

International Widows' Day QSD on 19 June 2019

Introduction

On 19 June 2019, the House of Lords is scheduled to debate a motion moved by Lord Loomba (Crossbench) that asks “Her Majesty’s Government what steps they are taking to empower widows in developing countries and to mark International Widows Day 2019.”. This briefing provides background information on International Widows’ Day and the issues facing widowed women around the world.

International Widows’ Day

International Widows’ Day takes place on 23 June each year. A resolution to mark this day was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2010.¹ The aim of International Widows’ Day is to address the issues faced by widowed women. These include the increased risk of poverty and violence and a lack of access to health care. The UN has stated:

The 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.²

The UN has also noted these issues are more widespread when there is an increase in the number of widows following armed conflict.³

Statistics

Statistics on the total number of widows around the world are compiled by the Loomba Foundation, a campaign organisation created by Lord Loomba. In 2015, the Loomba Foundation reported that there were 258 million widowed women around the world.⁴ Of these, 38 million lived in extreme poverty with their basic needs unmet. It also estimated that 585 million children were dependent on widows. It reported there had been a 9 percent increase globally between 2001 and 2015 in the number of widows.

In 2017, UN Women published a larger estimate of 285 million widowed women globally. Of these, it stated 115 million lived “in deep poverty, in fragile conditions and vulnerable to abuse”.⁵ In 2018, it reported 9.6 percent of widows in developing countries lived in extreme poverty.⁶ This is comparable to the figure for married women in poverty (9.5 percent). However, UN Women also noted widowhood seemed to be connected to higher poverty rates for women up to age 49.⁷ It stated that in certain countries, for example Madagascar, Mali, Uganda and Zimbabwe, some of the poorest households were those headed by widows.

Issues Facing Widows

UN Women summarises the issues facing widowed women around the world as follows:

- Widowhood can lead to a loss of home and property due to a lack of inheritance rights.
- Widows can be exposed to sexual violence, stigma, and isolation from the community.
- Widows can also be excluded from the use of communal assets.⁸

UN Women argued that, as a result, widowed women are more likely to live in poverty.

Inequality in access to resources and opportunities inevitably means their well-being outcomes will be drastically different not only from those of widowed men but also from other women not subjected to the distinct form of isolation and stigma that comes from the combination of being both a woman and a widow.⁹

Widows in many countries lack legal rights. The World Bank has stated nearly 40 percent of countries around the world limit women's property rights.¹⁰ Of 187 countries surveyed, 40 were found not to grant equal rights to male and female spouses to inherit assets. For example, in a 2016 study, researchers found widows in Nepal faced several barriers to exercising their property rights. These were identified primarily as a dominant patriarchal society, family traditions and bureaucratic restrictions.¹¹

In addition to a lack of legal rights, a number of cultural practices that are harmful to widows have been identified. In 2018, the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Helpdesk, an agency funded by the Department for International Development (DfID), produced review of the evidence available on these harmful cultural practices.¹² It identified a number of such practices, such as widows being forced to marry surviving members of their spouse's family, being raped, and being accused of witchcraft. However, the VAWG Helpdesk noted that, while there was small-scale qualitative research available on these practices, there was limited data on their prevalence.

Of these practices, the VAWG Helpdesk found the strongest evidence available was regarding the theft of widows' property also known as 'property grabbing'.¹³ It noted a study of 15 sub-Saharan African countries which found less than half of widowed women aged under 50 reported inheriting any assets. A recent study by Roxana Willis, junior research fellow at University College Oxford, has considered the impact of tradition and custom on the dispossession of widows' property in Cameroon.¹⁴ The study concluded that dispossession did not seem to form part of customary practices. However, in some cases customary exceptions were being used to prevent widows from inheriting. These exceptions included widows being accused of killing their husbands or misbehaving. These, combined with a decline in customary protections for women and an increased scarcity of resources, resulted in widows being more vulnerable to dispossession.

A further issue identified by the UN is the problem faced by widows in areas of conflict. The VAWG Helpdesk give the example of Afghanistan, where there are estimated to be over half a million widows, including war widows.¹⁵ According to evidence from the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, one in four of the 60 widows it interviewed had experienced violence after the death of their husband.¹⁶ Widows who had become ostracised from their communities had built their own settlement 15 kilometres southeast of Kabul, referred to as 'Zanabad' or City of Women. According to news agency Agence France-Presse (AFP), Zanabad, established in the 1990s, has been home to "as many as

500 widows”, including widowed mothers.¹⁷

Previous Debates

Lord Loomba tabled a similar debate in the House of Lords last year.¹⁸ During the debate on 28 June 2018, Lord Loomba said there had been little awareness of the issues facing widows prior to the UN’s adoption of International Widows’ Day.¹⁹ However, while he said awareness had increased, there remained a lack of reliable information on widows in many countries. He argued this underlined the low value placed on issues relating to widows and their children. He called on the Government to help monitor their treatment. The call for better information on widows around the world was echoed by other Members including Lord McConnell of Glenscorrodale (Labour) and Baroness Burt of Solihull (Liberal Democrat).²⁰

Responding for the Government, the International Development Minister, Lord Bates, acknowledged that widowed women were “too often invisible”.²¹ He also said they could be particularly vulnerable to stigmatisation and becoming marginalised. He stated the Government was:

[...] committed to tackling the harmful social mores and deep-rooted gender inequality that is at the heart of much of this cruelty and hardship. Achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls is the right thing to do and is in our national interest.²²

He said the UK was working with international organisations, such as the World Bank, to improve the statistical information available on widows. The Government was providing support to women-led civil society organisations in developing countries, he argued. He also said the UK had provided humanitarian assistance to 9.8 million women and girls between 2015 and 2017.

Further Information

- World Bank, [‘Invisible and Excluded: The Fate of Widows and Divorcees in Africa’](#), 20 January 2018
- Human Rights Watch, [‘Widows, Land and Power’](#), 19 March 2018
- Loomba Foundation, [‘The Global Widows Report 2015: A Global Overview of Deprivation Faced by Widows and Their Children’](#), March 2015
- Loomba Foundation, [‘1997–2017: Twenty Successful Years Fighting Injustice Against Widows’](#), 2017
- House of Lords Library, [‘Fragile States: Effects of Conflict’](#), 9 September 2016

- ¹ United Nations, '[International Widows' Day: 23 June](#)', accessed 6 June 2019.
- ² *ibid.*
- ³ *ibid.*
- ⁴ Loomba Foundation, [The Global Widows Report 2015: A Global Overview of Deprivation Faced by Widows and Their Children](#), March 2015, p 194.
- ⁵ United Nations Women, '[Day 8: Ending Violence Against Widows](#)', 2 December 2017.
- ⁶ United Nations Women, [Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), 2018, p 137, Figure 4.2: 'Extreme Poverty Rates Among Women and Men (Aged 15+), by Marital Status, 2009–13'.
- ⁷ United Nations Women and World Bank, [Gender Differences in Poverty and Household Composition Through The Life Cycle](#), 2018, p 5.
- ⁸ United Nations Women, [Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), 2018, p 135.
- ⁹ *ibid.*
- ¹⁰ World Bank, '[Women, Business and the Law: Managing Assets](#)', accessed 10 June 2019.
- ¹¹ Pamela G Poon et al, '[Nepali Widows' Access to Legal Entitlements: A Human Rights Issue](#)', *Human Rights Quarterly*, May 2016, vol 38 no 2, pp 391–410.
- ¹² Violence Against Women and Girls Helpdesk, '[Harmful Cultural Practices Towards Widows](#)', 31 August 2018.
- ¹³ *ibid.*, p 3.
- ¹⁴ Roxana Willis, '[A Comparative Analysis of Widow Dispossession in Francophone and Anglophone Cameroon](#)', *Journal of African Law* (£), February 2018, vol 62 no 1, pp 147–74.
- ¹⁵ Violence Against Women and Girls Helpdesk, '[Harmful Cultural Practices Towards Widows](#)', 31 August 2018, p 7.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Agence France-Presse, '[Afghanistan's 'Hill of Widows' Live in A World Apart](#)', 23 June 2017.
- ¹⁸ [HL Hansard, 28 June 2018, cols 60–74GC.](#)
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*, col 61GC.
- ²⁰ *ibid.*, cols 64–5 and 69–70GC.
- ²¹ *ibid.*, col 72GC.
- ²² *ibid.*

House of Lords Library briefings are compiled for the benefit of Members of the House of Lords and their personal staff, to provide impartial, politically balanced briefing on subjects likely to be of interest to Members of the Lords. Authors are available to discuss the contents of the briefings with the Members and their staff but cannot advise members of the general public.

Any comments on briefings should be sent to the Head of Research Services, House of Lords Library, London SW1A 0PW or emailed to purvism@parliament.uk.