



# ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT FOR WIDOWS AND FEMALE HEADED HOUSEHOLDS: LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE MDGS

**MONDAY 13 MARCH 2017**

Community  
Church of NY  
Gallery

12.30 - 2.00

Chair – Heather  
Ibrahim Leavers,  
Founder &  
President Global  
Fund for Widows

Nyaradzayi  
Gumbonzvanda,  
Chief Executive,  
Rosaria Memorial  
Trust

Eleanor  
Nwadinobi,  
Director Widows  
Development  
Organisation  
Nigeria

Meera Khana,  
Director Global  
Alliance Last  
Woman First,  
Guild of Service

Lily Thapa,  
Founder Women  
for Human Rights  
Nepal

Isobel Chappell,  
NAWO YWA

Georgia Young,  
NAWO YWA

Panel to share  
expertise from  
around the  
world.  
Interaction  
between  
participants and  
with the panel to  
explore lessons  
learnt for the  
SDGs and a set of  
actions to make a  
difference.



## Executive Summary

In this event, the panel consisted of a number of various women - each different ages, from different communities and with different roles in their societies, meaning the panel had a broad cross section of the world.

Speech topics included the gaps and challenges with the MDGs, things that work well for young widows, empowering widows through decent work and more relating to the key and review theme. The themes mentioned by the panelists included the key theme, women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work, and the review theme, which was the review of the Millennium Development Goals. Even though not all of the speeches included reflected on the MDGs, each one covered the key theme. Furthermore, each of these themes were discussed in alternative ways, some of the panelists used their own experiences to emphasise their points, allowing the audience to empathise with the speaker and imagine themselves in those women's shoes. Those who included the review theme, raise awareness on the lessons we have learnt from the MDGs, how they had affected widows and their families, and what can be done to continue our progress in the future.

Although similar issues were raised, the different cultures and ages were reflected in each of the speeches. One of the key areas of improvement, which was highlighted in all of the speeches, was education. This was not only to educate widows and their children, but to educate and raise awareness to others of this issue, as many are unaware how severe this issue truly is. Many of the NGOs represented by this panel already work hard to improve this and there are a number of different responses to improve this. Many have set up workshops to educate the widows and teach them new skills to prepare them for work and allow them to start their own businesses. By having young speakers it meant that a different perspective was brought up, as these girls had been raised in very different environments but were interested in learning more and educating others. The other panelists, directors and chief executives of a range of widow and women's rights NGOs, gave shocking statistics on what they had found in their own research and informed the audience of inhumane things that widows of all ages are faced with.



Not only did the panelists express their views, but the audience also had the chance to interact with everyone. This meant that more people could share their views and once again brought people together from different cultures - people who wouldn't have had the chance to do so without this event. The audience was also allowed time to ask questions which each of the panelists were able to answer.

It was very important that NAWO put on this event as it meant that it could educate others who had not heard much on this issue, bring people together with similar views and interests, and allow the opportunity for speakers, both new and returning, to express their views on such a interesting topic. Even though this was a small event the space very quickly became full and overcrowded meaning that the event was very popular and people were interested in hearing more .

The widow's rights international event took place on Monday the 13<sup>th</sup> of March, WRI had accredited me and NAWO had given me the opportunity to attend CSW61. The panel was chaired by Heather Irahim Leavers, the founder and president of the global fund for widows and included speakers with large levels of expertise around widowhood and its implications. The panel began with talks from the youth delegates form the young women's alliance (including myself) who detailed the basic problems surrounding widowhood and what was and was not working for them. The other speakers then connected these concepts with their personal experiences and spoke of widowhood in each of their individual countries and situations, leading to the asking of what needs to be done to solve the incredibly important issue of discrimination against widows.



## Biographies

### **Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda**

*Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda is the Chief Executive of Rozaria Memorial Trust, the organisation she found in memory of her late mother, to promote access to quality education, health and entrepreneurship for young people in resource poor communities. Ms Gumbonzvanda is the Africa Union Goodwill Ambassador on Ending Child Marriages. A Zimbabwean national, she is a trained human rights lawyer with extensive experience in conflict resolution and mediation.*

*For 25 years, Nyaradzayi has worked on issues of women and children's human rights, with a special focus on crisis countries, violence against women, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and HIV and AIDS. She held positions within the United Nations for 10 years, serving as Regional Director for the United Nations Development Fund for Women in Eastern and Horn of Africa. and as a human rights officer with UNICEF in Liberia and Zimbabwe. She served as a member of the UN Commission on Information and Accountability on Women and Children's Health. She also served as interim coordinator for the Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association during its formation; and a law officer in the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs in Zimbabwe. She served as General Secretary of the World YWCA from 2007 to 2016.*

*Nyaradzayi is currently the Chair of Action Aid International Board. Ms. Gumbonzvanda holds a Master's degree in Private Law with specialization in Constitutional Property Law from the University of South Africa and completed postgraduate work on conflict resolution at Uppsala University, Sweden.*

### **Dr. Eleanor Nwadinobi**

*Dr. Eleanor Nwadinobi is a medical doctor and international gender and human rights consultant. Currently, she is working as a manager with the Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP), a peace building programme managed by the British Council and funded by UK Department for International Development. She is a holder of the Ema (European Union masters in Human rights and Democratisation) from Venice, Italy, the Zonal Coordinator of the Coalition on Violence Against Women (CEVAW) and the immediate past Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Chair of the United Nations NGO/DPI Executive Committee.*

*She has authored several publications and received numerous awards of merit. Her personal profile is featured in Friedrich Ebert Stiftung publication, "The hands that build Nigeria: Nigerian women role models".*

### **Georgia Young**

*Georgia Young is a 17 year old English Sixth Form student and currently studies Biology, Chemistry, Psychology and Maths at A Level. She is interested in a future in STEM and due to this, was made aware of the issues that she will face due to her gender. Georgia goes to an all girls school which has meant she has been raised in a female~positive environment, allowing her to reach her fullest potential and be confident in her own body. it also sparked her passion in feminism and gender inequality. Georgia is active in school and has given a number of assemblies to a variety of ages on different topics and is currently the deputy head of her form. This means that not only does she represent her form, but she is also the charity representative which allows her to support many charities and organisations. She is looking forward to using her experience in the UN to support an NGO working for young widows. She is delighted to be speaking on young widows, as young widowhood has become one of the areas in feminism she is most interested in and she hopes to expand this throughout her school after her experience of CSW.*



**Isobel Chappell**

*Isobel is currently in year 12 at Stroud High School Sixth Form in Gloucestershire, UK. ' She is studying Politics and Government, maths, history and English Literature. Isobel is passionate about raising awareness about politics and human rights. Last year, she won an Amnesty international UK youth award for poetry she wrote about the persecution of people with Albinism. As head girl of her school, she is taking action to encourage younger girls to become more politically active and to engage with current and important issues. Isobel is a member of the feminist society at her school and is in the school debating team. She plans to spread what she will learn at CSW to other students in her area through assemblies at local schools.*

**Meera Khana**

*Meera Khanna is a writer, poet, and social activist. She is the Trustee & Executive Vice President, of the Guild of Service , an NGO combining grass root work and advocacy interventions, and is in consultative status with ECOSOC . She has also worked as a Consultant with the High Level Committee on the Status of Women, Government of India. As a social activist she has worked extensively with the conflict affected women and children of Kashmir and her main focus of work is on underprivileged women, particularly widows and single women. Through her grass root and advocacy work with the Guild she has spearheaded projects to build economic, political, and legal capacities of under privileged women . She has recently helped to create a global alliance for empowering under privileged women "The Last woman First'. Meera has written on career counseling , a collection of her poems and a fiction on Kashmir, film scripts, and several country papers and features on women's rights and widows' rights for conferences, newspapers, compilations, international forums and the UN system. Her latest book "In a State of Violent Peace" based on real life narratives has been widely acclaimed as humanizing the conflict in Kashmir.*

**Lily Thapa**

*Lily Thapa is a pioneer. She established an organization which solely focuses on the issue of widows and is the founding chairperson of Women for Human Rights (WHR), that has been working for the social, political, economic and legal rights of widows in Nepal and in South Asia for over 20 years. Through WH R, her advocacy has changed government policy, and has been successful in mainstreaming the issue of widows into the government agenda. Her work with the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare (MoWCSW) among others. This has led the Ministry to announce its decision to set up an Emergency Trust Fund solely for single women (widows) in Nepal.*

**Heather Ibrahim-Leathers**

*Ms. Ibrahim-Leathers founded Global Fund for Widows following the passing of her grandmother in 2009. Since then, she has endeavored to expand the reach of the Global Fund for Widows to 3 countries, and in doing so, has enabled more than 5,400 widows to become economically empowered and self-sustained. Ms Ibrahim-Leathers has advocated for widows' rights at the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia University, Fordham University, and the United Nations.*

*Prior to her career in non-profit, Ms. Ibrahim-Leathers served as a Vice President, in Credit Suisse's Leveraged Investment Group, where she was directly responsible for over \$1 billion in high yield and leveraged loan assets. Prior to Credit Suisse, Ms. Ibrahim-Leathers worked at JPMorgan where she was an Emerging Markets Fixed Income analyst responsible for over \$4 billion worth of debt issuance. Ms. Ibrahim-Leathers earned her Bachelors in Economics from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and is a Chartered Financial Analyst.*

**Economic Empowerment for Widows and Female Headed Households:  
Lessons Learnt From the MDGs  
Programme**



Monday 13

12.30 – 2.00

Community Church of New York, Gallery

12.30 – 12.35 – Welcome by WRI trustee Zarin Hainsworth OBE

12.35 – 12.40 – Introductions Chair – Heather Ibrahim-Leathers, Founder & President Global Fund for Widows

12.40 – 12.50 - Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda, Chief Executive, Rozaria Memorial Trust *“Widowhood and Barriers to Economic Empowerment for Women.”*

12.50 – 12.55 - Isobel Chappell – NAWO YWA *“Gaps and challenges with the MDGs in regard to young widows”*

12.55- 1.00 - Georgia young – NAWO YWA *“Things that work for young widows”*

1.00 – 1.10 - Eleanor Nwadinobi, Director Widows Development Organisation Nigeria *Empowering widows through decent work in Nigeria”*

1.10 – 1.20 - Meera Khana, Director Global Alliance Last Woman First, Guild of Service *“Women & Work: focus on female headed households”*

1.20 – 1.30 - Lily Thapa, Founder Women for Human Rights Nepal *“Mainstreaming widow's issues into National Action plan in Nepal- as a best practice”*

1.30 – 1.40 – discussion amongst participants

1.40 – 1.55 – Q&A

1.55 – 2.00 – closing comments

2.00 Photos

*Supported by: Guild of Service India, Global Alliance last woman first, Women for Human Rights Nepal, Widows Development Organisation Nigeria, Global Fund for Widows*





### **Widowhood and Economic Empowerment of Women**

Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda

Rozaria Memorial Trust is honoured to co-host this parallel event focusing on widows as it places a clear focus on a critical group of women who are often deprived of their social and economic rights due to death of a husband. This is an issue that has received global attention from the perspective of inheritance rights, and the yet the issues of wider economic security of women has not been fully explored. In this presentation, I will explore the processes and factors that lead to the economic disempowerment and deprivation of economic rights for widows and propose ways in which the same can be addressed.

Widowhood is caused by sudden death or long-term illness. Long term illness within a family impacts the economic status of the family as resources has to be found for treatment and care. In many of the developing countries, poor women do not have access to medical insurance. They end up using the savings or assets within the family. When these are exhausted, the family may end up borrowing or have to depend on the extended family. This whole health and caring process has a toll on the woman within the household, who may or may not have full authority about the decisions actually made about access to health for her husband.

In some instances, the long-term illness can end up straining relationships with the extended family. In Africa at the height of the HIV pandemic, some women had to stop going to work (formal or informal) in order to provide care and support to their loved one. This resulted in loss of income by the woman, or loss of opportunity to a job, increased absenteeism, impacts performance or progression on the job. There is therefore a direct relationship between quality of health care services, care responsibility of women within the household, long term illness and the economic base of the widow.

Managing a funeral can be a costly affair, this is also defined by cultural norms and traditions. In Zimbabwean culture, a person is buried at least a day or two after death. The expectation is for the person to be buried in their traditional homes, though many are now being buried in the urban areas due to costs. Funeral expenses can be very high as one has to cover the feeding of multitudes, transport costs and other related expenses. For an adult, it is expected that a cattle be slaughtered as respect to the deceased and to those who have gathered to mourn. The family resources are thus used to cover these costs. There are community burial societies and more formal funeral insurance policies to which a small nominal monthly premium is levied which are quite popular in the country. It is strongly recommended that families should participate in these social schemes as a way of protecting the family and also easing the burden at the point of loss and death.

In many countries, where a husband dies without leaving a will, there is dispossession of the widow. Customary laws often prescribe inheritance according to traditions which are mostly informed by patriarchal values. The eldest male child or relative is given preference as the heir to the estate. In Zimbabwe, a strong advocacy effort by women's and human rights organisations led to the reform of the laws on inheritance to ensure that there is protection of widow's rights and entitlements. While the law exists, the main challenge is that many women are unaware of their rights. The levels of legal literacy and civic rights are very low. It is important that women are informed of their rights within the family during the subsistence of the marriage, and are encouraged to plan for their estates before death. Widowhood further confines women's social and economic participation. Often the majority widows who are leading households are also poor and do not have assets to give as collateral when they want to apply for loans. The assets which may be in their custody are held often in trust for the children and may therefore not be easily used as collateral. Young widows often face sexual harassment and sexual pressure from relatives even where the practice of widow inheritance is dying. If they refuse the sexual advances their land may be taken away or subdivided. In many instances young widows are not allowed socially to remarry and bring the man into that family. If she decides to remarry, she has to leave the matrimonial assets, even if she is legally entitled. The same value and pressure is not exerted on the men.

Again, the freedom of movement for widows is also initially confined as part of the sexual control. Many widows take time to actively participate in economic activities like cross border trading, marketing and vending which require them to be active in the social space because of stigmatisation, and social pressure.

In conclusion, it is important to prioritise legal rights awareness for women during before and during marriage. Families and especially women must be encouraged to write their wills so that issues on distribution of property at death of a spouse are not left to the whims of cultural practices and tradition. Legal aid services are also important to ensure that women have the necessary support in case they seek justice.

Economic empowerment programmes and projects that target widows should be sensitive to their other social issues, and integrate programmes that respond to experiences of violence.





## **Women & Work: Focus on Female Headed Households**

Meera Khanna, Exec Vice President The Guild of Service

### ***Some telling facts***

- Almost worldwide, widows comprise a significant proportion of all women, ranging from 7 per cent to 16 per cent of all adult women. However, in some countries and regions the proportion is far higher.
- In India, every fourth household has a widow
- There is an overlap between incidence of widowhood and aging among women and this has serious social and economic consequences. Large number of elderly and widowed women with not much access to income, totally dependent on family members form the future scenario in many societies of the world.

Widows in patriarchal societies of Asia and Africa are vulnerable to social marginalization and stigmatization rites, and are unable to access the right to a life of dignity free from violence. Restricted mobility, forced remarriage and pregnancies, lack of access to education and training, inequitable inheritance laws, lack of social security, restricted access to financial resources and economic avenues, while exacerbating her poverty, leave her vulnerable to physical, emotional psychological violence both by acts of omission and commission.

Widows face gendered violence doubly as women and as widows and when they are old this violence is exacerbated further.

**With these huge numbers of women who face a violation to the human right to a life of dignity, one would think that they would figure prominently in every discourse on human right violation**

. Widows are visible culturally but invisible in the discourse on violation of human rights . There is astonishingly very little empirical evidence on widows. This invisibility itself underscores their value in the discourse for change.

Reasons for this invisibility on the horizon of international regional and national platforms are not hard to find

A/Widowhood as it exists in the Western nations and its implications in Asia and Africa are hugely different.

B/ Widowhood seen as just a cultural issue gives state parties a legitimate reason for the invisibility of widows from policy and programs.

C/ Large numbers of young widows are often a consequence of conflicts and wars which are directly linked to governmental decisions or lack of decision.

Widows are culturally discriminated against in many Asian, and African countries. Let me also emphasize that cultural and social discrimination of widows is directly proportionate to the economic dependency. **The more economically vulnerable a widow is, the higher is the violation of her human right through cultural stigmatization.**

**Structural inequalities of patriarchy manifests itself most crucially in the economic vulnerability which gets underscored by cultural stigmatization, social marginalization and individual vulnerabilities. It is a Catch 22 situation. Cultural discriminations result in economic dependency and economic dependency exacerbates cultural discrimination. Economic empowerment gives access to resources. Material, social and legal resources translate as power. When there is power, social and cultural stigmatization gets edged out. The bottom line is that it is not religious or social sanctions that violate a widow's human rights most, but her economic vulnerability.**

The violence against widow is double fold, as women and as widows

- While most women are given secondary status in patriarchal societies social isolation and avoidance of widows often leads widows to miss training, employment, healthcare, education and other information and opportunities
- While all women are unable to own land or property, inheritance laws by tradition and custom discriminate against widows
- While most women may not own their homes, expulsion of widows and their children from a marital home leads many to homelessness, migration, refugee or displacement camps and increased physical insecurity
- While all women are likely to be under employed and less well paid in comparison to men , widows are additionally constrained from pursuing education, job training or employment by mourning rites requiring widows remain inside for up to one year or more or an unwritten behavior code.
- Gender inequality is more pervasive than other forms of inequality. Within that widows are more unequal. Gender inequality manifests itself most in economic vulnerability

**If economic empowerment is the key to changing attitudes and socio cultural norms, then it makes pragmatic sense to begin with the most vulnerable of the unequal: the widows. It makes pragmatic sense to make widows active agents in economic growth**

How can the agency of widows manifest as an avenue to economic empowerment

**Control over resources**—measured by her ability to earn and control income and to own, use, and dispose of material assets.

**Ability to move freely**—measured by her freedom to decide their movements and their ability to move outside their homes.

**Decision making over family formation**— measured by her ability to decide if she wants to remarry and whom.

**Freedom from the risk of violence**—measured by the prevalence of domestic violence and other forms of sexual, physical, or emotional violence.

**Ability to have a voice in society and influence policy**—measured by participation and representation in formal politics and engagement in collective action and associations.

#### **How do we make it happen.**

Let me emphasise very categorically that as long as we treat widowhood and widows from the cultural lens of discriminations, empowerment of widows will remain within the welfare approach fold. But they are entitled. In this context, shifting from welfare driven approaches to rights-based ones is recommended in order to transform mindsets and ensure that the rights of widows are protected and maintained.

If we assume that economic vulnerability underscores the violation of human rights then it makes pragmatic sense to place widows squarely in the discourse on poverty.

Feminization of poverty is closely linked to feminization of household heads. In most patriarchal societies the largest number of households are headed or supported by widows. The socio-economic gender bias against women in patriarchal societies places female-headed households at a greater risk of poverty, where women are the primary earners.

**Affirmative action by governments** that can put female headed households as one of the prime beneficiaries of policies and programs.

**United Nations and international agencies** need to focus on widow supported or single women headed households as active agents in poverty eradication measures

**Governments need to withdraw discriminatory clauses** that deny women their rights due to their marital status and create a single window system to converge services of different departments to facilitate entitlements for shelter, pensions, health, food and other requirements

**Strengthen engagement with civil society** in the implementation of government programmes. Research findings revealed that collaboration between government and civil society results in a more enabling environment for vulnerable women to claim relevant services.



**Increase and strengthen partnerships among diverse stakeholders** will facilitate the inclusion of concerns and priorities in national policies.

**Disaggregated data** that can be both the management tool as well as a report card for capacity building programs and policies.





### **Empowering widows through decent work in Nigeria**

**Eleanor Nwadinobi, President Widows Development Organisation, Nigeria**

#### **Introduction**

Widows are the poorest of the poor

As female heads of households, widows are sometimes forced to sell their children into human trafficking.

Empowerment means the following :-

Reducing poverty

Providing sustainable value chains from production to marketing

Income generating skills

Decent work for commensurate pay

Affirmative action in positions of decision making

Tax rebates

#### **Conclusion**

Widows' economic empowerment programs are crucial in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

## Gaps and challenges in the MDGs in regard to young widows

Isobel Chappell

"It is estimated that worldwide there are 245 million widows, 245 million. That's about four times the population of the UK, or the entirety of Indonesia. These 245 million are being ignored and forgotten, subject to mental, physical and sexual abuse and what the UN terms 'harmful traditional practices'. For women in many cultures with their husband's death comes a social death on their part, many widows treated as outcasts and pariahs, or considered to be bad luck. In the Millennium Development Goals there are huge gaps when it comes to widows and especially young widows, as many are denied even basic human rights due to this widowhood. Young Widows are extremely populous for a number of reasons, war, revolution, genocide, child marriage and diseases such as HIV to name a few. In Rwanda due to the genocide a huge 13% of all women and girls are widows and in the Democratic Republic of Congo in some areas widowhood is at 40% due to war. The plight of widows is a huge issue and these gaps in the Millennium Development Goals in regard to them need to be addressed. The first goal, to eradicate extreme hunger and poverty has not been met when it comes to widows. When their husbands die, in places such as Kenya, widows are evicted from their household and if they refuse to be 'inherited' by a male family member as part of their husband's estate, widows and their children often end up homeless and destitute. In many countries such as Tanzania, widows are not entitled to inheritance. These widows and their children face extreme poverty, and often widows will turn to begging or prostitution to survive. In some cases, widows may end up having to abandon their children. Even if widows have a job, it is often not enough to make a living as, as a woman, she will earn significantly less than any man. With no reliable income and no home, many widows and their children end up in slums. In a multi-country poverty study, illness injury or death was found to be the most common poverty trigger, in the case of widows this certainly rings true.

The second millennium development goal, the achievement of universal primary education also faces a gap when it comes to young widows. Children of widows are much less likely to attend school as they rarely have the money to feed their family, let alone pay for school fees and uniform. Widows may depend on their child's labour, either as carers for younger siblings or as beggars. Girl children are likely to be given away, sold or trafficked into early forced marriages or prostitution. It is not only the widows themselves that are being affected by the stigmas, traditions and hardships of widowhood; it is their children too. Without an education, these children tend to end up with menial jobs and stuck in the poverty trap for life. Millions of children of widows are being subject to poverty, a lack of education and an extremely difficult life. This takes us on to goal number 4, reducing child mortality. Children of widows are more likely to suffer extended illnesses and therefore death. Widows unable to afford medicine may have to watch their children suffer or die from often preventable or curable diseases, knowing that if their husbands had still been alive they could have saved their child, as they may have been able to afford medical treatment. Widows are often mothers too, and having lost a husband, losing a child is another even more brutal hardship on them. Goal 6, to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and



other diseases, is another goal that has serious challenges when it comes to young widows. In many African countries and cultures, for example in Kenya, many widows are required to have unprotected sex with a man termed a 'cleanser' who is said to rid the widow of her dead husband's spirit. Widows are therefore very likely to contract sexually transmitted diseases, most commonly HIV from these cleansers. For the many young widows this tradition affects, they live their lives with these horrendous diseases, often having early deaths due to them and also passing these diseases on to others they have sex with in their lives, may this be a new husband or through prostitution. In Ghana, this ritual cleansing may have to take place with the widows brothers in law, the family heir or even the first stranger met on the road.

However, the millennium development goal in which there is most of a gap when it comes to young widows is goal number 3, promoting gender equality and empowering women. Although a lot of work goes on to help women in terms of equality, as widows are rarely even treated as women, measures for helping women rarely benefit them. For most widows their fate lies completely in the hands of men, it may be in the men of their community, male relatives of their deceased husband or even in strangers. Widows are held back simply because of their gender and status. In Afghanistan, it is considered immoral for a woman to live alone; this presents many problems for young widows. It makes it very difficult for widows to find safe places to live, especially as most are illiterate and cannot earn a living. As there are an estimated 2 million war widows in Afghanistan this is a huge scale issue in the country. Widows are subject to social marginalisation due to out-dated social practice, often facing stereotyping as witches, humiliating mourning practices for example having their head shaved and torturous cleansing rituals such as sleeping in the same bed or bathing with their husband's corpse. Widowers do not have to go through these same processes. Widows often take their own lives when the death of their husband comes either due to practices or before they have to endure them, however, many of these suicides are covered up and made to look like accidents. Widows, often being illiterate and in rural areas, are usually unaware of their legal rights, legislation their governments have put in place to help them or of how to seek legal help. Therefore, the way they are treated often goes unreported and unchallenged.

Widows present a huge issue when it comes to the Millennium Development Goals. Widows need special focus and effort from both governments and the UN. Looking forward there needs to be more initiatives that empower widows to allow their voices to be heard, this, in turn, will allow them to be protected from the horrific exploitation and violence they would otherwise face. Unless the status of widows is acknowledged worldwide and action taken for systematic social reform, this global problem will not be solved and the Millennium Development Goals will never be reached."

This event allowed people to really think about the action points for making a difference to widows around the world, including education, breaking stigmas, reducing child marriage and making widows aware of the rights they have and the legislation that is there to protect those rights (for example when it comes to inheritance). The issues surrounding widowhood are crucial yet not always talked about, I was incredibly grateful to have the opportunity to research and speak on these issues that otherwise I would have known little of. Back in the UK, as a sixth form student and Head Girl of my school I have been trying to spread the message about issues I have learnt about at CSW (including widowhood) to other students within my own school and in other schools in my area. . In the UK there is the stereotype that widows are old women, for girls at my school it is shocking that actually widows can be the same age as they are, this is an example of stereotypes that need to be broken. There needs to be worldwide recognition of widow's problems in order for them to be addressed and even if I can address this in a small way, I feel I can do my small part to help.





## Things that work well for young widows

Georgia Young

Good afternoon ladies and gentleman. My name is Georgia. I come from a sixth form school in England and I'm a member of NAWO Young Women's Alliance. I'm extremely honoured to be speaking on this topic, as this in my opinion, is a very serious issue of great importance, that many people are unaware of.

There are an estimated 258 million widows in the world and nearly 45% of them live in poverty. These women, combined with their children, make up a large percentage of the population - nearly one tenth. For such a large percentage of the population, there have been a surprisingly small number of campaigns to bring awareness to these widows. Worse, there is even less awareness of the difficulties of the young widows who are in my opinion the most vulnerable.

From researching previous projects and campaigns, those that have successfully improved the lives of widows have focused on these areas:

- Human rights awareness
- Support and training in business
- Education
- Improving social status

Naserian's projects are perfect examples of how raising awareness to widows their human rights can have such a large effect on not only their lives, but the lives of their children and their communities. In 2011, 30 widows were educated in their human rights and this has had such a significant change to their societies.

By training these widows they become valuable figures in their communities, as they can educate others in these areas, raising their status considerably - their knowledge is their power. This also means that widows can prevent the cycle of young widows continuing as they become aware that they can take control of their own lives and the lives of their daughters, reducing the chances of having to marry them off when they are just children, and therefore potentially reducing the amount of child widowhood in the future.

Helping to support widows, morally and financially, when starting their businesses is very important. One example is the employment programme from Global Fund for widows, which financially supports widows by supplying them with micro-credits, allowing them to start their own businesses which have the potential to expand. The programmes also trains them in important skills needed to run a business.

Allowing the widows to be economically independent, means that the widows can once again take control of their lives. This improves their lives because it means they can look after their family, without the need to be 'inherited' by their dead husband's family, as this can cause many issues, such as dependence and abuse and once again lowers the status of the widow. Having their own business would raise their status, as they would be contributing to their own society- rather than being a burden, which widows are often seen as, and often how they see themselves.

For many widows, the lack of support is a major issue. Some are being denied basic moral support and respect from their government. By allowing widows access to information and education many are now great importance to their communities. Being young, they all have the potential to do numerous things with their lives, which is why education is so important. It enables them to have a future that is not lived in fear and poverty.

In my opinion the improvement of awareness of this issue as a whole is the area which needs to be focused on and improved. In my society, when people think 'widow' they automatically picture an elderly woman, and do not picture a widow as young as 10 years old. It's shocking to think there are millions of young widows- younger than me - who have children when they are just children themselves.

In many cultures being a widow is deemed as unlucky and is often not spoken about. This causes an issue as it means that widows are seen as very low figures in society- excluded from social events and denied the ability to wear colour or even inherit land.

I'd like to thank Widow Rights International for this amazing opportunity of being able to express my views in front of you today. I hope after hearing this today, you too will get involved with this issue. We can change this if we work together, knowledge is power and now we have the chance to bring about a change, together.

### **Editors**

Georgia Young

Emma Jones

Zarin Hainsworth

