



THE LOOMBA FOUNDATION

Caring for widows around the world

in association with

BlitzINDIA Building a new nation
MEDIA TRUST

Commemorating United Nations International Widows Day 2023

House of Lords
United Kingdom
June 23, 2023



Chief Guest

Hon'ble Shri Tushar Mehta
Solicitor General, Government of India

Guest of Honour

H.E. Shri Vikram Doraiswami
High Commissioner of India to the Court of St James

Special Guests

Dr V.K. Raju
Founder of the Eye Foundation of America and UK



Mr Deepak Dwivedi
Trustee Chairman and Editor-in-Chief of the Blitz India Media Trust

Padma Bhushan Shri Dr Bindeshwar Pathak
Founder of Sulabh International Social Service Organisation

Mr Harjiv Singh, Chairman of Gutenberg Communications and
Trustee of The Loomba Foundation in India

Hon'ble Shri Tushar Mehta
H.E. Shri Vikram Doraiswami

International Widows Day



Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba became a widow on June 23, 1954 and devoted all her energies and resources to ensuring that her seven children, against all the odds, received a good education and every opportunity to succeed in life. The Loomba Foundation was established in her memory in 1997 to raise awareness of the plight of widows all over the world.

In December 2010 the United Nations General Assembly, after a five-year campaign by the Loomba Foundation, resolved that June 23 every year would be known as International Widows Day, a day of action to galvanise communities and member states to eradicate discrimination against widows wherever it occurs.



The first UN International Widows Day took place on June 23, 2011, fifty-seven years to the day since Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba became a widow.

Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba
Lady Cherie Blair, CBE, KC
Lord Raj Loomba, CBE

The story of International Widows Day

New York, December 21, 2010. The 65th General Assembly of the United Nations was gathered for its 75th plenary meeting when Ali Bongo Ondimba, president of the Republic of Gabon on the Atlantic coast of Africa, rose to speak.

His topic was the desperate plight of hundreds of millions of widows all over the world, women who for no reason other than the loss of their husband are ostracised by their communities; deprived of their livelihood and possessions; unable to support their children and all too often condemned to a life of indignity and destitution.

Economic empowerment is critical if we want to eradicate poverty, President Ondimba said, calling on member states, the UN and others to raise awareness about this issue. He called on the General Assembly to institute an annual day of action to fight discrimination against widows. The day, known as International Widows Day, would take place every year on June 23.

The journey to that meeting of the UN General Assembly had begun more than half a century earlier in Dhilwan, a small rural town in the state of Punjab in India, when local businessman Jagiri Lal Loomba succumbed to the still widespread scourge of tuberculosis. The date was June 23, 1954.

Jagiri's death was a tragedy for his wife Pushpa Wati and the family's seven children – but for their ten-year old son Raj, what happened next was a shock that was to stay with him for

the rest of his life. On the day of his father's passing, his grandmother ordered the young widow to remove her bangles, jewellery and bindi – the sign of a married woman – and henceforth to wear only white clothes. Raj had always known his mother as a happy and fulfilled person. Now she was instantly transformed into a troubled widow, shunned and facing unnecessary obstacles.

Pushpa Wati Loomba was determined to ensure her children's prospects were not harmed by the tragedy. The family was well provided for, and Pushpa Wati resolved to devote all her resources to ensuring that all the children, boys and girls, received the best education possible.

The plight of widows

As Raj Loomba came to realise years later, they were the lucky ones. Tens of millions of widows from poor backgrounds in India face penury, with customs and traditions making it even harder for them to support themselves, or to pay for their children's schooling. Many fall into destitution, with very little opportunity for their children to escape a similar fate.

So in 1997, after his mother had passed away, Raj and his wife Veena established a Foundation in his mother's memory to help poor widows and their families. Their first target was to fund the education of one hundred children in each of India's (then) twenty-nine states within ten years. They overshot their target within seven

years, building a nationwide programme that has transformed the lives of more than one hundred thousand people.

But Raj and his fellow trustees soon realised that the problem is by no means confined to India alone. Widows face abuse and discrimination in many countries, including in Asia and Africa. There was little or no prospect of this changing. The problem was quite simply not seen or acknowledged anywhere.

“It can be said,” a report by UNIFEM (the UN Development Fund for Women) stated in 2001, “that there is no group more affected by the sin of omission than widows. They are painfully absent from the statistics of many developing countries, and they are rarely mentioned in the multitude of reports on women’s poverty, development, health or human rights published in the last 25 years.”

But saying there’s a problem is not the same as doing something about it. In the early naughties, there seemed no chance this issue would ever rise to the consciousness of the international community.

The customs and prejudices that feed discrimination against widows are so deep-rooted that it would take the support of governments, international organisations, NGOs, researchers, educators, philanthropists and all people of goodwill to bring about significant change not just in legislation and

aid, but in changing the attitudes and cultures around widowhood. What was needed was a sustained campaign with visibility around the world.

On May 26, 2005, Raj Loomba and Cherie Blair, British prime minister Tony Blair’s wife – who had supported the cause from the outset and agreed to become the Foundation’s honorary president – launched International Widows Day at the House of Lords in London along with a campaign to persuade the United Nations to give it official recognition. The date chosen for it to take place each year, June 23, was when Raj Loomba, as a ten-year old boy, had lost his father and witnessed first-hand what then happened to his mother.

Alongside the campaign for international awareness, the Foundation expanded its aid operations, beyond its education focus, to economic empowerment, working with partners including the then Prince of Wales’ global charity Youth Business International, Oxfam GB, Rotary India Literacy Mission, Lions Clubs International and local providers to deliver skills training and equipment to thousands of widows across three continents, including in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Syria, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, South Africa, Guatemala and Chile.

In addition to fundraising activities to support and scale up the aid programmes, the work to raise global awareness proceeded apace.



Lord Loomba with HM King Charles III, four days before the King's coronation. The Loomba Foundation partnered with the then Prince of Wales' global charity, Youth Business International, to deliver widows empowerment schemes in eight countries in South Asia and Africa.

The first International Widows Day, on June 23, 2005, was marked with the release by local schoolchildren of a swarm of multi-coloured balloons at London's Tower Bridge, with similar activities that day in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Uganda and South Africa. Four months later the initiative was launched in New York with a dinner at the UN attended by secretary-general Kofi Annan.

On June 23, 2006, the Foundation organised a conference at the Foreign Office in London with contributions from grassroots organisations alongside Commonwealth secretary-general Don McKinnon, India's minister for women and child development Renuka Chowdhury, British cabinet minister Baroness Amos, Yoko Ono, and, by video conference, Hillary Clinton – who at that time was US Senator for the state of New York. The conference was followed by an open-air Bollywood concert in Trafalgar Square and balloons were simultaneously released in London and New Delhi, the latter attended by one hundred children supported by the

Foundation, together with their mothers. The next year, Cherie Blair launched an airship over Trafalgar Square with simultaneous balloon releases in Nairobi, Dhaka and Colombo, while in New Delhi, cabinet minister Renuka Chowdhury spoke at a dinner committing herself to doing all she could to remove the taboos around widowhood.

A new front

In 2007 Raj Loomba opened an important new front in the campaign.

The more the Loomba Foundation had learned in its first decade, the more it recognised the truth of UNIFEM's comment about the "sin of omission"; so it resolved to gather the evidence needed to underpin policy making and legislation at national and international level with two significant initiatives.

The first, a survey of attitudes to widowhood in partnership with Chatham House, showed that prejudice and preconceptions were rife all over the world, in developed as well as developing countries.

The second was a detailed, country-by-country review of all the research and data that is available about widows and their circumstances. This saw a first iteration published in 2010 as the campaign for UN recognition reached its culmination, and the second, more in-depth World Widows Report



UN secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon, Cherie Blair and Raj Loomba at the United Nations, New York, 2010.

was published in 2016 and remains, for all the gaps and questions it highlights, the most comprehensive worldwide resource on the topic to date.

Signs that the campaign was working emerged in 2008, when the Foundation became an accredited NGO associated with the UN Department of Public Information.

Events to mark International Widows Day continued in many countries each year,

coordinated by The Loomba Foundation, and on June 22, 2010, Raj Loomba presented *Invisible Forgotten Sufferers*, a book about the plight of widows which had the first iteration of the Foundation's research review as an appendix, to UN secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon at a dinner attended by 27 UN permanent representatives in New York. The next day, International Widows Day was marked with events in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Nepal, Syria, South Africa, Rwanda, the United States and the United Kingdom.

Five years of campaigning, research and building support across the globe finally bore fruit when Gabon's resolution at the 65th General Assembly of the United Nations – that it should grant official UN recognition of International Widows Day – was adopted unanimously and on the first UN International Widows Day on June 23, 2011, secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon sent a message to all member states in which he said:

“All widows should be protected by the rights enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other international human rights treaties.

“But in reality, interpretations of customary codes, as well as traditional mourning and burial rites, often deny widows virtually all of their universally recognized rights.

“Despite the many difficulties widows face, many make valuable contributions to their countries and communities. Some take on leadership roles at the highest levels. Others work in their families, taking in orphans, serving as caregivers and reaching across lines of conflict to mend tears in the social fabric.

“We must recognize the important contribution of widows, and we must ensure that they enjoy the rights and social protections they deserve.”

It was a milestone, but Lord Loomba has always been clear that International Widows Day is not

an end in itself. It is a tool to help change the world, and the real campaign could now begin in earnest.

Annual events continued and when in-person events became impossible during the global Coronavirus pandemic, the Foundation hosted a virtual conference for International Widows Day in 2020, with a panel that included Lord Loomba, Mrs Blair, Sierra Leone's First Lady Mrs Fatima Maada Bio and leading representatives from Gabon and India.

The number of awareness-raising events has grown substantially since International Widows Day was adopted by the United Nations, and each year on June 23, the UN secretary-general sends a message to all member states to highlight the cause and urge them to take action.

The Loomba Foundation continues to be involved in organising such events and supporting others in their efforts in the ongoing campaign to eradicate discrimination against widows from the world.

The Foundation's commitment to research also continues, with plans for a detailed impact evaluation – both of the Foundation's own programmes to date, and of changes in attitudes, support provision and legislation since International Widows Day was introduced by the Foundation in 2005 and its adoption by the UN five years later



In 2022, the Loomba Foundation and the US-India Friendship Alliance, the charitable arm of the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum, entered into a jointly-funded skills training partnership to empower disadvantaged widows in India to become economically independent.

The first phase, due to complete by the end of 2024, is empowering five thousand widows and their youths in the state of Uttar Pradesh before the programme rolls out to support one hundred thousand widows across different states and union territories of India by the end of the decade.

The Loomba Foundation entered into a separate agreement with Lok Bharti (Lok Bharti Skilling Solutions Pvt. Ltd.) to deliver the programme through skills training for one thousand beneficiaries in Uttar Pradesh in five sectors matched to industry needs in the state.

Lok Bharti identified widows whose monthly family income is less than five thousand rupees, prioritising those with dependent children.

Identified employment opportunities include:

Hospitality

Housekeeping Executives; Tour Operators; Billing Executives; Food & Beverage Service Assistants; and Multi-Purpose Associates

Tourism

Tour Guides; Front Desk Executives; Transport Coordinators; and Travel Advisors

Apparel and Tailoring

Self Employed Tailor; Sewing Machine Operator; Bag & Other Uniform Stitchers

Beauty & Healthcare

Assistant Beauty Therapists; Assistant Hair Dressers & Stylists; Makeup Artists; and Retail Sales Associates

Food Processing

Pickle & Paste Making Technicians; Jam, Jelly & Ketchup Processing Technicians; Squash and Juice Processing Technicians



US-India Friendship Alliance director Dr Mukesh Ugh is honoured by Loomba Foundation president Lady Cherie Blair at the House of Lords, December 9, 2022 on the occasion of signing the partnership agreement with The Loomba Foundation..

From left: Mr Harjiv Singh, Lady Loomba, Lady Blair, Lord Loomba, Dr Mukesh Ugh and H.E. High Commissioner Shri Vikram K. Doraiswami.

Blitz India is the world's first and only weekly devoted to development news: tracking and discussing events and ideas in the world's fastest-growing economy as well as in the wider world. With a relentless focus on inclusive improvement in people's lives, Blitz offers a balanced, probing and constructive chronicle of events in today's India and beyond. Since its establishment in 2022, it has become a must-read for policymakers, thinkers, academics, industry leaders and intellectuals.

In the three decades since India seriously opened its economy, the country has become a major driver of economic development and innovation, in recent years turning its focus increasingly towards social goals and governance, shaping a nation fit to be a global leader in the twenty-first century – a time when increasingly the world looks to its fastest developing countries to find the best way forward for both the challenges and the opportunities we face.

By nourishing and challenging the thought leaders, Blitz India's focus on development is both a catalyst and stimulus for this process of "building a new nation" where – in the words of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals – "no-one is left behind".



Mr Deepak Dwivedi
Trustee Chairman and Editor-in-Chief, Blitz India

This is why we are proud to be associated with The Loomba Foundation on International Widows Day: leading the fight to eradicate poverty and injustice faced by widows to create a fairer and more sustainable world.

The rapid growth of Blitz India shows a real demand for the development journalism which the weekly paper has pioneered, driving plans for editions in all major cities in India alongside global editions, starting with the United Kingdom.



A World Without Childhood Blindness

As the World Bank has stated, combating childhood blindness is considered one of the most cost-effective health interventions. Established by Dr V.K. Raju in 1977, the Eye Foundation of America has helped millions of people in India and other countries fulfil their potential by screening and treating vision impairment.

Avoidable blindness often goes unnoticed, but its impact is felt by billions of people worldwide with some 2.2 billion individuals suffering from near or distant vision impairment. Alarmingly, nearly half of these could have been prevented or addressed.

For children, poor vision can have a profound impact on their education, particularly during critical developmental stages. Studies indicate that approximately 80% of learning occurs through vision. Consequently, even a minor visual impairment can significantly hinder a child's ability to learn and thrive academically.

Dr Raju conducted his first eye camp in rural India in 1977 and since then, EFA has screened 3.5 million patients and performed 340,000 surgeries - of which over 45,000 were children. The Foundation has plans to build a world-class service and research eye hospital in India where



Dr V.K Raju
Founder of the Eye Foundation of America and UK

no child will be denied treatment and new cures for age-old eye diseases in children will be developed.

The EFA's Goutami Eye Institute provides preventive screenings for up to three hundred patients daily and in 2023 was named best eye hospital by the state government of Andhra Pradesh, underlining EFA's unwavering commitment to exceptional patient care.

With our shared commitment to addressing unfair disadvantage and helping all people, particularly children, reach their full potential, Eye Foundation of America is proud to be associated with The Loomba Foundation on International Widows Day.



India Literacy Mission

On June 23, 2017, The Loomba Foundation partnered with the Rotary India Literacy Mission (RILM) to launch a scheme that delivers training and start-up support for 4,300 poor widows in five states in India.

Titled "Project Dignity", the scheme not only increased the numbers but also considerably extended the range of skills and trades that had previously been offered in the Foundation's empowerment programme, to include Beauty & Wellness, Health & Care, Security, Telecom Services, Tourism & Hospitality, Handicrafts, Food Processing, Textiles & Apparel, Agriculture and Automotive.

To date, 2,683 beneficiaries have entered training in five locations – Delhi, West Bengal, Bihar, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh – with 2,205 completing their certification and 1,924 placed in employment.

RILM is working with local partners to help identify, mobilise and train beneficiaries, including Lok Bharati Skilling Solutions, Frontline Software Services, Career College and Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.

Shakuntala Balu Barve is a 30-year-old widow with two children living in the city of Thane near Mumbai. Since the death of her husband they are living with his parents and her father-in-law was the only earner in the family which made it impossible to continue supporting the schooling of her sons aged 9 and 15.

Shakuntala was selected for the Loomba Foundation / RILM empowerment programme and entered training in beauty and wellness, where she did extremely well and was spotted by The Saj Studio, who hired her as an assistant beautician. Shakuntala now earns eight thousand rupees per month, which enables her to support herself and her young sons



THE LOOMBA FOUNDATION

The Loomba Foundation is a specialist non-governmental organization established to alleviate the plight of widows and their dependents worldwide and to eradicate discrimination and injustice against widows.



The Loomba Foundation
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