



Enabling Widows to have a Brighter and Fairer Future

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Vrindavan's widows - even their shadows are considered a bad omen

Following on from our article in the June 2017 edition of the WRI Newsletter, here is a more in-depth description of the plight of widows in Vrindavan.

Full reports are available at:

<https://yourstory.com/2017/06/widows-vrindavan/>

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/forgotten-widows-of-vrindavan/article19574277.ece>

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/restore-dignity-to-widows-sc/article19497703.ece>

<https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/columns/c-p-chandrasekhar/what-it-means-to-be-a-widow-in-india-today/article9895691.ece>

Home to over 20,000 widows who have either been cast

aside by their families or are seeking sanctuary, the holy city of **Vrindavan** in Uttar Pradesh, northern India is commonly known as 'The City of Widows'. The local government-run shelters accommodate only 515 widows, leaving thousands out on the streets.

With shorn hair and wearing the distinctive white clothing, widows here live in abject poverty and earn a few rupees a day by singing *bhajans* (devotional songs) in segregated areas of temples.



Image: Shutterstock

These women are ostracised by societal stigmas: even their shadows are considered a bad omen. While a man is permitted to remarry after the death of his wife, a woman isn't. Instead, they are confined to closed rooms, hidden away from society.



Image: Shutterstock

They are subject to patriarchal customs, religious laws and widespread discrimination in inheritance rights.

Many suffer abuse and exploitation at the hands of family members, often in the context of property disputes.

Remarriage of widows is much less common than among male widowers, and often explicitly or implicitly forbidden by local communities and prevalent cultural norms. Widows are often perceived as “unlucky” and subject to various kinds of discrimination and even ostracism.

Issues about the division of the marital property and the rights of the widowed over such property, relative to the rights of children, are also significant. In many instances, women are denied automatic rights over the property of the dead spouse, and are therefore forced to reply upon the largesse of the beneficiary children. In poorer families they are also more prone to being abandoned or forced to live in *ashrams* (spiritual hermitages) and similar refuges. Among the extremely destitute in India, widows are disproportionately represented.

India has a particularly high proportion of widows. A global report by charity [The Loomba Foundation](#) estimates that there are over 46 million widows in India, making up more than 9% of the population. That is around the same as the entire population of South Africa or Tanzania.

In 2012, the Supreme Court of India questioned the work of agencies and the government for not doing enough to reduce the suffering and pain of the widows of Vrindavan.

Like other local and international organisations [Sulabh International](#), one of India’s largest NGOs, has been working to help these widows since this Court order. Apart from providing comforts such as refrigerators and TV sets, the organisation helps rehabilitate the women by providing vocational training such as sewing.

Bindeshwar Pathak, founder of the organisation, commented that her charity originally provided a stipend of 1,000 rupees but has since increased the amount to

2,000. She describes the continuing abuse of widows after their death, when instead of cremation their bodies are “chopped up, put in a gunny bag and thrown into the Yamuna [river].”

Part of the order by the Supreme Court was to order the establishment of a special committee to identify the widows in Vrindavan and also to collect complete data on their families. This process is still ongoing.

A detailed Agreed Action Plan formulated by the Ministry and the National Commission for Women was submitted before the court as a follow-up in 2017.

This plan detailed the need for improvement of infrastructure, the creation of a database of widows compiled from their Aadhaar ID cards and counselling the families to take these women back home. According to the order, the women should be entitled to free legal and medical aid along with basic living conditions.

Life for the widows has improved since the Supreme Court intervention, but a lot still needs to be done.



Image: Shutterstock

One problem these women face concerns the monthly allowance they receive in their bank account. Since most of them are old and frail, they are unable to physically go to a bank each month to withdraw their money. Also, many are uneducated and find it difficult to operate their account.

Most of the women who come to this part of Hindi-speaking Uttar Pradesh are either from West Bengal or Odisha, where the language is Bengali.



Image: Shutterstock

Their day starts at 4 a.m., after which they get ready to go to the temples. Prayers end by 10 a.m. and the women return to the *ashrams*. After a few hours of rest, they start preparing lunch, and later spend some personal time either watching TV or talking to each other. Prayers and sleep follow.

The Supreme Court ruled that dignity be restored to widows following a claim filed almost 10 years ago by the Environment and Consumer Protection Foundation highlighting the plight of widows of Vrindavan. The Uttar Pradesh government must take *“all steps to rehabilitate the widows of Vrindavan so as to bring them to a stage where they can live with dignity.”*

The Supreme Court condemned the modern-day stigma against widows, while

setting up a committee of experts to study the reports collected by the Court during the past decade and have developed a common working plan to rehabilitate the widows of Vrindavan and other *ashrams* by 30 November 2017.

The Court also highlighted several expert reports before it which recommend the need to encourage widows to remarry.

“It is a pity that these widows have been so unfortunately dealt with, as if they have ceased to be entitled to live a life of dignity and as if they are not entitled to the protection of Article 21 [right to a dignified life] of the Constitution,” the Court observed.

The committee set up by the Court consists of Suneeta Dhar of NGO [Jagori](#), Meera Khanna of [Guild For Service](#), Advocate Abha Singhal Joshi, representatives from [HelpAgeIndia](#) and [Sulabh International](#) and Aparajita Singh, a Supreme Court lawyer.

They are to consider recommendations for widows such as legal aid, medical insurance, potential employment in the care and hospitality sector, setting up old age homes and linking widow pension schemes to give them access to medical facilities.

Economically, public policy has largely ignored the specific problems of widows in India. And given their numbers, this exclusion could prove costly for society in general.

In all societies, the loss of the marital partner through death

necessarily involves several changes in the financial arrangements and subsequent economic management, especially if the dead spouse was the primary earner in the family.

In general, women tend to be worse affected, largely because of the gender construction of Indian society where men are more likely to hold assets and engage in paid work.

The well-known gender gaps in occupation and pay compound the problem, as do patriarchal institutions, patrilineal inheritance and

patrilocal residence, which all make their situation that much more difficult than for widowed men.

Given the higher life expectancy of women, it is unsurprising there are more widows than widowers. But widows are disproportionately represented among the elder population also because more widowers tend to remarry.

About Widows Rights International

Widows' Rights International supports organisations in sub-Saharan Africa working for social justice and human rights for widows.

WRI promotes: right to keep their home and property, right to inheritance, land ownership and possession, right to keep their children, right to not be forcibly married to deceased husband's kin, and the right to work outside the home.

WRI works: to promote the recognition of widows' specific vulnerability, to combat negative social attitudes which lead to isolation, exploitation and poverty, to bring these practices to an end.

WRI mobilises action through:

International organisations, national governments, legal and other civil society organisations.



@WidowsRI



@Widows.Rights.International

Ideas? Suggestions? Comments? Contributions?

If you have comments, suggestions, interesting stories, ideas, or concerns please e-mail us at:

administrator@widowsrights.org

WRI's goals

Our goals are to:

- ◆ Support the international campaign to end harmful cultural practices which ignore the human rights of widows and lead to their dire poverty and social exclusion.
- ◆ Raise awareness and understanding of the discrimination and violence encountered by widows in many countries.
- ◆ Continue to advocate for widows' rights to be integrated into the human rights agendas of national and international agencies.
- ◆ Promote the emergence of a vibrant and informed network of community based groups, widows' groups, NGOs, lawyers and human rights activists working on widowhood issues.

HOW YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

There are three pathways for you to make a difference.

1. Become a member of the WRI network.

If you belong to a women's group or are a human rights activist, legal professional, journalist, academic or are working for a NGO and are interested in challenging traditional harmful practices and abuse of widows, or providing services for widows and their children, please join our network.

2. Send us information about widows challenging mistreatment, changes in the law or cases of widows affected by harmful cultural or traditional practices.

3. Make a donation. Please click [here](#).



IMPORTANCE OF THE MEDIA ESPECIALLY TO RURAL WIDOWS: TO ENSURE LAST WOMAN FIRST

15 March 2018 from 12.30 – 2.00

Vartan Hall, The Armenian Convention Center, 630 2nd Ave

Chair WRI - **Zarin Hainsworth OBE**

Hendrika Okondo - (WREPA), Rozaria Memorial Trust

Georgia Ford - NAWO YWA

Alais Sima - Coordinator, Naserian

Dianah Kamande - Director Come together Widows and orphans Organization

Rugya Muttawa – Founder Hope Libya

Sienna Ambler - NAWO YWA

Marthe Vira - National MU Community Development Coordinator for DR Congo

Widows are among the most disadvantaged in the world. ICT including apps and mobile phone technology means that they have access to information about their rights that was hitherto denied them. They have increased access to funding using mobile phone financial options.

This interactive event will draw on experts and the voice of young women together with the expertise in the room, to highlight best practice and ensure that widows are not left behind. It will also highlight the SDGs that relate significantly to enhancing the life of widows across the globe.

Speakers will cover:

Widow land rights in Busia Kenya, implementing SDGs to assist rural widows, using all forms of media, training in ICT, mobile phone technology, war widows in DR Congo.



“Importance of the media especially to rural widows: to ensure last woman first”

Thursday 15 March 2018

12.30 – 2.00

Vartan Hall, The Armenian Convention Center, 630 2nd Ave

12.30 – 12.35	Welcome and introductions: Chair WRI Zarin Hainsworth, OBE
12.35 – 12.40	“Using Media to promote Widow Land rights in Busia Kenya “ Hendrika Okondo - (WREPA), Rozaria Memorial Trust
12.40 – 12.45	“Implementing SDG 5, 9 & 16 assist rural widows” Georgia Ford, NAWO YWA
12.45 – 12.50	“How Naserian is using all forms of media” Alais Sima, Coordinator, Naserian
12.50- 12.55	“Using all forms of media to ensure no one is left behind” Dianah Kamande Director Come together Widows And orphans Organization
12.55 – 1.05	Discussion amongst participants
1.05 – 1.10	“Training in ICT for widows” Rugya Muttawa – Founder Hope Libya
1.10 – 1.15	“Mobile phone technology that supports rural widows” Sienna Ambler NAWO YWA
1.15 – 1.20	"War widows in DR Congo, use of media" Marthe Vira, National MU Community Development Coordinator for DR Congo
1.20 – 1.35	Discussion amongst participants
1.35 – 1.55	Q&A
1.55 – 2.00	Closing comments
2.00	Photos