



## Harmful Cultural Practices towards Widows

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**Query:** Rapid evidence review to understand (a) the prevalence of harmful cultural practices towards widows (e.g. widow “inheritance”, widow “cleansing”, theft of widow properties, widow community rejection/community expulsion, widow witchcraft accusations) in developing countries, including an understanding of which DFID priority countries these issues are most pronounced/significant in and (b) the existing evidence on what works to tackle these harmful cultural practice against widows

**Purpose:** To build DFID’s knowledge on the prevalence of harmful cultural practices against widows and ways to tackle these to inform policy and potential programming.

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### 1. Overview

Globally, there are 285 million widows and over 115 million of them live in deep poverty, in fragile conditions and vulnerable to abuse<sup>1</sup>. These widows have been referred to by the UN as ‘invisible women’ (UN Women, 2001) due to the absence of data on their situation. This document provides a review of the evidence on harmful cultural practices against widows and preventive measures.

Key findings include:

- **There is limited data on the prevalence of harmful cultural practices against widows.** Although there is some quantitative data, based on Demographic and Health Surveys in 15 sub-Saharan African countries, showing that less than half of widows (47%) inherit any assets this is limited to women aged 15-49 years and varies from a low of 22% in Sierra Leone to 66% in Rwanda. In addition, there is data from smaller studies – often qualitative and over 15 years ago – on other types of cultural practices. For example, a survey of 109 widows in Zambia found that 19% of widowed people had been sexually cleansed (Malungo, 2001). In addition, there is data on recorded incidents (often from local NGOs), but this does not provide insight into prevalence levels.
- **Widows are not a homogeneous group.<sup>2</sup> The prevalence and severity of harmful cultural practices against widows varies considerably,** depending on age, social and cultural practices, geographical location, number/age of children and dependents, educational levels and also on who widows’ husbands were (UN Women, 2014). There is some evidence that young widows, such as widows of ‘child marriage’, can be particularly vulnerable to harmful practices involving sexual abuse (e.g. ‘cleansing’ or wife inheritance), whereas older widows can be more vulnerable to theft of property/assets and accusations of witchcraft (WUNRN, 2017a).
- **DFID priority countries where there is evidence that these issues are most pronounced** is shown in the table below. It should be noted that this is where evidence is available; it may be that harmful cultural practices against widows exist in some of these countries but are not well documented. Any potential programming would therefore need to explore further what issues exist at a country level.

<sup>1</sup> UN Women (2017): <https://medium.com/we-the-peoples/day-8-ending-violence-against-widows-e481ac9688c4>

<sup>2</sup> Categories of widows of all ages include, but are not limited to: widows of conflict (forcefully married in context of conflict); widows of epidemics (HIV/AIDS and Ebola); half-widows or wives of husbands missing due to social, political, religious conflict or unrest; child widows under cultural/religious practice married under age 18 which forcefully abducted into marriage and lost husbands; and widows of women-to-women marriage (infertile women who pay dowry to another woman for purposes of bearing children).

DFID priority countries where there is evidence that harmful cultural practices against widows are most pronounced/significant					
	Widow inheritance	Widow cleansing	Theft of widow properties	Community rejection	Widow witchcraft accusations
Afghanistan			✓	✓	
Bangladesh			✓		
Burma					
DRC		✓	✓		✓
Ethiopia					
Ghana		✓		✓	✓
Indonesia					
Iraq					
Kenya	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kyrgyzstan					
Lebanon					
Liberia					
Malawi		✓			
Mozambique					
Nepal			✓	✓	✓
Nigeria	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Occupied Palestinian Territories					
Pakistan					
Rwanda			✓		
Sierra Leone			✓		
Somalia					
South Sudan	✓		✓		
Sudan					
Syria					
Tajikistan					
Tanzania	✓	✓	✓		
Turkey					
Uganda	✓	✓	✓		
Yemen					
Zambia	✓	✓	✓		
Zimbabwe	✓	✓	✓		✓

- **Harmful cultural practices towards widows can increase in conflict and humanitarian emergencies** and it is therefore important to consult widows to understand their needs and vulnerabilities, and where possible, involve women's rights organisations, especially those led by or supporting widows, in emergency responses.
- **The evidence on what works is extremely limited**, with only one evaluation identified and little rigorous and/or quantitative research. Most studies have small sample sizes. In addition, a wide range of methods, measures and timeframes are used, making comparison across studies difficult. Additional research on what works to prevent violence against widows is recommended as part of wider initiatives to increase knowledge and evidence around ending violence against women and girls.

## 2. Evidence base

**Overall, the evidence base on harmful cultural practices against widows is limited, including on prevalence and what works.** This rapid research query has been conducted as systematically as possible, under tight time constraints (six days), and assesses that the evidence is limited, according to DFID's (2014) How to Note on Assessing the Strength of Evidence, i.e. moderate to low quality studies, medium size evidence body, low levels of consistency. Studies may or may not be contextually relevant.

**The strongest evidence is around theft of widows' properties (also known as property grabbing)** which is able to draw on DHS data on inheritance of assets and property from ever-widowed women aged 15-49. However, this data is limited geographically (not all countries have DHS data) and by age (does not cover women aged 50+).

**Particular gaps in the evidence and therefore priorities for future research** include:

- **Prevalence data** on all types of harmful cultural practices towards widows, including widow "inheritance", widow "cleansing", theft of widow properties, widow community rejection/community expulsion, widow witchcraft accusations.
- **Analysis of how harmful cultural practices vary** by age, gender, education, disability and other factors.
- **What works to prevent harmful cultural practices and violence against widows**, including what makes interventions effective and how they can be replicated, adapted and scaled up.
- **Documentation of good practice** on tackling harmful cultural practices against widows by widows' organisations and women's organisations with experience in supporting widows, and how donors and global funds can best support these approaches.
- **Understanding the particular risks for widows in humanitarian emergencies and conflict settings** and how best to respond to their needs and vulnerabilities.

## 3. Prevalence and Scope

### 3.1 Widow 'inheritance'

**Widow inheritance (also known as wife inheritance or levirate), involves widows being 'passed on' to a designated male.** Related terms include 'levirate marriage', which is the forced marriage of a widow to the brother of her deceased husband, and 'sororate marriage', the forced marriage of the sister of a deceased or infertile wife to marry or have sex with her brother-in-law, the widower/husband (UN Women, 2011).

**The practice of widow inheritance varies by the type and purpose.** Sex can play a variety of roles in an inheritance relationship, depending on the context and local traditions: i) *Ritual sexual cleansing* to cleanse the 'widow' and fully reintegrate her into normal community life (see Section 3.2); ii) *Bearing children* – to continue the lineage of the deceased husband for widows without children or with few children; iii) *Sexual companionship* particularly for women who are widowed young; and iv), *Other sexual rituals during widowhood* – to mark the beginning of social events, food production seasons, rites of passage, and establishment of homes. Research has found that in-laws are increasingly unwilling to inherit widows, which has created a demand for 'professional' non-relative inheritors (Agot et al, 2010).

**Countries where there is evidence that widow 'inheritance' is still practiced** include Kenya, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Nigeria.

**Widow inheritance practices can have a direct relationship with HIV transmission**, as in such situations, widows might be forced into an arrangement with an infected heir, brother-in-law, surviving male relation or non-relative inheritor. The widow is thus put at risk of either becoming infected or transmitting the virus to her inheritor. This inheritor may in turn transmit the disease to his other sexual partners, including co-wives in cases of polygamous marriage. In addition, widows are often not informed of the cause of their partner's death, or may not find out until they themselves become ill (Nwadinobi, 2014). Research among Luo widows<sup>3</sup> in Kenya found that HIV prevalence, at 63%, was similar among non-inherited and inherited widows. However, widows who were inherited by non-relatives for sexual ritual were significantly more likely to be infected than widows who were not inherited. Widows who were inherited by relatives for sexual ritual also had higher odds of HIV infection (Agot, 2010).

**The practice can increase in conflict and humanitarian emergencies.** Recent DFID-funded research has found that different forms of violence against women and girls, including harmful cultural practices against widows such as 'wife inheritance', can increase (see case study from South Sudan below).

#### **South Sudan and 'Wife Inheritance'**

DFID-funded research as part of the What Works to Prevent VAWG in Conflict and Humanitarian Crises programme has found that the widespread practice of wife inheritance increases as more men are killed in the conflict. The study is the first large-scale study of the prevalence, types and patterns of VAWG in South Sudan.

Of those respondents who reported being widowed and re-married (n=83), the majority (63%) were re-married to the brothers or other male relatives of their original husband, often without the widow's consent. Widows who are inherited by their husbands' brothers often face psychological and physical abuse from the new husbands' families, as do the widows' children (who are often considered 'children of the dead husband'). In addition, customary practices of land inheritance mean that the land is often returned to the husband's family.

The report also highlights the less common practice of 'ghost wives', where a wife is bought by the family for a man who died before he was able to marry. Ghost wives are not treated as 'real' wives and children borne of the new union are considered children of the deceased man, and rarely given the same levels of financial and social support.

Source: What Works to Prevent VAWG in Conflict and Humanitarian Crisis (2017)

### **3.2 Widow 'cleansing'**

**The harmful cultural practice of having penetrative sexual intercourse with widows for ritualistic 'cleansing' purposes is referred to as 'widow cleansing'.** Where it is practiced, widows who are not 'cleansed' after the death of their partner are generally regarded as outcasts and socially ostracised. For example, research in Zambia has found that widows who are unclesed are believed to "turn mad, a disease traditionally known [in Zambia] as *cibinde*" (Malungo, 2001).

**Evidence suggests that widow cleansing is of particular concern in parts of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Senegal, Angola, Ivory Coast, Congo, Malawi, Nigeria<sup>4</sup> and Ghana.** However, it should be noted that the research is often qualitative and small-scale, for example:

<sup>3</sup> Study participants were 1,987 widows in the Luo ethnic community in Nyanza Province, western Kenya, who were interviewed regarding their inheritance status and sexual behaviour profile and tested for HIV.

<sup>4</sup> 'The appalling practice of widow cleansing' [http://preventgbv africa.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Widow\\_Cleansing.pdf](http://preventgbv africa.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Widow_Cleansing.pdf)

- Zambia: A survey<sup>5</sup> found that 19% of widowed people had been sexually cleansed. Widowed people who were most likely to be sexually cleansed included: older people (35 years and above); people living in rural areas; people with lower educational attainment (primary level and below); farmers; people who irregularly attend church services; and to a lesser extent, widows rather than widowers (Malungo, 2001).
- Uganda: Qualitative research<sup>6</sup> in Kampala found sexual or sexualised rituals of purification and cleansing of orphans, widows and household members among the last funeral rites. The researchers note that this sexual cleansing is different from levirate marriage or widow inheritance because none of the widowers reported further relationships with the male members of their deceased husband's clan/lineage who performed the ritual cleansing. Most widows were able to negotiate alternatives to sexual intercourse, including the in-law jumping over the widow's outstretched legs, or her inner belt<sup>7</sup> (Nyanzi et al, 2011).
- Kenya: Qualitative research<sup>8</sup> in the Nyanza Province of Kenya revealed that nine of the 15 widows (60%) interviewed had participated in the cleansing ritual - seven by a non-relative, and two by a relative. Although widows knew they were at increased risk of contracting HIV, the women described being unable to insist upon a condom, as it is an expected norm that sperm and vaginal fluids must mix in order for cleansing to be complete. Abstinence is rarely an option due to a "widow's fear of being ostracized by her family and community if she does not engage in prescribed sexual rituals" (Perry et al, 2014: 6).

### 3.3 Theft of widow properties and assets

**Asset disinheritance, commonly known as 'property grabbing', is a form of gender-based violence with long-term implications for widows' financial security.** The theft of a widow's land, property and other financial assets by other family members, traditional leaders or neighbours is not only a form of economic violence, it is often accompanied by other forms of violence including physical abuse, harassment and intimidation (Izumi, 2007).

**Although related to patriarchal norms, it should be noted that the perpetrators can be women.** For example, in matrilineal societies in northern Namibia, sisters-in-law are reportedly the main perpetrators, although male relatives may be the ones who physically remove the widows, or their assets (Izumi, 2003).

**Less than half of widows (47%) report inheriting any assets,** according to the findings of the largest cross-country study of data from 15 sub-Saharan African countries. Using demographic and health survey (DHS) data on ever-widowed women aged 15-49, results shows that inheritance of any assets ranges from a low of 22% in Sierra Leone to 66% in Rwanda (see table below).

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<sup>5</sup> The sample covered 549 households with 3828 household members and 1000 respondents aged 15 years and above. Of the 1000 respondents, a total of 106 people, 38 men and 68 women who had been widowed were identified in the sample and asked whether they had ever been sexually cleansed or not. A total of 19 people (or 19%) had been sexually cleansed.

<sup>6</sup> Ethnographic participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions with 35 widows and 9 widowers in Kasubi-Kawaala (a peri-urban slum on the edge of Kampala city).

<sup>7</sup> A special belt made from banana stems tied around her waist

<sup>8</sup> As part of a larger descriptive qualitative study for an HIV prevention trial, 15 semi-structured interviews (SSIs) were conducted with widows (aged 23 to 35), 15 SSIs with inheritors (aged 19 to 76), and four focus group discussions with widows (aged 22 to 35) to explore the HIV risk context within widow cleansing and inheritance practices.

## Percentages of widows inheriting assets in sub-Saharan Africa by country (Peterman, 2011: 20)

	Pooled sample	Benin (2006)	Congo (2005)	DRC (2007)	Guinea (2005)	Mali (2006)	Namibia (2006/7)	Niger (2006)	Nigeria (2008)	Rwanda (2005)	Tanzania (2004)	Senegal (2005)	Sierra Leone (2008)	Uganda (2006)	Zambia (2007)	Zimbabwe (2005/6)
Ever widowed (% full sample)	5.03	4.31	3.33	3.98	7.29	4.73	3.22	4.12	3.88	7.19	4.30	4.13	7.91	6.36	7.12	9.06
Ever widowed (% ever married sample)	6.71	5.38	4.72	5.25	8.73	5.37	7.65	4.57	5.18	11.53	5.59	5.65	9.77	8.34	9.62	12.41
Sample size ever widowed	8725	727	226	412	555	637	343	370	1283	779	426	611	563	546	484	763
Inherited any assets (%)	46.95	27.29	24.49	30.63	36.66	40.01	59.91	48.53	56.73	65.61	52.92	57.10	21.88	51.06	48.73	56.22
<i>Who inherited majority of assets?</i>																
Widow/widow's children (%)	31.94	21.90	15.81	23.80	25.40	28.86	29.40	23.75	27.87	59.96	38.06	46.24	12.65	36.41	31.77	37.31
Other wife (%)	3.52	2.26	0.75	2.90	5.93	2.83	2.11	3.24	4.44	4.74	2.06	3.56	5.44	6.49	0.98	1.60
Spouse's children/family (%)	48.41	56.05	64.61	62.73	52.02	50.52	60.69	52.07	57.16	6.58	47.11	28.67	55.35	48.90	57.82	50.92
Other relative/person (%)	8.19	2.48	5.11	10.57	16.64	4.40	2.09	20.94	4.99	28.71	3.20	7.59	6.96	2.27	1.55	3.47
Husband had no property (%)	7.93	17.31	13.72	0.00	0.00	13.40	5.72	0.00	5.54	0.00	9.57	13.94	19.59	5.92	7.89	6.70

Note: Sample is among women ages 15 to 49 and mean values are weighted according to population-level weights provided in the DHS.

**Across countries, inheritance is generally correlated with higher age, education and wealth,** suggesting that women with higher socioeconomic status may be more likely to negotiate favourable asset inheritance outcomes (Peterman, 2011). Similarly, a study<sup>9</sup> on widows' land security in Zambia found that older widows and widows related to the local headman enjoy greater land security. However, women in relatively wealthy households lose proportionately more land (71% drop for those in 90<sup>th</sup> percentile of assets) than widows in households that were relatively poor (37% drop for those in 25<sup>th</sup> percentile). Women in matrilineal inheritance areas were no less likely to lose land than women in patrilineal areas.

**Physical eviction from the family is a common feature of widows' disinheritance ordeal in rural parts of South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa,** with serious consequences for widows and their children (Loomba Foundation, 2015). Research from the northern states of India has revealed that theft of properties and assets is intense for widows, whether Hindu or Muslim, despite laws for both groups specifying the right to inherit (Phakde, 2008).

### 3.4 Widow community rejection/community expulsion

**Cultural norms towards widows vary considerably from slight stigma to community expulsion.**

An international public opinion poll in 2008 found that in 16 of the in 18 countries<sup>10</sup> surveyed, the majority of respondents said that widows and divorced women are treated worse than other women. In six nations, the dominant view was that there is "some" or a "great deal" of discrimination against widows. This included majorities in South Korea (81%), Turkey (70%), the Palestinian territories (61%), Nigeria (58%) and China (54%) (World Public Opinion, 2009).

**A combination of social ostracism, stigma and disinheritance often leads to widows being rejected and escaping to larger towns or cities** where they can seek support from widows' organisations and escape discriminatory social norms against widows. In South Asia, there are several examples of towns where widows have sought sanctuary *en masse*, such as Vrindavan, an Indian pilgrimage city about 100km south of Delhi – home to more than 20,000 widows. Although the Indian Constitution guarantees widows certain rights, conservative Hindu traditions demand that women do not marry and widows are often a source of shame for their family. In Vrindavan, women live in a *vidhwa ashram* (ashrams for widows) run by the government, private enterprises and NGOs.<sup>11</sup> Another example is Afghanistan's Zanabad (see box below).

<sup>9</sup> Based on nationally-representative panel survey data of 5,342 rural households surveyed in 2001 and 2004

<sup>10</sup> WorldPublicOpinion.org is a collaborative research project of research centers from around the world, managed by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland. Interviews with 16,103 respondents were conducted in 18 nations – China, India, the United States, Indonesia, Nigeria, Russia, Argentina, Mexico, Britain, France, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, the Palestinian territories, Thailand and South Korea.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/travel/gallery/20160907-the-widows-who-cant-return-home>



### **Afghanistan's 'Zanabad ('City of Women')**

Over half a million widows live in Afghanistan, many of them war widows. Widows are highly vulnerable to violence and community rejection, according to a 2014 report by the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA):

- More than 1 in 4 of the 60 widows interviewed by UNAMA reported experiencing violence after the loss of their husband.
- The most common types of violence are physical and verbal abuse, social ostracism, expulsion from the family home, and forced re-marriage (often with a brother-in-law).
- Violence begins within days of the husband's death in most cases, and is mostly perpetrated by relatives and the wider community.
- Widows told UNAMA that the violence was related to discriminatory social norms and attitudes that widows and their children are an economic burden. Other reports have noted that widows are seen as a 'bad omen' in Afghanistan (Bronstein, 2015).

Many widows have found an escape from the stigma and violence in 'Zanabad' or City of Women, built by widows some 15 kilometres southeast of Kabul. The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled has noted that 90% of the widows are illiterate, some taking care of as many as eight children each (Salahuddin, 2018).

Although war widows who are registered by the government receive a small military pension, this does not meet the widows' needs. Gul Ghotai, head of the statistics department at the Ministry of Women Affairs, has recently said in an article in the Arab News that the government lacks any strategy on creating vocational or short-term jobs for the widows: "The ministry of women has done nothing on this. The government as a whole has failed to address the widows' problems because it does not have the capacity. It has not even come up with a plan as to how to tackle the problem" (Salahuddin, 2018).

### **3.5 Widow witchcraft accusations**

**Various forms of violence against widows accused of being witches have been recorded** including murder, beating, deprivation and neglect/seclusion, starving of food, stealing assets, and withholding basic amenities such as health care (Atata, 2018). Witchcraft accusations are deeply rooted in the socio-cultural and economic processes of particular societies, and often triggered by competition for scarce resources, power and domination (Sambe, 2014).

**There is evidence of violence associated with widow witchcraft accusations in various countries in Africa (e.g. Tanzania, Ghana, DRC, Nigeria, Kenya Zimbabwe, and South Africa) and South Asia (e.g. Nepal, India).** For example, HelpAge International reported that in Tanzania, more than 500 elderly people were murdered between 2005 and 2011 due to suspicions that they were witches, with numbers increasing over time to 630 people in 2012 and 765 in 2013 (505 of which were women).<sup>12</sup> Often the reports do not distinguish between widows and older women.

**Widows have also been accused of killing their husbands by witchcraft, leading to retaliatory violence and abuse from in-laws.** Research with Zulu widows in South Africa observed that widows were accused of using witchcraft to kill their husbands, which in turn undermines widows' relationships with in-laws and sense of safety (Rosenblatt and Nkosi, 2007). This was also the basis for harmful cultural practices against widows in Nigeria, as described by Nwadinobi (2008). In one testimony, a widow says: "I was asked to sit on the bare floor. My blouse was removed. My hands tied up with rags so that I could not scratch my face or eat with my hands. If my body became too dirty

<sup>12</sup> HelpAge International: <http://www.helpage.org/blogs/natalie-idehen-23204/tackling-witchcraft-accusations-in-tanzania-724/>

they would use sand to bath me. I did not bath with water or wash my hands until after one month of my husband's death" (p.9).

**In Nepal, widows are often accused of becoming a 'bokshi' or witch, and face widespread discrimination, abuse and violence.** In 2011, the NGO Women's Rehabilitation Center (WOREC) recorded 103 cases of violence against women related to accusations of witchcraft (Fernandez and Thapa, 2012). See also section 4.5.

#### 4. What works to tackle harmful cultural practices against widows?

Harmful cultural practices still exist despite modernisation. In tackling these practices, preventive and supportive measures should be geared towards addressing key issues i.e. poverty, illiteracy, discriminatory cultural norms and poor socio-economic status of widows and women. No global programmes or initiatives that aim to support widows and/or older women were identified as part of this query. Nevertheless, there are a few regional, national and NGO efforts, although these are not coordinated. At the UN level, there is still no distinct intervention aimed at widows, for example a global study, special rapporteur, or goal in the SDGs.<sup>13</sup> However, one positive is the UN International Widows day, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2011 as 23<sup>rd</sup> June every year.

##### Why the UN recognised International Widows Day – 23rd June

- 259 million widows worldwide, with over 115 million widows living in poverty
- Widowed women experience targeted murder, rape, prostitution, forced marriage, property theft, eviction, social isolation, and physical abuse
- Children of widows face increased risk of child marriage, illiteracy, loss of schooling, forced labour, human trafficking, homelessness and sexual abuse
- HIV/AIDS, armed conflict and poverty are amongst the most prolific causes of widowhood
- Widows are less likely to remarry, especially if they have children, whereas widowers even in their later years often find new partners, who will care for them in their old age. This makes the status of widow/widower-hood more transitory for men and more permanent for women.

Source: The Loomba Foundation (<http://theloombafoundation.org/international-widows-day/>)

#### 4.1 Legislative change and increasing widows' access to justice

**Legislation to condemn, prohibit, and penalise harmful practices against widows varies greatly in scope.** In 36 of the 189 economies covered by the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law, widows do not have the same inheritance rights as widowers. In spite of the many ratifications to the CEDAW, the consensus of the Beijing Platform for Action, the widespread support for the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence to Women, and the endorsement by governments of the UNSCR 1325, very few UN conventions make specific reference to the rights of widows, and widows continue to be excluded from the progress made in raising the status of millions of the world's women. In response to this gap, Widows for Peace through Democracy (an umbrella organisation for widows associations) has proposed a 'Charter for Widows' Rights'<sup>14</sup> which demands the elimination of all discrimination against widows both within the family and in community and in public life (WUNRN, 2018a).

**In some countries like Nigeria, State and National laws have outlawed harmful traditional practices against widows,** following consistent work of NGOs like the Widows Development

<sup>13</sup> Expert contribution by Eleanor Nwadinobi.

<sup>14</sup> The Widows Charter is available here: <http://www.widowsforpeace.org/widows-charter/>



Organisation (WiDO) and Legislative Advocacy Coalition on Violence Against Women (LACVAW). For example, the Widows Law of Enugu State (2001) and the national Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) act (2015). Other examples of States signing into law the eradication of malpractices against widows/widowers include Anambra (2005), Ekiti (2005), Imo, Edo States (2004), Rivers (2003), Delta and Cross River State (2004) (George, 2012).

**However, even where legislation exists, widows may be unable to access the modern justice system.** Where parallel systems of law co-exist (religious, customary, modern), widows' lives may be determined by interpretations, made by leaders of their local communities, of religious or customary systems (WUNRN, 2018a). Key factors contributing to the effective implementation of legislation include: political will and enabling environment; shifting attitudes and norms towards harmful practices; appropriate training and capacity building of public officials, including police and judicial officers; coordination between different agencies; and women-led campaigns to ensure governments fulfil their commitments and to shift public opinion (Fraser and Wood, 2018).

**An example of promising practice on legal support for widows includes land reconciliation sessions run by Tanzania's Women's Legal Aid Centre (WLAC)** which mediates dispute cases between widows and their in-laws. The Tanzanian government has enacted a number of reforms that recognize women's land rights, including the ongoing review of the National Land Policy. However, widows are still subjected to discriminatory norms including customary inheritance laws that exclude widows from inheriting their husbands' property, but allow the widows themselves to be 'inherited' by a male relative of their late husband and made to marry them. CSOs have trained paralegals on women's land rights and provided legal aid to widows, with promising results<sup>15</sup> (Mhoja, 2018).

#### 4.2 Changing attitudes, practices and social norms

**Harmful cultural practices against widows are sustained by social norms around gender and ageing and the perceived value of older women.** Harmful attitudes, behaviours and norms are socially constructed, which means they can be challenged. DFID's guidance note around changing social norms around violence against women and girls notes that in order to tackle harmful social norms, interventions need to create new shared beliefs within an individual's reference group, which in turn change expectations around behaviour (Alexander-Scott et al, 2016).

**Emerging evidence suggests that in order to shift harmful social norms against widows, programmes need to: (a) substitute with alternative norms; (b) publicise the change; and (c) reinforce new norms and behaviours.** With harmful practices that are culturally sensitive, such as widow inheritance, engaging local women's movements and wider community mobilisation to challenge these practices is critical.<sup>16</sup> An example of promising practice from Togo involving public declarations to publicise and reinforce new norms is provided below.

##### **Shifting social norms around harmful traditional practices against widows in Togo**

Togolese law gives widows the right to refuse harmful practices, including having sex with a man selected by the community and living in isolation for over three years. However, social norms mean that these rituals persist in a majority of tribal, rural communities in Togo.

The UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women is funding the local NGO Alafia to run a project in 24 villages that holds training sessions explaining the harmful effects of widowhood rituals on both women and local development. At the end of the training, a public 'eradication' ceremony is held

<sup>15</sup> Data is not publically available on what these 'promising results' are.

<sup>16</sup> Personal communication, Sarah Cornish (IRC), 26 July 2018

where the community pledges to abandon the rituals. Communicating change through public declarations is important, as norms and behaviours begin to shift in an initial core group. There is some evidence that public declarations help 'accelerate' changes in people's attitudes; however these need community ownership to shift norms.

As of January 2017, the training has reached nearly 2,000 people and by the end of the project it will have reached 9,000 women (UN Women 2017). There is currently no data available on whether the training and community pledges are leading to a reduction in the practice.

**With the rise of HIV/AIDS, several programmes have attempted to substitute traditional 'sexual cleansing' rituals of widows with alternative symbolic rituals. To date, these activities have not been evaluated.** In Malawi, the National AIDS commission in partnership with community leaders now encourage sexual cleansers to wear a condom when carrying out sexual cleansing rituals; if this is not adhered to the person is subject to punishment from the elders. In Kenya, the Luo council of elders have come up with alternatives to wife inheritance practices, including the symbolic dressing of the widow wearing the coat of the man who will take care of the widow and the children (the inheritor) so that no sexual act is required. Another alternative is a symbolic patching of the roof by the inheritor by removing a section of it and replace it (Day and Maleche, 2011). In Zambia, alternative rituals include prayer, placing of a hoe, brushing shoulders, tattoos, bead/strings, throwing mud and rolling over the grave (Saguti 2016).

#### 4.3 Economic empowerment

**Interventions to increase widows' economic empowerment are an important part of preventing harmful cultural practices and violence against widows.** For example, economic or financial support to avoid the practice of 'transactional sex' for both widows and their daughters and to prevent widows having to marry their husbands' brothers to survive economically (Loomba Foundation, 2015).

**The main types of economic interventions with widows include:**

- **Microfinance support**, including group-based approaches to savings and lending to women normally excluded from formal banking/loan systems. An innovative form of this is in Bolivia - the Micro-Social Capital Initiative funded by the Global Fund for Widows (GFW) with an NGO partner. The program provides widows with a micro-capital investment to launch a micro-enterprise. The widow in return enters into a social contract with the GFW, promising to use profits from her enterprise to extend the money multiplier cycle which will lead to another widow being hired as she expands her own activities. Ultimately, empowered and profitable widows will make contributions with their profits to a social endowment fund, intended to support elderly widows in the community, provide funding for emergency or critical surgery, or help with education expenses of their children.<sup>17</sup>
- **Vocational or job training programmes** that seek to build the skills and knowledge of widows to seek work more effectively, develop skills for informal sector work or develop alternative livelihood strategies.
- **Pensions or other forms of social protection** to widows. For example, in India, the government introduced the Indira Gandhi National Widow pension scheme (IGNWPS) to benefit widows 40 to 59 years for widows living below the poverty line. For those who don't qualify for pension, widows under the poverty line are given wheat and rice at a reduced rate<sup>18</sup> (UN Women 2014b).

<sup>17</sup> Global Fund for Widows (2018) Global reach. <http://globalfundforwidows.org/global-reach/>

<sup>18</sup> Widows above 65 years are entitled to 10kg of free rice every month, and given INR 45,000 (900 USD) and INR 45,500 (USD 970) for construction of a shelter in the plains or hills respectively. State programmes also offer widows INR 500(USD10) every month for child welfare for up to five years of age. The assistance then

**It should be noted that the primary goal of economic interventions are to financially support or empower widows; the impact on the prevention of harmful practices or violence is rarely measured.** Examples of two economic interventions with widows which have been evaluated and/or studied are provided below and show mixed results – some economic benefits, but limited impact on widows’ social or emotional outcomes. Neither provides any insights into impact on preventing harmful cultural practices or violence.

#### **Economic interventions with widows: Case studies**

**Microcredit programme with widowed women in Tamil Nadu after the Indian Ocean Tsunami:** A needs assessment after the 2004 tsunami found that there were 1,700 widowed or abandoned women in Tamil Nadu, India who faced severed discrimination and poverty. Widows were also at increased risk of abuse within the relief camps that were set up following the tsunami. In response, a local NGO, Kalangarai, developed self-help groups for widowed women and provided financial assistance in the form of microcredit loans. A study with 109 participants found that the programme helped widows to build productive assets and invest in their children’s education and nutrition.

However, the findings were not conclusive about the exact mechanism by which the programme helped women – participants from one community were more likely to invest in an animal, others in a small business, others to pay off a debt. Loan amounts and investment patterns were not significantly related to widow’s well-being. Indeed, women who had participated in groups the longest had the lowest well-being, which may be explained by more recently formed groups benefiting from the experience of the NGO and the leaders of previously formed groups who serve as mentors and become more skilled at helping each other on psychosocial levels.

The study did not assess the impact on abuse, violence or harmful traditional practices against widows, but noted that ongoing discrimination against widows in one of the communities (Nagapattinam) made it difficult for widows to use the loans to invest in the economy. Widows in this community experienced a decline in psychological well-being by participating in the programme as they saw what opportunities ‘could’ be available to them in the absence of discrimination. Future economic interventions should therefore include a community mobilisation component, to change social norms around widows (Kayser et al, 2009).

**‘Al Amal’ (‘hope’) economic empowerment programme with widows in Egypt:** The Amal project provides widows with the support and resources (loans, vocational and financial literacy training) needed to establish a micro enterprise to sustain themselves and their family in three villages in rural Minya, Egypt. Amal is implemented by a local NGO, the Future Eve Foundation, and is funded by Alfanar (the first venture philanthropy organisation in the Arab world).

An evaluation<sup>19</sup> of Amal found a statistically significant increase in widows’ income (48% increase per month, from a mean of 796 EGP/month to a mean of 1181 EGP/month) and savings (threefold increase from 63 EGP/month to a mean of 197 EGP/month). However, there was no significant increase in widows’ emotional well-being or sense of community, possibly due to the small sample and short duration of time between the two surveys (three months) (Ibrahim, 2016).

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becomes INR 675(USD13.5) per month and covers the child education up to 18 years. INR 2,000(USD 40) is given annually for the child’s clothing

<sup>19</sup> The evaluation used sequential pre- and post-test survey that measured variables related to income, economic and social status of participating female heads of households before receiving a loan and three months after.

#### 4.4 Refuges and response services for widows who have experienced violence and abuse

**Shelters and refuges for widows and their children are important safe spaces for women to find temporary protection, support, and access essential services**, including medical aid, counselling, education, training and legal services. In some countries, these are self-contained ‘one-stop centres’ designed specifically for widows who have experienced violence (see box below of AVEGA centres in Rwanda). In others, women’s shelters may include services for widows, with staff trained on the specific harmful cultural practices, discrimination and violence faced by widowed women. For example, women-centred HIV prevention options for reducing widows’ risks of acquiring HIV during sexual cleansing practices (e.g. ARV-based oral PrEP, vaginal gels, and the vaginal ring) (Perry, 2014).

##### **Women’s Centres run by the Association of Genocide Widows (AVEGA Agahozo) in Rwanda**

There are an estimated 19,000 genocide widows in Rwanda. In 1995, the AVEGA Agahozo was founded in Rwanda to help widows and their dependents following the genocide of 1994, and to help reintegrate genocide widows back into Rwandan society following the trauma they faced. Many had experienced sexual violence, were badly injured, and/or had been infected by HIV. Today, AVEGA has centres and refuges across Rwanda, providing medical services, psychological counselling, education and training, housing and legal services. More than 47,000 women are receiving medical treatment through its programs, including more than 20,000 widows and more than 71,000 dependents and orphans. AVEGA has also helped women become involved in income-generating activities, such as business projects, farming, basket-weaving and other handicraft (Marima, 2017; AVEGA website).

**Providing support to widows is an important goal in and of itself; however, there is little evidence that strengthened response mechanisms prevent or tackle harmful cultural practices.** No evaluations or studies could be found during this rapid query of ‘what works’ to respond to widows who have experienced harmful cultural practices.

**During humanitarian emergencies, practitioners have noted that it is particularly important to ensure that widows can access response services.** For example, after the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, UN Women put widows at the centre of its humanitarian response. Working with local widows groups, UN Women set up 14 multipurpose centres to provide protection, security and essential services to widows and other vulnerable women, including psychosocial trauma counselling and gender-based violence referrals (WUNRN, 2018b). HelpAge International has observed that during disasters and population displacement, important documents are often lost and widows are particularly at risk of eviction and theft of properties and assets. Older women, particularly widows, are also more vulnerable to physical, sexual and psychological abuse during conflict and emergencies due to their perceived isolation.<sup>20</sup>

**There is mixed evidence about the effectiveness of longer-term widows’ communities, and particularly ‘witch camps’.** In northern Ghana, ‘witch camps’ are safe havens for individuals (often widows and/or older women) who have been accused of witchcraft and been exiled or fled their homes for fear of violence. An ActionAid (2012) survey found that in one camp, Kukuo, more than 70% of women were accused of being witches after their husbands died. Various international and national NGOs provide support and services in the camps, mostly with the long-term aim of helping alleged witches to leave the camps and safely reintegrate into society. However, the question of the most effective process and timing for reintegration remains controversial, including occasional disputes between aid agencies and the Government about the extent to which women are willing to

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/emergencies/older-people-in-emergencies/>

return to integrate.<sup>21</sup> The local Ghanaian organisation GO Home helps facilitate negotiations between the accused individual and their families, provides mediation services, and financial support for reintegrated individuals, including ongoing follow-up support. A study found that as a result of GO Home's help with reintegration, those who have left the camp have not returned again or faced violence in their homes (Roxburgh, 2018).

#### 4.5 Engaging local women's groups who work with widows

**DFID's theory of change on violence against women and girls recommends supporting women's rights organisations (WROs)**, especially those working to tackle violence against women and girls, to make changes and build strong and inclusive social movements as the most effective mechanism for ensuring sustainable change in the lives of women and girls (DFID, 2012). WROs can create spaces for widows to see themselves and their situations differently, mobilise widows to claim their rights, provide specialist expertise and support, as well as having deep understanding of the context and connections with communities (see example of the Women for Human Rights group in Nepal below). However, like other WROs, organisations working with widows also face significant challenges including problems in accessing funding and other support, difficulties in documenting and sharing results and impact (especially when timeframes are short), a rise in backlash against women's rights and shrinking civil society space (Esplen, 2013).

##### **Case study – Women for Human Rights 'Single Women Group' in Nepal**

There are around 500,000 widows in Nepal (4.6% of the female population).<sup>22</sup> The number of young widows is increasing due to natural disasters, conflict, disease and poverty. In Nepal, widows face high levels of stigma, discrimination and violence due to their single women status in a society that remains conservative and patriarchal.<sup>23</sup> Religious, cultural and traditional beliefs and practices towards widows expose them to violence and abuse at multiple levels and prevent them from participating in normal social activities and accessing vital services. According to Women for Human Rights (WHR), an NGO established in 1994 by Lily Thapa and other widows for widows' rights in Nepal, and its members:<sup>24</sup>

- Widows in Nepal experience physical, sexual and psychological violence. In a recent survey of WHR members, 78% of widows reported experiencing various forms of violence and abuse.
- The violence is perpetrated by family members (in many cases sexual abuse from in-laws) and by the community (a widow is easily identifiable and an easy target).
- Women without a husband are considered as ill-omens and the main cause of their husband's death. This results in shunning and blaming of widows, stigma and bias and mistreatment.
- Widows are considered impure and their sexuality questioned. Their status as single but sexually experienced, and perceived loss of a husband's protection, exposes them to sexual abuse.
- Widows are accused of being witches and subjected to violence, including being fed with urine and stool, beaten to death, and expelled from the community and their own property.
- Widows are not allowed to participate in auspicious events or wear red or bright colours.

<sup>21</sup> For example in February 2018, see article: 'ActionAid, Others reject Otiko's Comments on Witch Camps' <https://starrfmonline.com/2018/02/12/actionaid-others-reject-otikos-comments-witches-camp/>

<sup>22</sup> National Population and Housing Census 2011 (National Report), Central Bureau of Statistics, Government of Nepal <http://cbs.gov.np/image/data/Population/National%20Report/National%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> WHR use 'single women' to include widows because widow in Nepali "Bidhwa" has negative connotations.

<sup>24</sup> WHR (2017) WHR in Brief <http://whr.org.np/beta/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/WHR-Brochure.pdf>; Sabri B, Sabarwal S, Decker MR, Shrestha A, Sharma K, Thapa L, Surkan PJ (2015) 'Violence Against Widows in Nepal: Experiences, Coping Behaviours, and Barriers in Seeking Help', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*; Sumeera Shrestha, Executive Director WHR, [personal communication 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2018](#).

- The majority of widows are illiterate and financially dependent on other family members. They experience economic abuse, including through a practice of 'chasing-off' and 'property grabbing' where in-laws try to make widows leave the house and take their share of property or land.
- Widows develop physical and mental health issues, including depression and suicidal thoughts.

WHR is supporting a growing widow's movement in Nepal, connecting with regional and international networks. It works at multiple levels to raise awareness of widows' rights, their specific needs and challenge harmful cultural practices. It works with widows, their families and children, the community (including religious leaders and police) and government. It has established 2,000 Single Women Groups in Nepal and has groups in 73 districts with over 100,000 members. The groups focus on advocacy and community mobilisation, economic empowerment, participation and leadership and sustainable peace.

In 2004 WHR established the Red Colour movement (Rato Rang Abhiyan) promoting the right of widows to wear a colour of their own choice, instead of white. It has successfully campaigned to change discriminatory laws and policies against widows, including securing widow allowances for widows of all ages and more equal property rights, mainstream widows in the National Action Plan, and secure national data on the number of widows in Nepal. Widows are starting to become more socially accepted but WHR's Founder Lily Thapa acknowledges there is still a long way to go and that 'changing minds is the hardest part of the challenge we continue to address.' (Thapa, 2016)

Box written and researched for VAWG Helpdesk by Maria Vlahakis (Womankind)

**Strategic and well-coordinated funding from donors can play a strong enabling role** in work undertaken by women's organisations to tackle harmful cultural practices against widows. Examples of promising practice include:

- **The Loomba Foundation has partnered with non-governmental organisations** across Asia, Africa and South America to introduce education and empowerment programmes for widows. For example, in Nairobi, the foundation has partnered with Kenya Business Trust to train widows and support them with loans under the foundations empowerment programmes (Loomba Foundation, 2015).
- **The Global Fund for Widows (GFW) works with non-profit organisations to empower widows.** For example, in Nigeria, GFW provided a grant in July 2018 to Widows Development Organisation (WiDO), a Nigerian women-led NGO, for the economic empowerment of widows through oil mill cooperatives in six communities in Abia State. The project seeks to reduce violence against women especially widows, increase empowerment of women through palm oil processing, and improve access to credit and marketing skills for women. WiDO has accessed global funds from different donors based on the areas of focus of the donors, over its 23 year existence, including from Mama Cash, the European Union, and UK partners such as Widows for Peace through Democracy (WPD) and Widows Rights International (WRI).<sup>25</sup>
- **UK based charities like Widows for Peace through Democracy (WPD) and Widows Rights International (WRI) continue to support NGOs in Asia and Africa,** focused on the rights and empowerment of widows.

As with other support to WROs working on violence against women and girls, it is important the funds support both sustainability (ability to persist and continue the long-term social change work) and responsiveness (ability to react in the short-term to opportunities and threats) (Nagarajan and Fraser, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> For example, research on "the health of widows and their children" in collaboration with Medical Women's International Association (MWIA) August 2000-March 2001. From June –December 2003 WiDO received a grant to run a 6-month radio Jingles to sensitise on a newly passed bill on widow's rights from Mama Cash of the Netherlands. A grant for Legislative advocacy was received from the Global Fund for Women. A grant to Support for widows whose rights had been violated was received from European Union from 2006 -2007.



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