especially the desire for sons - and the need for parents to reduce the number of children to feed. Men will accept a lower dowry for a younger girl, and the family benefits financially from the marriage of a girl child, known as bride price, which can feed the rest of the family. Early marriage also ensures virginity, a pre-requisite in societies where extra-marital sex is still frowned upon. The family's honour must be protected as any transgressions damage the family's reputation and reduce a girl's chances of marriage (Bhagat, 2016). Poor families are reluctant to educate daughters - they consider educating a girl is like 'watering someone else's garden', benefitting her husband's family. The cost involved in education is also a major consideration as parents must pay school fees, provide uniforms and books. Furthermore, concern for the safety of their daughters when travelling to and from school may also encourage early marriage.

Many child brides are married to much older men, resulting in child widows. Women who marry older men at a young age risk early widowhood and domestic violence (The World's Women, 2015). According to Indian Hindu texts, it is acceptable for the groom to be 2 or 3 times the age of the bride, so a 12-year-old girl could marry a 36-year-old man. In Bangladesh and Burkina Faso, child brides are generally at least 10 years younger than their husbands, but in many countries girls can be married to men who are even many decades older.

Given the prevalence of child marriage, child widows are an inevitable consequence. In Nepal for example around 7% of girls marry whilst still under 10 years of age. In 1996 Margaret Owen wrote "Despite the clear link between child marriage and child widows, the major UN agencies have not picked up on the plight of child widows". Unfortunately, over 20 years later, child widows still remain absent from international dialogue. The older widows of today, were often themselves child widows many decades ago, making it vital to consider widowhood in a life course perspective.

6. WIDOWHOOD IN SOUTH ASIA AND SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Most research on child widows and widows in general has been conducted in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, where most child marriages and therefore child widows occur. It is pertinent therefore to deal with these two high prevalence areas.

7. WIDOWS EXPERIENCES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Widows' experiences in Sub-Saharan African communities are somewhat similar to those of the Indian subcontinent but also different. Child widows from three Tanzanian tribes are characterized by poverty, insecurity, denial of inheritance rights, property grabbing, violence, ostracism, levirate marriages, risks of losing custody over their children and widespread stigma and discrimination (Magoke-Mhoja, 2006). However, Potash asserts that contrary to popular beliefs, rural widows in Africa are often self-sufficient and independent and in fact, economically better off than their married counterparts. Moreover, widows in some African cultures are not marginalized but are given a central place in society as valuable contributors to the agricultural labour force.

They can also refuse, though few do, levirate unions (marriage in which the brother of the deceased man is obliged to marry the widow), as they are supposed to protect widows and their children and help integration into society (Potash, 1986).

Sex rituals form an essential part of Luo customs in Kenya, including widow cleansing where a widow must engage in sexual intercourse with a "cleanser," following her husband's death to purify her body from her dead husband's spirit. Condoms are not acceptable as semen and vaginal fluids must mix during sexual intercourse for the ritual to be fulfilled. After cleansing, the widow is inherited by a relative, but increasingly in-laws are reluctant to inherit widows because of the economic burden and increased risk of HIV/AIDs. This has given rise to a new breed of 'professional inheritors' who have commercialized the practice. Such inheritance relationships are based on prescribed roles rather than on commitment and the permanent

bonds of marriage. Widows remain “married” to their husband even after his death, but this is not the case with an inheritor (Perry *et al.*, 2014).

Widows must also find a partner to engage in sex on other occasions, for instance when setting up a new home, during agricultural cycles or when participating in certain funeral or marriage ceremonies. The social pressure on widows to fulfil these rituals is intense. While some widows refuse to observe these practices, many still comply to avoid being ostracized by the community or from fear of attracting bad luck. “Inherited” widows who perform sexual rituals are at greater risk of HIV infections. Given these high risks, it is of concern that in Kenya less than 3% of widows had used a condom since the death of their husband (Perry, *et al.*, 2014). Although inheritance customs can provide much needed help to widows, they also legitimize multiple sexual partnerships as inheritors will often have several wives or inherited widows. Widows may have sexual relationships with a series of professional inheritors, but each new sexual relationship increases the risk of sexually transmitted infections (Perry *et al.*, 2014). The Global Widows Report (2015) also points out that some of the sexual behaviours and norms practiced can be harmful to communities in situations of extreme poverty as they lead to “exchange sex” and “survival sex”.

These practices are harmful as they spread diseases such as HIV/AIDs and Ebola through rites involving touching the dead husband’s body or drinking the water in which the dead husband’s corpse was washed (Kouagheu and Guilbert, 2016, Dutt, 2010). As in India, widows from many ethnic African groups are expected to publicly express their grief and observe “mortuary etiquette,” such as wailing, fasting, shaving their head or leaving it unkempt (Obbo, in Potash, 1986 p.95).

As in India, African widows are sometimes accused of being witches and are blamed for their husband’s death. They are often perceived as promiscuous or prostitutes, and some are forced to enter levirate unions, endure periods of social seclusion and left to rely on adult sons to take care of them in old age (Potash, 1986).

In Togo, there is a similar situation where harmful traditional practices put widows at risk of rape and HIV infections. Widows are ‘inherited’ and often forced into levirate marriages with a relative or someone chosen by the community. The mourning rituals can last 3 years, and widows may have to undergo “tests” to prove that they did not kill their husband. They are often denied food, access to income generating activities and inheritance rights. An NGO called Alafia is working with villagers to raise awareness of the harmful effects of such rituals (UN Women Trust Fund, 2017).

Some important differences between South Asian and Sub-Saharan African widows are the treatment of children born out of wedlock and sexual relations other than levirate marriages. Both situations are accepted in some African communities but considered unacceptable in Asia. Another difference is the duration of mourning - in India it can be lifelong, whereas for many African groups widowhood is seen as a temporary phase until the widow re-marries.

In Hausa societies in Nigeria, during mourning (takaba), widows pack away the symbols of their marital status such as dowry gifts as these are regarded as decorations. After mourning, the dowry is either left locked away, distributed to others or sold. Mourning rituals require the widow to refrain from adorning her body, wearing makeup or using perfumed soap (only a traditional black soap used to wash a newborn infant is allowed). Her hair must not be plaited and is washed with potash. Widows covers their heads and wear an old plain wrapper which is removed when mourning ends. Widows take ritual baths every Friday while reciting verses from the Koran; they are not allowed to attend feasts or ceremonies (Schildkrout in Potash, 1986). Some of these Hausa traditions bear a remarkable similarity to those of Indian widows.

Table 1 on the next page summarises some of the rituals performed by widows in Nigerian groups such as the Yoruba, Igbo, Igala and Ezeagu. It is compiled from data collected by the Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada (2000) from many different sources. Mourning rituals are gendered experiences as Sousa (2002) and others state. Although men are also expected to mourn their wives, the rituals are far less demanding and low key. For example, a man mourns only for 2 weeks in parts of Ghana compared to a widow who must spend one or two years in mourning (Sousa, 2002).

TABLE 1: RITUALS OFTEN PERFORMED BY WIDOWS IN NIGERIAN GROUPS

A widow:

- Drinks the water used to wash her husband's corpse to prove she did not murder him. This ceremony of self-exoneration will 'show' if she was responsible for her husband's death;
- Participates in "widow cleansing" through sexual relations with relatives e.g. brother-in-law, to "cleanse" her of evil spirits and break the bonds between the living and the dead;
- Sleeps with the corpse as a symbolic last sexual act with her dead husband;
- Sleeps on the bare ground without a blanket for a month and a week;
- Shaves her head, and in extreme cases, also the pubic and underarm hair;
- Wears the same garments for a long period (which can be from months to a year);
- Wears a cloth for 28 days which is only washed at night and remains naked until it dries;
- Sits alone on the ground, motionless for a specific period;
- Eats only with her unwashed left hand;
- Eats food off unwashed plates during mourning period (this can be 1 to 3 months);
- Undergoes "Hair scraping"- where the hair is scraped from a widow's head with a razor blade, often in an untidy manner by older widows ("umuada"). This can occur 3 times, the last time being after the ritual cleansing. She is made to look ugly and unkempt and is shunned;
- Is untouchable and tainted, so must not receive gifts or receive a handshake;
- Must not speak out or make a noise unless she is required to cry;
- Must be fed by others, her meals should be reduced in number or she must fast;
- Undergoes scarification of face with a knife or razor;
- Must not bathe during mourning, even during menstruation (from 28 days to 8 months);
- Exhibits nakedness. She sits naked to wash in a stream. In some areas after bathing, the widows' clothes and shaved hair are burnt and she must return home naked. This is called the "naked walk," a stage which makes her vulnerable to rape.
- May be expected to stay naked for 3 months with her hands covering her breasts;
- Must weep for long hours, even when she does not feel able to;
- Is restricted in her movements - she is not allowed to leave the home for 28 days and cannot go to work, meet people, fetch water, cook, go to the market or farm;
- Is not permitted to participate in her husband's funeral;
- After a period of isolation, an organized gang rape ends a widow's mourning allowing her to embark on relations with other men. However, men only face the head-shaving ritual.

Table compiled from data sources collected by the Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada, 2000: Baltimore Afro-American. 27 November 1998. Dorothy S. Boulware. "Third World Widowhood Rituals Devastating." (The Ethnic NewsWatch/NEXIS), Empowering Widows in Development, London, U.K. n.d. "Country Report: Nigeria." [Accessed 4 May 2000], Headway. 28 February 1999. Deborah Burston Donbraye. "To be a widow in Nigeria " (The Ethnic NewsWatch/NEXIS), Inter Press Service (IPS). 30 December 1998. Remi Oyo. "Rights-Nigeria: Widows Tortured in the Name of Tradition." (NEXIS), The News [Lagos]. 30 November 1999. Dotun Adekanmbi. "Nigeria; Tears for the Living." (Africa News/NEXIS), Post Express [Lagos]. 8 July 1999. "Affairs of the Heart; Woman to Woman: Circle of Distrust and Cruelty." [Accessed 4 May 2000], WIN News. 30 April 1999. "Reports from Around the World: Africa and the Middle East: Widows Tortured in Nigeria in the Name of Tradition." (GenderWatch/NEXIS)

8. THE EXPERIENCES OF CHILD WIDOWS AND ADULT WIDOWS IN INDIA

In India, widowhood in lower castes is characterized by poverty due to inheritance laws favouring men, lack of education and employment skills and deeply engrained social norms constraining women, both mentally and physically. Widows become destitute and are shunned by society as they are believed to be inauspicious and harbingers of bad luck (Giri, 200, Dutt 2010). They are marginalized through rumours and accusations, they suffer from restrictive diet and dress codes, physical harassment and violence (Chen, 1997). Many widows experience social isolation, psychological abuse and emotional distress because of their perceived threat to the social order (Chen, 1997). Thousands of older widows make their way to the holy cities of India, some of which are known as the “city of widows” such as Vrindavan. There, they spend the rest of their lives singing bhajans (hymns) for eight hours a day in return for a pittance of 2 rupees a day and 250 grams of rice in the hope of achieving moksha (salvation) (Khanna, in Giri 2002, Patri, in Giri, 2002).

As to the number of child wives and child widows in India, in 2016 “The Wire”, a media organisation, estimated that there were 12 million married children under 10 years of age. Some of these child brides may end up as ‘virgin widows’, which refers to a young bride who has not even set foot in her husband’s house yet is pronounced a widow. Parihar, (India Today, 2008) reported cases of young girls married at age 4 or 5, who became widows shortly afterwards. Regardless of their age, such girls are still labelled as widows and must behave like any other widow. Worse still, if they are from a high Hindu caste, it is likely that they will never be allowed to re-marry and so will be denied the opportunity of having children and being a mother. These young girls are not only robbed of their childhood, but of their future also.

Hindu widows are expected to remove all marriage symbols and to follow strict dress codes, dietary restrictions and personal hygiene routines which affect their appearance and health.

For example:

- Wedding bangles are violently smashed and removed from widows using a stone or a wall.
- The mangalsutra, the ornamental chain which symbolizes her status as a wife is removed.
- Hair must not be braided, it should be tied back simply, or shaven. Henna is prohibited.
- Flowers, perfumes, fragrances are prohibited.
- Saris must be white made of a coarse material, worn without a blouse.
- No colourful jewelry or make-up (shringar).
- No tikka (red dot on the forehead) or the sindhur (red dye placed on the hair parting).
- They should sleep on the floor and not on a bed.
- They should emaciate and eat only once a day, mainly ‘cold’ foods such as yoghurt, rice, milk and honey to dampen their sexual desires and avoid ‘hot’ foods like meat, fish, eggs, garlic and onions as these are believed to fuel sexual desire. (List compiled from: Jensen, 2005, Khanna, in Giri, 2002, Patri in Giri 2002, Sahoo, 2014).

The symbolic significance of the white sari in India is important because of the multiple forms of discrimination it evokes: social, political and economic. It also symbolizes the life journey towards death. Yadav, (2016) contends that forcing women to wear a white sari is a means of disciplining them and ensuring that they remain faithful to their husband’s memory, even after his death. The white sari is highly visible making widows conspicuous in public places and alerts others to their marital and social status, making them vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence (Surkal *et al.*, 2015).

In Hindu society colour reflects the sexual state of a woman; cool colours symbolize infertility, asexuality, old age, widowhood and death. The colour white therefore signifies the end of widows’ sexual and social life. A woman’s relationship to her husband and children also influences the colours she wears. A bride for example traditionally wears red which symbolizes that she is sexually active. As women age and have older children

and grandchildren, they will change to wearing cooler colours such as off white, cream and grey (Yadav, 2016).

Paradoxically, the white sari signifies purity, but it also labels the widows who wear them as promiscuous, creating a double standard which prevents them from being accepted in mainstream society (Yadav, 2016). During widowhood women are expected to avoid colours, but this is slowly changing as women are forming collectives and demanding the right to wear colours (WHR, 2010). Eliminating the constraint of wearing the white sari is thus a way of eliminating discrimination against widows (Yadav, 2016). Such a change will require informing women of their rights and helping them realise that by challenging cultural expectations regarding dress code, dietary and mobility restrictions, they can change society.

The Indian Government is to be commended for taking steps to address these complex and sensitive issues by creating a Ministry for Women and Child Development, and providing a social security system for widows, although this must be made more easily accessible. Despite the many challenges India faces dealing with a very large, predominantly rural population, progress is noticeable.

9. WIDOWS IN NEPAL

In Nepal, ten years of conflict resulted in demographic shifts, with unprecedented increases in the number of widows, especially young widows with 65% of them under 30, mostly illiterate and dependent on others (WHR 2010). As in India, widows in Nepal are poor, marginalized and ostracized and seen as inauspicious and a curse on the family. The vilification of widows in Nepal was so extreme that it led to support groups being renamed from 'widows' groups' to 'single women's groups'.

Nepalese women are so afraid of being labelled a widow, that if the husband dies while working abroad, (there is high labour migration and nearly all households have at least one member working abroad for several months or years), they hide his death to protect themselves and their family from abuse and marginalization. These women continue to dress and behave as though they still had a husband (Surkan *et al.*, 2015).

In Nepal like India, a woman's status is tied to the men in her life, first her father, then her husband and also sons and brothers. Religious ideologies based on Hindu texts still influence the relationship between men and women (WHR, 2010). Institutionalized patriarchy has prevented women from enjoying equal social, cultural and economic rights to men, a situation which becomes worse upon widowhood. Widows are impoverished, neglected and treated as outcasts. They are denied their inheritance and land rights; most of them are unaware of their rights and do not know how to access services and protection (WHR, 2010). Many are illiterate, unskilled and destitute. Their lack of education increases their risk of suffering violence, abuse and exploitation including rape and trafficking. As in India, they experience restrictions in their mobility, diet and dress, they are excluded from social gatherings, even from participating in their own children's marriage ceremonies (WHR, 2010).

The child marriage rate is very high in parts of Nepal, with over half of the girls married under 18 and many even under the age of 15. This inevitably results in increasing numbers of child widows. WHR (2010) found some widows were still teenagers who had not yet reached puberty or set foot in their husbands' home. Some child widows (*vaikalayas*), never even knew married life before being labelled inauspicious.

The position of child widows becomes even more untenable after their parents die as siblings do not want to be burdened with caring for them. Child widows may be denied fundamental rights such as access to food, clothing, education, freedom of movement, which increases their vulnerability (WHR, 2010). They are totally dependent on their families for survival yet with no voice they are often forced to accept domestic and sexual violence and even trafficking.

Widows in Nepal are sometimes labelled “bokshi” (witch) as they are believed to possess powers which can harm others, including causing the death of their husband. If labelled a bokshi, a woman may be beaten, tortured or made to perform humiliating acts such as eating human waste or flesh (Dutt, 2010).

Women for Human Rights, Nepal led by Lily Thapa has successfully pressurised the Government to bring about change resulting in the Government’s announcement that the practice of Vaikalya (child widows) is an evil practice that should be stopped; the deceased husband’s property needs no longer be returned by the widow if she re-marries; changing property ownership no longer requires her children’s consent, women do not have to be 35 to inherit their deceased husband’s property and they no longer require the consent of a male family member to obtain a passport (WHR, 2018). Widows in Nepal have thus played an important role in building a more humane, post conflict society.

10. WIDOWS AND DIVORCEES IN INDONESIA

Studies by Parker and Creese (2016) and Mahy *et al.*, (2016) show that widows and divorcees in Indonesia are often described negatively as a ‘Junda’ in contrast to a virtuous married woman who is called an ‘Ibu’. Widows (junda mati) and divorcees’ (janda cerai) negative stereotyping are perpetuated through gossip which affects the behaviour of both men and women towards them and also importantly affects how women present themselves in society. Some jundas were child brides, married under age 16 secretly or unofficially. One of the consequences being that these widows cannot remarry because their marital status cannot be legally verified (Parker and Creese 2016).

The Indonesian family ideal generally consists of the male breadwinner husband who goes out to work and provides for his wife, family and home. Jundas, especially young jundas are stereotyped as sexually experienced but deprived of a male, who are on the hunt for a man. They are often perceived as loose women, no longer protected or under the control of a man and hence free to do what they want. Such stereotypes are depicted in traditional Indonesian tales and modern pop culture. Whilst men often view a junda as a weak and lonely woman who can easily be seduced, their wives see them as a threat to their husbands’ faithfulness and to their marriage. Men are most interested in a ‘Junda kembang’ (meaning a young, attractive junda). Although widows and divorced women can re-marry and become an ‘Ibu’, or virtuous married woman, it is sometimes difficult for them to shed their past label of a junda. The male equivalent - a widower or a divorcee, is called a “Duda” which does not carry the same negative connotation. Jundas were commonly talked about by men as sexual objects, yet married women were not treated in this demeaning way (Mahy *et al.*, 2016). Thus, the sexual stigma surrounding widows affects their moral identity and perceived worth (Parker and Creese, 2016). For example, the bride price for a single virgin woman is 30 coconut trees compared with only 10 trees for a junda, reflecting their different values. (Parker *et al.*, 2016 in Parker and Creese 2016). However, these authors show how jandas resist this stigmatization by portraying themselves as loving mothers, hardworking, economically independent and religious women.

11. IMPACT OF HINDU RELIGION IN INDIA

Widowhood is influenced by many factors including religious beliefs and norms. In 2017, the Indian population was 74% Hindu, 14% Muslim, 6% Christian, 2% Sikh, 1% Ethno - religionists and Buddhists and 1% non-religious. The Hindu caste system affects the lives of three quarters of the Indian population of 1.35 billion, making it very powerful. In the Hindu caste system every man has his place in the societal hierarchy, including his occupation, career and even his circle of friends.

The main characteristics of India’s caste system are:

1. Caste is inherited, a person is assigned to a particular caste at birth;
2. There are restrictions on marriage -endogamy and exogamy i.e. they are expected to marry someone within the same caste but not to marry certain relatives or other persons, even though they are of the same caste;

3. There are restrictions regarding food, such as what food and water can be consumed, from whom it can be accepted and who they can eat with;
4. Their occupation is often restricted to the caste they were born into;
5. It is a hierarchical system where some castes are at the top of the social scale while others are so low that they are considered as untouchables.

Of these 5 characteristics, marriage restrictions have become the consistent feature of the caste system but even this is changing. The other four characteristics vary across different regions (Kane 1941).

The caste system can be compared to a social club, a trade union and or a nexus for upholding traditions. The operational and procedural rules for Hindus are set out in ancient and medieval religious texts such as the Vedas, dating back to 1500 to 600 BC, which have been interpreted and translated over time and are still followed today (Kane 1941, Yadav, 2016). However, Khanna attributes widows stigmatization to generations of repressive tradition rather than to Hindu religious texts (Khanna in Giri 2002).

One very important philosophical text called the “Manusmriti” states that: “In childhood a female must be subjected to her father; in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons, a woman must never be independent” (WHR, 2010, Kane 1941).

Within Hindu family traditions, every girl must be married; if she is married before menstruation, it is believed that her family will go to heaven, which encourages child marriages.

According to ancient religious texts, the woman’s only purpose in life is to serve her husband. She must seek her husband’s permission before engaging in any activities such as fasting or making pilgrimages. Manu IX:11 (in Kane 1941) advises the husband to delegate certain tasks to his wife - conserving wealth, taking care of household expenditure, keeping things clean, performing religious acts, cooking food and generally taking care of the household.

The Padma-Purāṇa (in Kane 1941) expects a wife to work like a slave, offer sexual pleasure like a whore, offer food like a mother and act like a counsellor in family matters.

In addition to serving her husbands’ best interests at all times, the rules of conduct for a wife also include avoiding bad company such as dancing girls, women who gamble, women who have lovers, female ascetics, female fortune-tellers and women who follow magical and secret rituals (Sāṅkha, in Kane 1941).

In Hinduism it is believed that if a husband dies before his wife, it is her fault as she is atoning for sins of a past life (Khanna in Giri 2002). The Hindu religious texts set out detailed codes of conduct for widows. Sati, the well-known tradition of wives sacrificing themselves on their husband’s funeral pyre is rare today. It originally applied only to the wives of kings and nobleman for fear of ill-treatment in the hands of enemies if they were captured, which later spread to higher Hindu castes but was banned in 1829 (Jarmine, 2002, Kane, 1941).

As widows no longer immolate themselves on their husband’s funeral pyre and out-live their husbands, they posed a threat to his honour, as a wife remains attached to her husband, even beyond death. Eventually widows were accepted in Hindu society, but only on its margins. To minimize the chances of a woman dishonoring her dead husband’s memory, strict rules of behaviour were set out for widows, to “uglify” and “de-sex” them and make them appear as unattractive as possible to discourage men from desiring them (Khanna, in Giri, 2002). All widows, including Hindu child widows are expected to follow rules set out in ancient texts, some of which are summarised in Table 2. The expectations of a widow’s gaunt appearance are the opposite to a beautiful wife who display symbols of marriage such as wearing make-up, auspicious ornaments and braided hair, showing that upon the death of a husband, a widow loses her identity and status as a wife and must remove all symbols of marriage.

TABLE 2: CODE OF CONDUCT EXPECTED OF HINDU WIDOWS

A widow:

- May, if she chooses (or must) emaciate her body by eating only flowers, roots and fruit.
- Should not pronounce the name of another man after her husband's death.
- Until her death she should be forbearing, observe vows, remain celibate and follow the code of conduct prescribed for women devoted to their husbands. If she abides by the rules of celibacy and is a virtuous woman, she will go to heaven.

Vrddha-Hārīta (XL 205-210) prescribes rules for a widow's life.

A widow should no longer:

- Adorn her hair but tie it back simply. Some writings explain that when a widow ties her hair into a braid, this leads to the bondage with her husband; therefore, a widow should always shave her head - (This practice is declining);
- Chew betel-nut leaves;
- Use perfumes, flowers, ornaments and should avoid the fragrance of all sweet-smelling things;
- Wear dyed garments but only wear white garments of coarse material
- Take food from a bronze/bell metal vessel;
- Eat only two meals a day;
- Apply collyrium to her eyes and rocana (yellow pigment) to her face; and
- Take ceremonial baths with oil or wash her body with fragrant unguents.

In addition, widows should:

- Curb their senses and anger;
- Not resort to deceit or tricks;
- Not be lazy or over sleep;
- Be pure and conduct themselves well;
- Always worship Hari;
- Sleep on the ground at night on a mat of kuśa grass as a widow who sleeps on a bed would make her husband fall in hell; and
- Everyday perform tarpaṇa, religious rites with śeṣame, water and kuśa grass for her husband, his father and grandfather.

These duties for a widow were compiled from translations, Manu (V.157-160), Vrddha-Hārīta (XL 205-210), Bana in his Harsacarita (VI, last para), The Kaśikhanda of the same Purāṇa, chap. 4 taken from Kane1941.

Rules for wives whose husbands' work away from home.

The rules of behaviour expected from wives whose husbands are working away from home (shown in Table 3) are remarkably similar to the rules for widows, suggesting that wives must always protect their husband's honor whether it be during his temporary absence for work (weeks, months or years), or after his permanent departure upon death.

TABLE 3: RULES FOR WIVES WHOSE HUSBANDS WORK AWAY FROM HOME

Wives should:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look pale, ashen and distressed • Remain devoted to their husbands • Be without (full) meals and emaciate their bodies • Avoid amusements of swing and dance • Not embellish their bodies • Not walk in parks, sleep in open places (or uncovered) • Not consume sumptuous food and drink 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not wear fragrant resins and perfumes • Not use flowers, unguents or ornaments • Not engage in ceremonial brushing of the teeth • Not wear collyrium (eyeliner) in the eyes • Not adorn the body • Not attend community gatherings and festivities

12. VERBAL ABUSE SUFFERED BY WIDOWS

According to Women’s Human Rights (2010), the violence suffered by widows in Nepal is 80% verbal abuse, 12% physical torture and 8% sexual harassment. Verbal insults against widows as a form of oppression are widespread and have been documented in several countries. Indian writer and social activist Meera Khanna (Khanna in Giri 2002) refers to this as ‘linguistic oppression’. Examples of how widows and the word widow are negatively regarded in different countries, regions and languages are given in Table 4.

TABLE 4: TERMINOLOGY REFLECTING THE PERCEPTIONS OF WIDOWS BY SOCIETY

COUNTRY	TERM ASCRIBED TO WIDOWS	REFERENCES
Ethiopia	Harmella, a shameful term for a woman who is no longer under the control of a man. Widows are blamed for their husband’s death, viewed as ‘overly sexualised’, unpredictable and on the hunt for a man.	Newton-Levinson <i>et al.</i> , 2014
India	Harlot, witch, prostitute, sorceress. In Punjabi (North Indian language) a widow is called ‘khasma nu khaniye’ or husband eater. The word for widow is ‘rand’ and for a prostitute ‘randi’ ; both are forms of abuse. A widow may be referred to as a ‘prani’, meaning creature, since only a husband makes her a human being.	Khanna in Giri, 2002
Indonesia (and Bali)	Junda is a term used for widows (junda mati) and divorcees (junda cerai) - meaning she is sexually available, as opposed to an ‘ibu’ who is a virtuous married wife.	Mahy <i>et al.</i> , 2016 Parker and Creese, 2016
Sri Lanka (Tamil)	Mundachi or Munda - the terms are used to describe widows, but they are also used as abusive terms during heated arguments.	Khanna in Giri, 2002
Nepal	The term for a widow is Bidhawa, “woman without a husband” which is highly negative. Widows are so vilified that support groups to help widows are called ‘singles women’s groups’ thus avoiding the term ‘widows’.	Yadav 2016, WHR 2010
Tanzania	Widows are often called witches. Amongst Luo and Kuria clans widows mostly cannot re-marry, but those that do, are regarded as prostitutes.	Potash 1986, Magoke-Mhoja, 2006
West Africa (Ivory Coast Nigeria Ghana)	Widows are considered prostitutes or evil for outliving their husband and they are often blamed for their husband’s death.	Sossou 2002

13. WIDOWHOOD AND MOURNING ARE GENDERED EXPERIENCES

In Western countries, once the funeral of the deceased has been held, the rites are considered completed, but in many African and Asian cultures, the rites continue long after the funeral (Sossou, 20002). Moreover, these mourning rituals are gendered and are more onerous and demanding of widows than of widowers. In addition, in some countries death is not accepted as a natural occurrence and is often attributed to witchcraft and magic with the wife blamed for her husband's death, but not vice versa.

The term 'widow' which in Western countries is a neutral term meaning a woman whose husband has died, carries negative connotations in some countries (see Table 4), but the term 'widower' carries no such stigma. There are many examples of widows being more disadvantaged, including economically, so that female heads of households are generally poorer than male headed households (Khanna, in Giri 2002).

In addition, there are no dress codes for widowed men, whereas women mostly observe certain dress codes (Khanna, in Giri 2002), such as wearing a white sari in India or remaining naked in parts of Africa. Equally dietary restrictions are not imposed on widowers, yet widows are expected to emaciate or fast and avoid certain foods. Widowers usually re-marry, but widows rarely do - especially if they are over 40, have children or are from a high Hindu caste where re-marriage may be prohibited.

Widows are subjected to widespread humiliation and insults, called names, looked down upon, abused and marginalised which is not the case for widowers who are accepted in mainstream society. Men may be expected to mourn for as little as 2 weeks while widows are expected to mourn for 1-2 years, and in some cultures for the rest of their lives. Widows are expected to undergo humiliating funeral rituals, but the equivalent practices for widowers are much less demanding and invasive. Bereaved men are more likely to re-marry, have freedom to socialise and enjoy unrestricted mobility which is not the case for widows.

The dehumanising and humiliating mourning practices women have to observe are a form of power and control men exercise over women in patriarchal societies, where men are believed to be superior to women (Sossou, 2002). Moreover, the negative framing of widows and the humiliating narrative surrounding them as sexually available and immoral, undermines their dignity and disregards their need for male companionship and sexual relations (Muller 1986 in Sossou 2002).

14. CHILD MARRIAGE AND CHILD WIDOWS IN CONFLICT AND HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

The number of widows in the world has escalated due to armed conflict, genocide, revolutions, political and ethnic unrest and violent extremism yet we do not know how many of these are children.

During humanitarian crises such as conflict, gender inequality and gender-based discrimination increase. Political unrest and widespread insecurity due to poverty, the collapse of the rule of law and government services pose multiple problems for girls including their safety, right to education, economic, social, cultural and human rights and also threatens their right to postpone marriage until adulthood. In such circumstances of insecurity and war, child marriage becomes a survival strategy (UN-ESCWA, 2015). Over half the countries with the highest rates of child marriage are fragile states or affected by conflict (Rose, 2016).

Due to mass migration, many refugee camps have been set up and in these camps adolescent girls often face greater risk of gender-based violence such as early and forced marriage, rape, unwanted pregnancy, HIV infection, trafficking and sexual exploitation (Nassif, 2016).

As fragile states become ungovernable and the young men leave to fight, sexual aggression can increase (UN-ESCWA, 2015). Fear of violence drives child marriage as girls' parents believe marriage can provide security

with husbands protecting the girls from sexual violence (Lemmon, 2014; World Vision, 2013; Nirantar Trust, 2015). This has been observed among Syrian refugees (Bartels *et al.*, 2018; Office of the Secretary General's Envoy on Youth, 2017; UN-ESCWA, 2015; Nassif, 2016). It is reported that over 50% of Syrian girls in Jordanian refugee camps marry before they are 18 (UN Women, 2013).

In some fragile states with strong patriarchal societies, the social norm is women's dependence on men for financial support, food, shelter and protection in return for child rearing and homemaking (Khan, 2018). These women are generally uneducated, often married as young girls and unaware of their rights. When their husbands are killed, without male protection, a pension or social security, these adult and child widows and their dependents are left destitute and vulnerable to violence and multiple forms of discrimination. (Dutt, 2010; Owen, 2015; Global Widows Report, 2015; UN-ESCWA, 2015).

The child marriage rates in the Arab region for instance are: Somalia (45.3%), Sudan (32.9%), Yemen Rep. (32.3%), Iraq (24.3%), Palestine (21.0%), Syrian Arab Republic (13.3%), Jordan (8.4%) and Lebanon (6.1%). (Data taken from Cohen, 2011 in UN-ESCWA, 2015 p41).

Bartels *et al.*, (2018) report that 5 million Syrian refugees fled to other countries and a further 6 million are internally displaced. Of the 2.3 million displaced Syrian child refugees in the Middle East, over half a million are hosted by Lebanon where the increase in child marriage is attributed to fear of sexual violence and harassment, the need to preserve family honour and also to reduce the financial burden on the family (Bartels *et al.*, 2018).

Families in refugee camps sometimes arrange marriages of young girls to Lebanese men to shed their refugee status by claiming Lebanese citizenship in order to leave refugee camps (Nassif, 2016). Sometimes girls themselves want to get married to reduce the burden on their families (Nassif, 2016; UN-ESCWA, 2015).

Child marriage can also increase due to climate change where droughts and floods destroy farming and fishing livelihoods in African countries such as Malawi and Mozambique making it difficult for parents to feed their children. Girls as young as 13 are married so that families have one less mouth to feed. An estimated 30-40% of child marriages in Malawi may be driven by climate change which translates into 1.5 million girls (Chamberlain, 2017). However, the existence of child widows in these contexts are rarely mentioned.

The increase in the number of child marriages during conflict and other humanitarian settings is generally well documented, yet the increase in the number of child widows is rarely reported, apart from occasional media reports. It is clear that if girls marry early in areas where daily violence is rampant, their husbands go to war while women stay at home, men will be killed leaving behind child and adult widows and their children. The hardship of widowhood is exacerbated when the widow is only a child herself.

In parts of Afghanistan, women are considered as a possession, owned first by their father and then by their husband. Following decades of war in Afghanistan, it is estimated there are 2.5 million widows (average age of 35), 70,000 of whom live in Kabul, 94% are illiterate and 90% have 3-8 children. Most have few survival possibilities, leaving them in extreme deprivation when their husband dies (Hasrat-Nazimi, 2013; Bamik, 2018). Any compensation awarded for the death of a police officer or government soldier killed while on duty, is made to the husband's father and not his widow and children, making it difficult for them to survive. Poverty may thus force widows to withdraw girls from school further exposing them to early and forced marriage, child labour, prostitution, trafficking and sale (Bamik, 2018).

It is inevitable that some of these widows will be child widows, but data is scarce. Widows often survive through low paid jobs such as cleaning homes or sewing or end up begging and also sending their children to beg in the marketplace.

The emotional and financial strain of a husband's death, the pressure to earn a living, never having worked outside the home before, having little or no education, the societal pressure to re-marry, fear of sexual and physical violence, poverty and social marginalisation from being labelled as a bad omen, all contribute to push widows into depression and even suicide (Hasrat Nazimi, 2013; Bamik, 2018).

Khan, (2018) reported the plight of a 16 year old girl whose husband was shot dead by the Taliban after only 7 months of marriage. Her devastating loss was exacerbated by the belief in rural Afghan communities that if a man dies within 10 months of marriage, his wife is to blame as she must have cursed him. Following her husband's death, this child widow was mistreated by his family and neighbours and was henceforth labelled as an unlucky wife, and unlikely ever to re-marry.

The pressure on widows to marry their young daughters is highlighted in a report of a 35 year old widow in Afghanistan with four children, who was forced to marry her 13 year old daughter to a man of forty, as she was unable to feed her (Mail Online, 23 June 2017). This is an example of poverty driving child marriage and perpetuating the intergenerational cycle of the practice.

Joya, (2017) from the Thomson Reuters Foundation highlighted the plight of a 12 year old girl married to a controlling Taliban in Kabul who refused to let her bathe, threatened her if she wore make up, beat her for burning her hand whilst baking, raped her and beat her for not consenting to sex.

Although child and forced marriages are illegal, they remain common in Afghanistan, especially if families are poor and eager for dowries. Many girls in Afghanistan are married before the age of 15 so some child brides will inevitably become child widows.

Another case given by Joya (2017) involved a young Taliban widow who was forced into marriage at 14 and was trapped in Helmand Province after her husband was killed. Her husband's cousins visit her twice weekly to rape her and threaten to kill her if she tells anyone. She cannot afford to send her 9 and 11 year old sons to school, but her husband's cousins are raising them to become Jihadis. She is living as a sex slave, but it is difficult to rescue her as she lives with her elderly mother in law in remote rebel controlled territory. Unable to fend for herself she was forced to live with her in-laws which also adversely affects her sons who are deprived of schooling but indoctrinated with extremist beliefs.

A very unusual story in the New York Times, reports the case of a young Afghan girl who was married 3 times to brothers of the same family: so had been a child widow twice. Prior to birth she was promised in marriage to a first cousin, 15 years her senior, although the marriage would not be consummated until she reached age 11 or puberty. After an air strike killed her sister-in law, her husband joined the Taliban but was shot dead leaving her a child widow at the age of 10. She then married one of her husband's brothers who was subsequently killed in a roadside bomb leaving her a child widow for the second time and pregnant. At 14 she gave birth to a daughter and after the prescribed interval, married her husband's youngest brother. Under Pashtun culture she had little choice but to marry these brothers - although her ambition was to become educated, her sole wish now is for her husband to remain alive (Nordland, The New York Times, 26 May 2018).

Khan, (2017) claims that young girls between the age of 15-19 are the main victims of war. Most of these war widows are in fact girls and not women, so they become child widows. Due to their young age they may find it difficult to access help and be more vulnerable to the oppressive traditions of their culture. Many widows are unaware of their rights and even for those who are aware, conservative customs can deprive them of any compensation. According to local laws in rural Pashtun communities, when a young woman loses her husband her inheritance goes to her new husband.

Due to insufficient data on child widows in peacetime as well as during conflict and other humanitarian crises, they are invisible and afforded little protection. It is therefore vital to pay more attention to the link

between child marriage and child widows and realise that child marriage can lead to girls becoming child widows who are most vulnerable because they are only children.

Inevitably, there are also child widows due to the ongoing conflict in other areas of the world such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) but there is little data on their numbers, age, needs, legal status and human rights. These children may have suffered physical and emotional trauma including rape but without comprehensive data, the conviction of perpetrators is very difficult (Owen, 2015).

Even though little data is available on child widows during conflict, widows themselves can be a reliable source of information so some grass roots women's organisations such as Women for Human Rights in Nepal and others are collecting data on adult and child widows (WHR, 2010). Yet, despite such efforts, widows' voices are rarely heard at the international level. It is difficult to understand why the plight of child widows and widows in general has not been taken into consideration in national and international policies, particularly in view of the important role women play during conflict in financially supporting their children, the elderly, the sick, and the wounded.

Although campaigners welcomed the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions on 'Women Peace and Security' in the hope that it would highlight and address gender issues in conflict resolution, prevention and peace building, the reality has been disappointing due to poor implementation (Owen, 2015).

Despite the abundant research on child marriage in recent years, the related issue of child widows has been overlooked both in peacetime and conflict and humanitarian settings. It is therefore imperative to link research on child marriage and child widows to determine how many child brides become child widows and their life circumstances on account of their added vulnerability as children. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child states that children must be protected from violence and exploitation and be allowed to have a childhood during which time they can grow and develop their full potential physiologically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually. It is clear that more reliable data is needed to understand the relationship between child marriage and child widows and the impact on widows' children in all conflict and humanitarian settings.

15. EXAMPLES OF POSITIVE COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY

Although widowhood rituals are deeply ingrained, they can and must change and there is cause for optimism as adversity can be the catalyst for positive transformation. For instance, in Nepal, after 10 years of war (1996-2006), and a large number of young war widows, greater transformations were achieved in the status of widows in a few years than had been possible in a thousand years (Yadav, 2016). The reasons being that men came to rely on women during war and women took on professional roles such as police officers, which led to widowhood rituals becoming more relaxed. The war also gave rise to many 'half-widows' whose husbands had disappeared, but no one knew if they were dead or alive which led to greater sympathy for widows. Widows also started working outside the home, such as on construction sites, so people came to accept them as part of society. War widows in Nepal also carried out work they had not been allowed previously, such as ploughing the land. All this contributed to transforming society and the lives of Nepalese widows (Yadav, 2016). Women also started forming collectives to voice their needs. Lily Thapa set up the Womens Human Rights Single Women Group which helped transform society. A widow herself, she has fought for widows' rights in Nepal since 1992 (WHR, 2010, Yadav, 2016).

The Ebola outbreak in 2015 which killed thousands of people is also an example of local communities being suddenly forced to radically change their traditional burial practices as these were spreading the virus; 80% of the Ebola cases in Sierra Leone and 60% in Guinea were spread through such burial rites, (WHO website 2018, Maxmen, 2015 National Geographic).

Changing such traditional cultural practices was a challenge because many West African ethnic groups had detailed rules on the handling of dead bodies, such as touching, washing or kissing a dead body before burial (Cooper, 2014, in Shah, 2015).

Whilst the burial guidelines from the World Health Organisation advised cremating the bodies of Ebola patients to minimize the risk of spreading the infection, this conflicted with the traditional burial rites performed in West Africa.

Healthcare organizations in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea were trained to persuade local communities to abandon their traditional mourning and burial practices, at least until the pandemic was over, by explaining how these practices contributed to spreading the Ebola virus in the community. In some cases, health workers reached a compromise with local communities to allow them partial adherence to the burial traditions (Shah, 2015).

This change in burial rites was pivotal in containing and ending the Ebola outbreak as was enlisting the help of an experienced anthropologist from Cameroon who found a solution for burying bodies which respected the local ceremonial traditions (Maxmen, 2015).

These examples clearly illustrate how adversity such as war and pandemics can play a positive role in transforming traditional practices. Thus, Margaret Owen contends that widows similarly can use the adversity arising from the death of their husband as an impetus for change, both in their own lives and in society. She states that widows now free from conjugal control and facing the need to earn a living, are ideally placed to become agents of change.

16. HUMAN RIGHTS OF CHILD WIDOWS

Child widows are often denied basic human rights. They are often impoverished, homeless, without support or protection, abused, forced to atone for past sins and engage in harmful mourning rituals. Children are exploited by gangs, forced into prostitution and often so overburdened with domestic duties, that their lives resemble modern-day slavery.

Child widows suffer more acutely than older widows as they are immature, underdeveloped, often illiterate as well as socially and financially vulnerable. Moreover, inheritance, land and custody laws do not offer adequate protection, allowing child widows to be cheated out of their rights by in-laws and they may even lose custody of their children. They may be forced into cruel mourning rites such as remaining naked, in seclusion, with their deceased husband's body for many days or forced to have sexual intercourse with a relative or stranger (see Table 1). Widowhood and mourning rituals are both gendered experiences and are never as onerous on a man, should his wife die (Sousa, 2002, Dutt, 2010, Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada, 2000). They also suffer from being stereotyped as promiscuous.

A child widow suffers further discrimination, not only as a female and a widow, but also because of her unclear status between an adult and a child. Regardless of age, once married, she is considered an adult despite being incapable of taking on adult responsibilities (Early Marriage, whose right to choose?, 2001). Thus, the principles enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, such as non-discrimination, children's best interests, right to life, and right to be heard (CRIN website, 2018), are violated in the case of child widows.

An important issue concerning child widows' rights is the conflict between customary and international laws. Under customary laws child widows do not benefit from the protection of international conventions and are neglected and voiceless and thus denied access to any form of justice.

Child widows are inadequately protected under any of the following UN instruments: The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Beijing Platform for Action.

Under CEDAW, child widows are indirectly referred to in:

- Article 5 (a): which attempts to eliminate harmful traditional practices including child marriage and mourning rituals.
- Article 10: which provides the right to education, yet child marriage usually means girls are not enrolled in school or have been forced to drop out.
- Article 12: Women have the right to family planning services, yet they may fear sexual harassment from health workers or being judged by other community members which can be a barrier to access. Sex outside of marriage is still not accepted in some countries.
- Article 14 (1): requires Governments to consider the particular problems faced by rural women and girls (Mgoke-Mhoja, 2006). This will include child widows and child brides. In India 72% of child marriages occur in rural areas and in Nepal early marriage is also common in rural areas where 85% of the country's population lives.
- Article 16, Women have the same rights as their husbands in marriage, childcare and family life. This includes consent to marriage which is important for levirate unions and child marriage where consent may not be given.

Child widows' right to health is endangered when they do not have access to adequate healthcare. For example, pregnancy-related complications can occur as their body is not ready for childbirth (e.g. increased risk of death during childbirth, obstetric fistula, increased risk of sexually transmitted infections such as HIV/AIDS, Nour, 2006). They may also suffer from physical and sexual abuse (e.g. prostitution and trafficking) as well as from the psychological impact of bereavement which can affect their mental health. Widows' right to health and access to family planning services is endangered as they may be reluctant to seek treatment from clinics for fear of being judged by health workers over contraceptives or being sexually harassed by healthcare providers if their status as a widow is known (Surkan *et al.*, 2015). Thus, many widows travel to health centres away from their home where their status as a widow is unknown. Stigma and discrimination can thus form a barrier to widows' right to health in Nepal.

Moreover, child marriage is a human rights violation as it prevents girls from getting an education, enjoying optimal health, forming relationships with peers or choosing their own life partner (Nour, 2006, Bartels *et al.*, 2018). Child widows suffer multiple and intersecting forms of violence such as under-age marriage, forced traditional and levirate marriages, under-age sex and childbirth as well as physical domestic violence. Infringements of these and other rights prevent gender equality and are an obstacle to girls attaining their full potential. Despite this, child widows have rarely been on the UN agenda. Although the global momentum to fight child marriage has gathered pace in recent years, UN Agencies and NGOs alike have rarely acknowledged or addressed the very important link between child widows and child marriage.

Patriarchal structures can also be a major barrier to women's empowerment and independence. For too long girls have been silenced in the name of tradition, raised to remain passive and submissive which is a hindrance to claiming their rights (Magoke-Mhoja, 2006, WHR, 2010).

Addressing child widows' rights will be challenging due to the varied local contexts, as each village or community conforms to different customs and norms consistent with their beliefs and traditions as well as gaining access to child widows themselves. Thus, applying a standardised legal framework to child widows and widows in general is difficult, yet a solution must be found as harmful traditional practices can no longer be hidden under the veil of local traditions and children can no longer be allowed to suffer. As Martha Chen states, "The well-being of widows is not just a question of economic security, but also of dignity, self-respect and participation in society" (Chen, 1997, p315).

17. CONCLUSION

When a woman in a developing country loses her spouse, often her whole world is changed, both economically and socially with the loss of her identity as a wife, affecting her home, family, livelihood, inheritance rights, and sometimes her right to remarry. This suffering and hardship is felt more acutely when the widow is only a child herself who has already experienced a difficult accelerated life journey from being a child, to an adult, to a wife, a mother and a widow. She is often left vulnerable and subject to multiple forms of intersectional discrimination and violence.

With at least 1.36 million child widows, more must be done to prevent the stigma and discrimination faced by child and adult widows alike, which is as crippling as its socio-economic impact. Often accused of witchcraft and blamed for their husband's death, married women view widows as promiscuous and a threat to their marriage and wider society.

India has the highest number of child marriages and child widows. Almost 100 million of India's population are Hindus, many practicing mostly ancient traditions including strict mourning rituals for widows, as well as child marriage. As child widows are a consequence of child marriage, the two issues must be linked and treated together. To date the UN and NGOs have focused on child marriage in isolation and have not made the crucial link between the two, yet it is vital that this link is acknowledged and acted upon. Child marriage is a harmful traditional practice and child widows are a direct result of this practice.

The dire consequences of widowhood on children and their hopeless situation reinforces the importance of addressing the multiple forms of discrimination they face and empowering women and girls, especially in rural areas, to become local agents of change to transform their communities.

To achieve such change, it is of paramount importance to alter deeply engrained social norms and behaviour patterns. National laws must also be implemented and linked to human rights mechanisms with the required political will to enforce laws protecting widows' rights. To date, child widows are not adequately protected neither under CEDAW, the UN CRC nor under the Beijing Platform for Action.

Although activists have called for child widows to be put on the UN Agenda, little has changed in the past two decades. For too long child widows have remained hidden and absent from international statistics. It is vital to gather data, disaggregated by sex, age and marital status so that appropriate policies can be designed to meet the needs of all widows. It must not be forgotten either that many older widows today, were child widows themselves many decades ago, making it vital to consider widows in a life course perspective.

The narrative on widows should also be re-framed to reflect their important and changing role in society as mothers, caregivers, heads of households and independent career women as well as their role during conflict, and not just as recipients of benefits.

This report attempts to shine the spotlight on the youngest and most vulnerable of all widows, child widows, who despite numbering millions, are forgotten, invisible and vulnerable.

18. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Address the intersectional discrimination faced by widows of all ages.
- Recognize that widowhood occurs at all ages, including children and must be viewed through a life course perspective.
- Bring child widows and widows to the top of the UN agenda.
- Consider child marriage and child widows as part of the same problem in peacetime, conflict and humanitarian settings.
- Gather data disaggregated by sex, age and marital status.
- Strengthen inheritance, land and property laws to protect widows.
- Implement national laws to protect the human rights of child widows and strengthen their protection under international instruments.
- Ensure compulsory birth and marriage registrations.
- Empower women and girls to become independent, especially in rural areas through education, vocational training, access to credit, social security and collectives.
- Bring an end to poverty as economic hardship drives child marriage which can lead to child widows.

The stark reality is that unless the issue of child widows and widows in general is addressed and followed by concrete actions, supported by the necessary resources, the Sustainable Development Goals and other global development targets will remain mere aspirations. It is vital that widows' poverty and discrimination be addressed. Over past decades the international community's indifference and inaction has allowed the problem of child widows to continue unnoticed and unchallenged, leaving them forgotten, invisible and vulnerable. UN Agencies, Governments and NGOs are encouraged to unite in the fight to acknowledge and improve the lives of millions of child and adult widows. Nothing is impossible if there is sufficient will and commitment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Action on Child Early and Forced Marriage committee members Jacques Maüel, Ursula Barter-Hemmerich, Jeanne McDaniel, Nicole Bloesch, Andy Medlicott, Nicole Zakher and Livia Paladi for their support and help with the planning, information gathering, writing and editing of this report, and our Sahiyo partner and journalist, Aarefa Johari for advice and proof reading.

I would also like to thank Dr Jung-Sook Kim, President of the International Council of Women for her encouragement and support as well as Margaret Owen, Director WPD and Lois Herman, Founder WUNRN. Thanks also to Caroline Ouaffo Wafang from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva for valuable feedback on the final version.

The author also wishes to thank students Rachel Wibberley and James Davidson for some layout, formatting and editing help from 20 - 23 June 2018.

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Graphic design by **Griff Design**, Switzerland.

Email: actiononchildmarriage@gmail.com | Website: www.actiononchildearlyandforcedmarriage.org

Publication date 9th July 2018. Geneva, Switzerland.



Action on Child
Early and Forced Marriage