



Widows' Rights International

Registered charity number:1069142

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## Newsletter

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# EDITORIAL

**The coming year will be one of the most challenging in WRI's existence. Since we were last in touch, we have faced up to the need to reassess our priorities and examine how we can relaunch ourselves as one of the leading organizations dealing exclusively with issues affecting the human rights of widows and their children.**

**In order to prepare ourselves to meet this challenge we have undergone an exercise to help us identify our priorities. We plan to change WRI from a trustee-led to a staff-led organisation. We have had to recognise that our cause still has limited appeal to most traditional funders and that we will have to be more alert to new funding opportunities.**

**We have also moved office and the process of getting settled into new premises has taken up a great deal of our time. We hope to be able to provide more effective help for our partners. We recognise that there is still a great need for advocacy at national and international meetings when issues relating to the status of women are discussed.**

**We acknowledge that we have been limited in our outreach activities, because widows and organisations working with them seek us out with evidence of the cruel and inhuman treatment meted out in many countries. We know that there is still a great deal of sensitive work to be done to change attitudes towards widows, as so much of their treatment is based on the culture of their societies. We understand that our work must proceed only in tandem with local partners, many of whom rely entirely on us for much of their funding.**

**This means that in the coming year we will be looking for wider financial support. We will try to build on the contacts which we have with a number of important and generous funders, but we hope that individuals and small groups who are touched by the harrowing tales we publicise in this newsletter.**

**This is therefore an urgent appeal for financial support. You can do this by filling out the gift-aid form included in this newsletter. Please remember a little will go a long way to ease the suffering of countless widows and their children.**

**Patsy Robertson  
Chair**

**Widows Rights International (WRI), Registered Charity no 1069142**

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# A B O U T     W R I

## **Widows' Rights International supports organisations in South and West Asia and Africa working for social justice and human rights for widows including:**

- Right to keep their home and property
- Right to inheritance and land ownership and possession
- Right to keep their children
- Right not to be forcibly married to the dead husband's kin
- Right to work outside the home

Traditional customs in many developing countries, especially in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa – which can deprive a widow of home and livelihood or subject her to social ostracism - lead to dire poverty for widows and their children.

Even when modern laws exist to prevent these abuses, ignorance of the law, or cultural habits, impede access.

### **Widows are young as well as old, because of:**

- \*Child marriage
- \*HIV/Aids
- \*Civil strife

### **WRI works:**

- \* to promote the recognition of widows' special vulnerability
- \* to combat negative social attitudes which lead to their isolation, exploitation and poverty
- \* to bring these practices to an end:

### **WRI mobilises action by:**

- \*International organisations
- \*National governments
- \*Legal and other civil society organisations

### **WRI offers resources for:**

- Capacity building and networking
- Advice and information for national groups, especially through our website
- Research into the status and condition of widows and their children
- Legal action for widows' rights
- Assistance to raise international awareness of degrading practices
- Advocating creation of international instruments protecting widows' rights
- Supporting regional meetings to promote social justice for widows

### **Financial assistance may be available for:**

- \*pioneering activities by and for widows which provide examples of best practice
- \*activities designed to establish legal precedents; heighten public awareness; repeal of laws inimical to widows
- \*action to influence international agencies to condemn practices which deny widows their rights
- \*action to train widows and legal personnel in rights awareness

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# NEWS FROM AFRICA

**This tale of the treatment of a widow in Uganda was submitted by WOMEN OF PURPOSE (WOP) our partner in Uganda**

## **ROSA'S STORY**

Rosa's husband was murdered in 1989 during an uprising in Eastern Uganda. An illiterate housewife with no independent source of livelihood, she was left with four small children to look after. Soon after the funeral, rumours started circulating around the village that she had connived with the killers in order to take over her husband's property. She was in shock, heartbroken at losing her husband and fearful of the future.

The rumour spread like wild fire, and soon, Rosa found herself not only having to cope with widowhood but also having to deal with the stigma and isolation that was caused by this malicious rumour. Even the people she had considered her close friends begun to shun her and distance themselves from her. She was branded a "witch and harlot."

While still contemplating her next move, the parochial chauvinistic tendencies of the culture were set in motion. Her husband's relatives informed her that although she had killed their son, they would not let her go away with his property. She had to choose one of the relatives to "inherit her."

*She said that "my husband had only one brother and his wife warned me that if I chose him to be the heir, that would mark the end of my life. I therefore picked on one of my late husband's cousins – not that I loved him but because I wanted to stay and look after my children. If I had any choice in the matter, I would have preferred to bring up my children as a single mother since my husband had left a big portion of land that could ensure our survival."*

So in the quest to ensure the safe upbringing of her children, Rosa chose to be inherited by a relative so that she could stay a member of the family. However, that was not the end of the story, as she explains *"this man also had his own wife. She called me names and threatened to kill me. I had no alternative but to bear all these problems for the sake of my children."*

Worse still, upon inheriting her, her "successor husband" took over her late husband's estate and she had to share the land with the other wife. This only increased the tension and conflict in the home.

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**Continued ...**

Rosa soon became pregnant. Despite the added responsibilities of another child she was not receiving any financial assistance from this "new husband" except for the land that she was allocated to cultivate.

Then after about three years of toiling in this new situation, the past came back to haunt her. One day, her late husband's brother came back from the city, where he was employed as a teacher, and ordered Rosa to pack all her belongings and vacate their home. He claimed that he had confirmed that she was the perpetrator of her husband's death. It was already night, so he threatened to kill her if he found her still present in the morning.

*She said: "I ran to the Clan head, who came and calmed him down and said we would settle the matter in the morning. The next morning, I was shocked to have all my property thrown out of the house and I was told to go back to my parents. The only reason I was given was that they had confirmed that I was a witch. I was only saved by my father-in-law who said that he still needed me around so that I look after him because he was ill."*

Rosa's father in law remained bed-ridden for a year. When he died, her brother in law renewed her eviction immediately after his funeral. She laments that:

*"He sent me away saying I was no longer needed in their home. I was in a dilemma and in the midst of all this my "new husband" was unable to defend me. I had to leave the home and live as a beggar. For over six years, I lived as a pauper and survived on hand outs from sympathizers. Then I was told by one of the women in the village that an organization called Woman of Purpose could help me solve my long lasting problems with my in-laws. I went to the Woman of Purpose office in Agule and they were able to organize a dialogue with my in-laws."*

It was not easy to settle the long standing conflicts and accusations. But by and by, Rosa was able to recover part of what she had lost. Although the clan did not restore to her all that belonged to her, at least she was able to get some land to support her and her family. It may not have been total justice, but at least the voice of justice was heard and that in future, justice will triumph.

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## Widows and Orphans Ministry (WOM), Ghana

### WHAT WIDOWS GO THROUGH IN THE NAME OF CULTURE

A widow, whose name has been withheld for security reasons, and will be called Ayi for this article, got married to her husband, a peasant farmer, in her village. She was very happy with her husband who had paid the customary full dowry for her with three cows. After nine years of marriage, Ayi's husband died, leaving her with three children, the youngest one being less than two years and the eldest being barely nine years old.

After the funeral, Ayi was asked to choose a husband from the family, as custom demanded that she should continue delivering children for her dead husband. Since the husband's only full brother was not present, she chose a relative. She gave birth to another child with this man, her fourth child. She supported herself and her children by weaving baskets. She was fortunate to be among a group of young widows selected to be retrained to weave modern baskets to meet the current market. These baskets are made using less straw but are exported at better prices.

While Ayi was getting settled into her new situation, her late husband's brother who had migrated to the south, came home. He was not happy that she had chosen a distant relative to marry instead of him. He asked Ayi to leave her new husband and to marry him because he was the closest relative of her first husband and was therefore more entitled to marry her. Ayi was very unhappy with this situation because she had already given birth to a child with her new husband.

She ran to her father's house for help, but he commanded her to go back home, leave the father of her fourth child and marry the brother who had the authority to demand back the dowry paid to her father. To prevent the disgrace of her father, who could not get the cows to pay back, Ayi returned home and married the brother of her late husband.

Ayi had a fifth child but later this new husband man decided to marry another woman. He began to persecute her. **Ayi was labelled a witch and the man was warned not to touch his new wife because Ayi had performed witchcraft on his brother and killed him.** Ayi was relieved when the couple decided to migrate to the South again.

Unfortunately, after six months, the husband came back with his wife who was ill. Ayi was accused as being the cause of the wife's illness and when she died, was denounced as having killed her. Ayi cannot count the number of beatings she went through, or the number of insults she endured while being called a murderer.

Ayi reported the situation to the Widows and Orphans Ministry when she could no longer stand the pain. The day she came and reported this story, she asked; "please come and deliver me because any time I leave the house, I am happy but when I am entering the house my heart beats faster and faster and I suffer from palpitations." After mediation by officials, AYI was advised to move to her father's house with her five children to ensure their peace and security.

Today, Ayi and her five children have been living in her father's house for three years. She is weaving baskets and depends on the revenue from this to support her family. None of her five children are in school because the profit she makes from her baskets is not enough. They live a hand to mouth existence. However, for Ayi it is better to stay in her father's house with her children than to stay in her late husband's house where she could have lost her life by now.

The custom in this area of Ghana demands that a widow must choose someone from her late husband's family to continue delivering children for the dead man. All of the five children bear his name. Even though the last two children have different biological fathers who are alive and well, they cannot claim the children and the children cannot use their names because they are not the father of those children according to custom. The fate of these children rests on their mother, and her story emphasises the need to empower women economically so that they can support themselves and their children.

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# NEWS FROM ASIA

## ANCIENT PRACTICE OF BURNING WIDOWS DIVIDES INDIA

OTTAWA CITIZEN

Posted by Joanne Payton on Monday, December 11, 2006

BANIYANI, India -- It's an unused cornfield at the edge of an isolated village, an empty plot of earth that the police flattened with a backhoe and hosed down with a water tanker.

But villagers take off their shoes when they step onto the field. They do it as a sign of respect for what happened there a couple of months ago, and to honour the woman they say became a goddess that afternoon when she chose to be burned alive.

"It has become a holy place, and people want to worship there," said Daya Ram, an aged man who looks battered by decades of labour. "The police won't let them."

That, authorities say, is no surprise. They see nothing holy about what happened in Baniyani.

"It's murder," said Chanchal Shekhar, the region's top police official. "It's blatantly a murder."

The reality is something more complicated, a tangle of traditions, laws and beliefs where clear explanations are anything but blatant. Because more than 175 years after India's former colonial rulers outlawed sati, an ancient Hindu practice whereby a widow burns herself alive on her husband's funeral pyre, it remains powerfully resonant in pockets of rural India — and a profound embarrassment to the country's increasingly urbanized elite.

India remains, in many ways two countries — a place that is urban and rural, modern and preindustrial, educated and illiterate. And sati is a reflection of how vast that divide can be.

While sati cases remain rare today, and India normally only has one every year or so, recent months have seen a surge: At least three widows have died on their husband's pyres since August, and another was stopped from burning herself to death when villagers intervened.

Experts can find no explanation for the increase. It's possible that media reports and word-of-mouth lead to a copycat effect.

But across rural India, it's easy to find people who revere sati as the ultimate demonstration of womanly honour, devotion and piety. Thousands of sati temples have been erected over the centuries, many carefully preserved and still in daily use.

"India's modernization has not really reached out to our far-and-beyond villages. It's very urban, it's very metropolitan, it's very middle class," said Ranjana Kumari, a prominent women's rights activist in New Delhi, the capital, some 400 miles north of here. "We are many cultural nations within one nation."

If this nation of more than a billion people appears increasingly modern, a country of software developers and outsourcing firms, the reality is different for most people. More than two-thirds of Indians still live in villages such as Baniyani, and most depend on agriculture. The country seems to thrive on contradictions: India produces well over 300,000 engineers a year, but 700 million Indians lack access to toilets; top Indian universities are among the world's most competitive, but nearly 40 percent of adults are illiterate; India now has Ferrari dealerships, but only six percent of rural homes have telephones.

... / ...

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*Continued ...*

Women's issues are a big concern. Thousands of young brides are believed to be killed annually in dowry disputes, and statistics indicate that in a society that prefers to have boys, the aborting of female fetuses has left the country with 10 million "missing" girls. It's not all about education and modernization: Some of the country's wealthiest communities have the biggest imbalances.

But to modern India, sati is a reminder of what it is trying to leave behind, and it reacted with scorn and shame to what happened in Baniyani. "Barbaric," one news report called it. "Medieval," said another. Politicians hailed the police for arresting 13 villagers, including the four sons of Kariya Bai, the woman who died. For weeks afterward, a police detachment stayed in the village to ensure the cremation site was not turned into a shrine. In India, even glorifying sati is illegal.

In Baniyani, though, tales of sati have been passed down for generations, and the story of what happened here is told with reverence.

"I've heard that police say it was a murder, but that's not true," said Ram Bali, a 51-year-old farmer walking into the village late one afternoon, exhausted from a day hacking needle-filled brush from nearby fields. "Kariya Bai has become a saint."

This much, at least, most everyone agrees on: A frail woman about 95 years old, Bai lived with her husband and sons in a mud-walled house barely 15 feet wide. In mid-September, Bai's husband died after a long illness.

He had asked to be cremated on his own land. So his sons built a pyre of dried cow dung in the cornfield, and set his body on top of it.

That's where the disagreement starts.

Bai, her neighbours say, was a quiet, uneducated woman who had given birth to five sons, suffered through the death of one, and watched the others grow to be labourers or small-time farmers. For years, she had talked about how she did not expect to live long past her ailing husband.

Still, they say, they were stunned when she announced after his death that she would commit sati.

No one in Baniyani will admit to having joined what quickly became a parade to the funeral pyre, or to having seen Bai burn. They're too afraid of the police. But many say they listened to the crowds, and heard stories afterward from neighbours who watched.

"The minute she said she wanted to be a sati, everyone came from here and nearby villages," said Ram, the elderly villager. "There must have been at least 200 people, maybe 300."

Chanting filled the village's narrow dirt roads: "Sati mata ki jai!" — "Glory to mother sati!"

Then Bai climbed onto the funeral pyre, took her husband's head in her lap, and went — painlessly, they insist — to her death. To some villagers, the act made her a saint, to others a goddess. Most everyone here worshipped what she had done.

"India has changed, and people should not do sati now," said Bali. "But if you do commit sati, you have courage ... You have gone from a normal person to superhuman." ... / ...

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*Continued ...*

"Before the police came, everyone in the village walked around the ashes of the fire" praying to Bai, he continued. "Of course I took my turn." But three hours away in Chhatarpur, the nearest large town, the police commander sits in his brightly lit office and dismisses talk of sainthood.

Shekhar is unsure exactly what happened, but knows a crime took place. He doubts Bai had the strength to climb on the pyre herself, but also doubts she was physically forced, as has happened in some other cases. He adds, though, that the villagers could have easily stopped Bai, and almost certainly goaded her on.

"The stories of the glorification of sati already exist in these villages. It only takes something to encourage it," he said. Widow burning is believed to have taken hold in India around the fifth century, eventually centering on the Rajputs, a high-caste warrior community tied to many north Indian noble families. Bai, like most other women who have died in recent sati cases, was a Rajput.

Sati's origins remain under debate. It may have been how women showed loyalty to dead husbands, or to keep the wives of defeated kings from being raped. It may have been how a man took what he owned, including his wife, into the next life.

Certainly, though, it spared women one of the harshest traditions in ancient Hindu culture: the scorning of widows. Even today in parts of rural India, some high-caste widows remain bound by practices that leave them deprived of any inheritance and forced into destitution.

For India's modern elite, such beliefs mean there is no real choice in sati, even if a woman goes willingly onto a funeral pyre.

"It's absolute rubbish, these people who say it is voluntary," said Kumari, the rights activist. "It's always a question of family, of socialization and economic circumstances."

But go to a place like Rampur, a village a few miles from Baniyani on twisting dirt roads, and they speak of the deaths of widows with an often unsettling joyousness. They had a sati case there about 60 years ago, and a temple, set on a shady hill outside the village, marks the spot where the woman died. Inside the small temple, a carefully painted statue shows a woman holding the body of her husband.

"People from far and wide still come to pray at our temple," said Bimla Shukla, a 40-year-old woman. She smiles broadly when she talks about the woman who was burned alive, and the miracles that her death still brings. "Any wish you make there comes true."

In another village a couple of hours away, a group of young men spent a recent evening smoking and talking on the steps of a small sati temple. It had been covered in blue graffiti — the announcement of a polio inoculation drive, a political slogan — and then partially whitewashed over. They barely paid the temple any attention. It is part of the background of their lives.

But ask, and its importance is clear.

"The police think it's stupid. They don't believe in sati," said Pradeep Kumar Gupta, 22, a sometime guide at an ancient Hindu complex popular with tourists.

But he believes. He hopes that one day, after he marries, his wife will follow him into death. "If she loves me, if she really loves me, then she will die with me. That's the truth," he said. "But there's only one person in a million who can love like that."

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## IRAQ: WIDOWS BECOME THE SILENT TRAGEDY

<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp>  
Dahr Jamail and Ali Al-Fadhily

### **BAGHDAD, Dec. 7 (IPS) - Hundreds of thousands of widows are becoming the silent tragedy of a country sliding deeper into chaos by the day.**

Widows are the flip side of violence that has meant more than a million men dead, detained or disabled, Iraqi NGOs estimate. These men's wives or mothers now carry the burden of running the families.

"The total figure of men who have been killed, disabled or detained for long periods of time adds up to more than one and a half million," Khalid Hameed, chief of the Iraqi al-Raya human rights organisation told IPS. "The average number of Iraqi family members is seven, so about ten million Iraqis are facing the worst living circumstances."

In these circumstances, he said, women have had to "search for ways to survive and support their families at a time when not much help comes from the international community."

Most international NGOs left the country by last year apparently on the advice of governments of their countries pointing to growing violence and dangers to NGO members.

"International NGOs were conducting support projects for Iraqi women before they suddenly quit and left the country in a rush in October 2005," Faris Daghistani, who was project manager at the Baghdad mission for the Italian humanitarian aid organisation in Iraq INTERSOS told IPS.

"There was a wide focus on working women and how to support them by training and providing them with necessary tools to raise income on their own," he said. "It is a pity that most of our productive projects have stopped, and we had to leave women to face their fate on their own."

The violence since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 is not the first to have taken its toll. Hundreds of thousands of men were killed, taken prisoner or disabled during the 1980-1988 war between Iran and Iraq.

"We have never lived our lives as human beings should live," 42-year-old Dr Shatha Ahmed told IPS at her home in Baghdad. "The Iraq-Iran war took our fathers, and now the Bush war is taking our husbands and sons."

Women now face a long struggle surviving and bringing up families on their own, she said. "We could not even dream of developing our own skills."

Dr. Shatha's husband, also a doctor, was killed by Muqtada al-Sadr's Mehdi Army in September this year when he was leaving the Ministry of Health offices in Baghdad. She now has to support her family, and her husband's parents as well.

Some help is on offer to widows through groups such as the Iraqi Red Crescent, the Islamic Party, the Muslim Scholars Association and non-governmental organisations. But this support is not well organised, and is insufficient to help the growing number of widows.

The Social Affairs Office of the government has started paying the equivalent of about 100 dollars monthly to widows. But this payment cannot support whole families, given particularly the shooting inflation.

And the payment is not easy to get. "I had to pay a lot of money as bribes to government officials in order to get the monthly support payment, and that is not enough to support my big family," 47-year-old widow Haja Saadiya Hussein from Baghdad told IPS.

"Americans killed my husband last year near a checkpoint, and now I have to work as a servant in government officials' houses to earn a living for my six children. I have stopped them going to school, to cut my expenses."

Some widows have attempted to remarry in order to find support. Some second husbands, who are usually older, offer to take care of their new sons for religious reasons.

"There can be no compensation for losing a husband," a spokesperson from the Iraqi Red Crescent's social support department told IPS. "The world is responsible for these women who lost their spouses in the name of the international community." (END/2006)

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# I N B R I E F

**1. Nepal:** A message from WHR (Women for Human Rights), Nepal Group of Widows, regarding the Interim Constitution 2006 draft by the 8 party alliance

`The Interim Constitution 2006, Part 4, Article 35, clause 9 has acknowledged "single women" under state directive principles and policies. Under this clause the state shall work towards special social security schemes for single women as well. Hope is that the state shall live up to the humble expectations of the people and progress towards making the rights and needs of single women as a essential right with follow-up of action into implementing this clause. `

**2. Some news from SANWED, NEPAL (SECRETARIAT OF SANWED)**

A National coherence team has been formed to get approval of SAARC to the widow's charter. Once the widows charter will be approved from SAARC Ministerial level, it will go to UN Secretary General. For further information please contact Margaret Owen at margieowen@aol.com.

**3. A film about Hindu widows**

In Friday's RNS report Lisa Rose reviews "Water," a film that shows Hindu widows surviving religious backlash: In "Water," Canadian director Deepa Mehta tells the story of three Hindu widows living in an Indian ashram, circa 1938. The widows, one of whom is 8 years old, are abandoned by their families and forbidden to remarry according to custom. The poetic film, the final chapter in a political trilogy, advocates human rights without growing preachy.

Excerpt of Religion News Services (RNS)

**4. Women of Strength**

Women of Strength  
 The World Welcomes You Into This New Time  
 This Time Of Leading In New Ways  
 Conflicts Are Ending.....  
 Even Though It Appears Global Issues Are Worsening  
 As Long As Women Of Strength Are Willing To Follow Their Hearts  
 New Times Will Arise  
 Women Of Strength  
 Know! Know! Know!  
 You Are Being Called !

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# URGENT APPEAL FOR SUPPORT

**WRI is in urgent need of funds so as to be able to continue supporting our existing partners. Please consider sending us a donation.**

If you are a tax payer in the UK please consider signing a GiftAid declaration which converts every £10 gift to £12.80; every £15 gift to £19.20

Gift Aid form is given below.

**Widows Rights International (WRI), Registered Charity no 1069142**

Room 405 Davina House, 137-149 Goswell House, London EC1V 7ET, Tel : 020.7253.5504, E-mail : [enquiries@widowsrights.org](mailto:enquiries@widowsrights.org), website: [www.widowsrights.org](http://www.widowsrights.org)



**Yes**, I want to support WIDOWS RIGHTS INTERNATIONAL's struggle for social justice for widows in South and West Asia and Africa.

Name .....

Address .....

..... Postcode .....

Telephone ..... e-mail: .....

I would like to give (please tick): £5  £25  £50  £100

Other £.....

Please debit my account

Bank sort code

Once  Monthly  Quarterly  Half year  Annually

Starting on (date): ...../...../..... Signature .....

**YOUR bank name and address**

Name ..... Address .....

..... Postcode .....

**Gift Aid Declaration**

Using Gift Aid means that, if you are a UK taxpayer, for every pound you give, we get an extra 28 pence from the Inland Revenue, helping your donation to go further. To qualify for Gift Aid, what you pay in income tax must be at least equal to the amount we will claim in the year.

Tick the box if you are a tax payer and would like us to reclaim tax on this:

Date of Declaration : ...../...../.....

Please return this form to:

**WIDOWS RIGHTS INTERNATIONAL**, 1-3 Berry Street, London EC1V 0AA. Tel: 020.7253.5504

E-mail address: [administrator@widowsrights.org](mailto:administrator@widowsrights.org)

**Thank you for supporting Widows Rights International.**

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