

25 years of The Loomba Foundation



THE LOOMBA FOUNDATION
Caring for widows around the world

THE LOOMBA FOUNDATION

www.theloombafoundation.org

Published by The Loomba Foundation,
London and New Delhi, 2022
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Produced for The Loomba Foundation by Images&Co
Printed by Gavin Martin

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Opposite The inspiration of the Loomba Foundation and International Widows Day, Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba, who was widowed on 23 June 1954.





Foreword

Lord Raj Loomba CBE

Opposite Lord and Lady Loomba

The plight of widows is, for me, both a global humanitarian issue and an intensely personal one. Veena and I established The Loomba Foundation 25 years ago because I had seen with my own eyes the humiliation and dramatic loss of social standing my mother had to endure when my father passed away on 23 June 1954. I was just 10. My mother was in the full bloom of life, aged 37, with seven children to bring up.

In such a situation at the best of times, a mother faces a daunting task to provide stability and continuity, with the love and guidance children need. My mother responded with determination: she used all her resources to make sure that all of us – girls and boys – received an excellent education, so that we could have the best chance in life. It was only many years later that I realised how lucky we had been. Fortunately for us, my father had left enough money, and my mother spent it educating all of us at the best institutions.

When my mother passed away, we could think of no better tribute to her memory than to enable other widows, who have no money or way of earning a living, to ensure their children are educated, so that their future prospects are not suddenly snatched away when their father dies.

This inspired the establishment of the Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba Foundation in 1997, and our first significant programme: to finance the education of children of poor widows in India.

This book tells the story of what we learned and what we achieved – reaching our targets, expanding our activities to empower widows to achieve economic independence, expanding our horizons to cover the globe, persuading the international community to help eradicate injustice and discrimination against widows.

We could not have done what we did without the dedicated support of many people and organisations, including members of the Royal Family, Governments, business leaders and individuals. I want to take this opportunity to extend a special heartfelt thanks to Lady Cherie Blair, CBE QC, who has supported our cause since 1998 and as our President since 2004, and who has worked with me tirelessly and selflessly to create global awareness throughout that time, and to the late Dr L.M. Singhvi, whose wise counsel was invaluable when we established the charity and who went on to serve as our Chair of Trustees in India for over a decade. Thanks are also due to Lord Dholakia and to our Patron-in-Chief Sir Richard Branson, both of whom have been steadfast in their support for the cause.

Now that we have garnered the world's attention we must redouble our efforts to achieve real change on the ground. So, as we celebrate the achievements of our first quarter century, I say this to all those who have supported us on the journey:

We have made a great start, and now we have the chance to bring about large-scale culture change. So while we celebrate the past, let us keep our eyes focused firmly on the future to eradicate this injustice from the world.

Chapter 1

Shining a light

Opposite Two widows at the Merra Sehbhagini Mahila Ashram in Vindravan.

Below The first Global Widows Study was published by the Loomba Foundation in 2010 as an addendum to Vijay Dutt's book *Invisible Forgotten Sufferers*.

In the closing years of the 20th century, widows were absent from the discourse about humanitarian issues. Anecdotally, we knew of suffering that had – through the ages – been inflicted on widows through practices such as Sati, the ritual self-immolation on the husband's funeral pyre, but we thought these horrors belonged to a distant past. We knew there were millions of poor widows in India and elsewhere, but we thought of that as a poverty issue, not specifically connected to their status as widows.

Awareness of the issue was localised, and campaigners for widows failed to make an impression on the global stage. There was little or no empirical evidence about the plight of widows. How many were there? How many lived below the poverty line? How were they affected, specifically, in different countries and cultures? What was the impact of their plight on dependents, on women and girls generally, and on wider society?

No-one knew.

This marginalisation was underlined by the UN's Division for the Advancement of Women, which 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 and human rights published in the last 25 years."

In 2010, a study published by the Loomba Foundation provided the first comprehensive, country by country, regional and global breakdown of data about widows. Five years later its successor, the World Widows Report, revealed that 38 million widows live in extreme poverty with basic needs unmet, and nearly a billion people overall are affected by the blight of widows discrimination.

In December 2010, following a five-year campaign by the Loomba Foundation, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted 23 June as its annual International Widows Day and every year since 2011, the United Nations Secretary-General has sent a message on this day to all Member States, reminding them of the plight of widows, the urgency of ensuring justice and its importance in delivering the Sustainable Development Goals. Many countries in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere have taken steps to provide targeted support and strengthen laws to combat prejudice. On 15 March this year, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution proposed by 54 African countries condemning all forms of discrimination against widows and calling upon Member States to act comprehensively to eradicate this injustice.





Today, on the thirteenth UN-accredited International Widows Day, the plight of widows is undeniably an issue that Governments and international organisations are aware of.

Raj Loomba, who with his wife Veena established the Loomba Foundation and launched it in 1998, is the first to say that the work is not done. There are still millions of widows and dependents living in abject poverty, suffering humiliating and degrading treatment. In numbers affected, the improved awareness has barely begun to scratch the surface. But more widows have come out of the shadows. There are more organisations – governmental as well as humanitarian and voluntary – to turn to. There are more routes to seek redress, even if it is still hard for many to find them. There are more programmes to help ensure dependent children get to school, and to help widows become economically independent.

This is the achievement of the Loomba Foundation in the quarter century since it was founded: to shine a light where previously there were only shadows, to bring together evidence and stimulate research on a global scale, to galvanise governments and the international community to recognise the importance of this issue and prioritise it in humanitarian policy development.

This volume recounts that journey: the origins of the idea, the obstacles faced and the many supporters – individuals, corporations and Governments – who have played such an important part in what has been achieved. And it looks ahead at what remains to be done in the years ahead, now with greater awareness, to finally eradicate the injustice of discrimination against widows from the world.

Chapter 2

Education: Breaking the cycle of deprivation

Right The launch in India by Prime Minister Vajpayee.



In India, there are some 46 million widows – almost 10% of the female population of marital age – and of these, more than 15 million live in abject poverty. If there is an inheritance it is often taken by the husband's relatives. By custom widows – even child widows – are not permitted to remarry and it is very hard for them to find any form of employment. As a consequence, their children are unable to continue their education and instead are put to work at a very young age to help support the family. The curse of widowhood thus sets in train a cycle of deprivation, with consequences that blight communities and last for many decades.

By funding the education of poor widows' children, the Loomba Foundation aimed not only to transform the conditions of individual families but also provide for a better future for all their members. The first aid programme began at the inauguration of the Loomba Foundation in India on 30 March 1999 by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, with the launch of the Delhi State Programme funding 49 girls and 51 boys up to secondary graduation, and beyond for those who

wished to go into higher education. This was part of a bigger target: to fund the education of at least 100 children of poor widows in each of India's 29 States.

To receive funding under the scheme, beneficiaries are selected purely on the basis of need, without regard to religion, ethnicity or gender. The Loomba Foundation is proud to support the education of children from all religions and social groups. When selected, the Foundation opens a bank account in the joint names of the mother and the scholar, and automatically transfers the scholarship sum into that account each month. Each Loomba scholar is guaranteed funding of 500 Rs per month for at least a five-year period. No payments are made to third parties.

When disaster strikes

The Loomba Foundation's programme in the East Coast state of Odisha was launched on 5 January 2001 after a major cyclone had caused 10,000 fatalities to educate 100 children who had lost their father (or in some cases both parents).

Just three weeks later another disaster struck, this time in Gujarat, in the far north-west of the country. The Bhuj earthquake, which registered 7.7 on the moment magnitude scale, killed 20,000 people, injuring a further 167,000 and destroying 400,000 homes. In the midst of such devastation, widows, lacking wider community support, are always hardest hit – and of course, thousands more are created with immediate consequences for themselves and their dependents. The Loomba Foundation responded by establishing a programme in Gujarat State to educate 50 children from Bhuj and 50 from Ahmedabad and surrounding areas. This programme was launched on 5 November 2001 by Edward Marsden, chairman of the British Council in India.



Opposite A senior class at the Shri Jagiri Lal Loomba Government Senior Secondary School in Dhilwan.

Right Sir Richard Branson, Patron-in-Chief of the Loomba Foundation, greets Loomba scholars.

Far right State Governor Gopalkrishna Gandhi of West Bengal congratulates a new Loomba scholar in class.



Gathering momentum

On 18 January 2002, India's then Finance Minister, Yashwant Sinha, launched the Rajasthan State Programme to educate 100 children of poor widows. Later that year, in July, the Punjab State Programme started with 100 students.

The Loomba Foundation's aid programme was picking up pace and the Punjab programme was one of four launched in 2003. The Andhra Pradesh State Programme with 100 Loomba scholars launched on 5 January. In July of that year, 66 girls and 34 boys in the State of Haryana became Loomba scholars and on 8 September, the Uttarakhand Pradesh programme for 110 scholars was launched. The last of the programmes to be launched in 2003, for 100 scholars, was inaugurated by the Deputy Prime Minister of India, Shri L.K. Advani in the State of Arunachal Pradesh in the far north-east of the country.

The Loomba Foundation partnered with the Sriram Welfare Foundation to deliver a jointly funded programme in the State

of Tamil Nadu for 200 beneficiaries, launched on 13 January 2004.

It was at the end of that year, on 26 December, that the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami struck, with devastating consequences for the entire region. The worst affected area in India was the Tamil Nadu district of Nagapattinam, where more than 6,000 fatalities were reported. The Loomba Foundation responded by establishing an extended scholarship programme in the State for a further 500 girls and boys who had lost their fathers or both parents, drawn mainly from the fishermen's villages in the district.

The year 2005 saw the introduction of six further State programmes: in Chhattisgarh, Jammu and Kashmir, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. Further programmes for 100 children each were launched in the States of Assam, Bihar, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkand, Karnataka, Kerala, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, bringing the total number of Loomba scholars by 2006 to 3,610.





Above Lord Loomba's late father, Shri Jagiri Lal Loomba.

Right The entrance to the refurbished and renamed school in Dhillwan.

A target achieved

The Loomba Foundation had beaten its first target, to educate 100 children of poor widows in each of India's 29 States within a decade, by three years, and broadened the reach of its programme. Today, the original Loomba scholars have completed their education and started building their careers on a sound foundation. New Loomba scholars have taken the place of those who have completed their education and to date, more than 10,000 children of poor widows have received Loomba scholarships for at least five years, directly transforming the lives of 60,000 people in their immediate families.

The Loomba Foundation's Education Programme would not have been possible without the generous support of our partners and donors, with individual benefactors including Shamin and Shiraz Lalji, Sheetal Kapoor and Ricky Kapoor, Martin Ciupa, Sir Richard Branson, Briyesh Nayyar and others, organisations including Sriram Welfare Foundation, the Hinduja Foundation and Rotary India Literacy Mission, and corporate partners including BT and Mellon Group Europe.

The Foundation has also undertaken projects to improve infrastructure, hygiene and sanitation in schools, including the refurbishment a school in Dhillwan, which was reopened in 2008 by Loomba Foundation President Cherie Blair and named by the Punjab State Government as the Shri Jagiri Lal Loomba Government Senior Secondary School, after Lord Loomba's father.

The importance of these achievements in transforming the lives of thousands cannot be overstated. It is still however a drop in the ocean worldwide, and more needs to be done to bring relief to the many millions of widows and their families still suffering poverty and discrimination.



Chapter 3

Empowerment: Helping widows to be independent

The Loomba Foundation's second principal aid programme, focusing on the empowerment of widows, was launched as the Foundation entered its second decade.

If in many villages, towns and cities and in numerous countries it is impossible for widows to find employment – whether because of discrimination or lack of skills – the inevitable consequence is that they must support themselves by other means, and all too often this leads to child labour, prostitution and other forms of exploitation. The Loomba Foundation's empowerment programme invests in skills training, equipment and microfinance to help widows set up in business and become independent.

In 2005, the Loomba Foundation launched an empowerment partnership with YBI – Youth Business International – a project of the Prince of Wales International Business Leaders Forum that helps disadvantaged people in many countries start up new sustainable businesses and create jobs. Branded the Loomba Entrepreneur Programme, this partnership venture has delivered support to widows in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Syria, Kenya, Uganda, Chile and Guatemala.

In Nairobi, the Loomba Entrepreneur Programme has been in contact with over 5,000 widows and orphans in nine communities. Some 300 of these participated in business skills training and 92 widows attended further workshop courses on how to start up a business. More than 40 widows and children of widows were given loans and business mentors and those already in business have received on-the-job skills training.

In Sri Lanka there was a large proportion of female-headed households due to internal conflict in the country, labour migration and the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. Working with local women's organisations, the Loomba Entrepreneur Programme identified women who were interested in starting their own business, leading on to training and investment in

jewellery, garment making and other businesses.

"Helping people help themselves in this way," said YBI Chief Executive Andrew Devenport, "has a hugely beneficial impact on the wellbeing of the families and employees." He pointed to reduced poverty and hunger, increased access to basic services, and reduced vulnerability to violence, disease and discrimination as some of the immediate benefits, alongside improvements in confidence and self-esteem, organisational skills and standing in the community for widows, their children and orphans.

Encouraged by the success of its partnerships with Youth Business International and Virgin Unite, in 2008 the Loomba Foundation launched the Loomba Entrepreneur Programme in South Africa to empower 100 young widows with the support of international and local NGOs.

In January 2008, the Foundation organised a landmark industry conference at Federation House, the headquarters of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) in New Delhi, looking at the role of corporate responsibility in the country's development with particular focus on empowerment of widows and educating their children. The conference highlighted the benefits of enabling India's widows to work for themselves and this led directly to a partnership with health and beauty expert Dr. Blossom Kochhar to offer tuition to 100 widows and potential investment in setting up a business which was launched in April 2008.

The Rwandan genocide in 1994 ravaged that country and – as with many conflicts and natural disasters – the hardest hit are those who are marginalised in the community: widows and their children. The Loomba Foundation had already learned a great deal about the specific issues faced by widows in sub-Saharan Africa from its successful partnerships with Youth Business International and Virgin Unite when a chance meeting

Opposite India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi launches the Loomba Foundation's empowerment programme in Varanasi.

Right Loomba Foundation empowerment project in Patna, Bihar.

Below Raj Loomba, Kigali Mayor Dr. Aisa Kacyira, Cherie Blair and Veena Loomba visit a Loomba empowerment project in Rwanda.

between the Mayor of Kigali, Dr. Aisa Kirabo Kacyira, and Raj Loomba at a Commonwealth Business Conference in 2009 led to an expansion of the Foundation's empowerment programme in that country. In partnership with Oxfam (GB), the Loomba Foundation delivered aid including training and startup funding to 350 Rwandan widows who were genocide survivors.

In 2012, the Loomba Foundation launched a new initiative to empower 10,000 poor widows in India by providing each with training in garment-making as well as a sewing machine. By enabling these widows to earn money independently, an impact report from Northampton University has calculated that this scheme has directly benefited some 100,000 dependents by supporting the family and enabling children to continue in education. New local projects were launched in Bihar, Delhi, Andhra Pradesh and Puducherry in 2013; and in March 2014 the Foundation launched a partnership with Lions Clubs International, which included the donation of 2,000 sewing machines for widows in India.



In August 2014, Punjab Chief Minister Prakash Singh Badal launched an empowerment scheme for 2,000 widows. Later that year saw the launch of further schemes in Delhi NCR, for 120 widows including 40 who were prisoners; in Mumbai, for 524 widows; Patna, Bihar (41); New Delhi (83); Hyderabad (51); Srikakulam, Telangana (280); and Puducherry (100).



According to the 2011 Population Census of India, the holy city of Varanasi in the State of Uttar Pradesh is home to 90,000 widows, and on 22 January 2016 the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, who represents Varanasi in the Lok Sabha, launched the Foundation's programme to train and support 5,000 poor widows in the city, which was fully delivered in just over two years.



Below Chris Parsons cycling on NH44 from Kanyakumari to Sankarnagar Day as he embarks on his Cycle for Widows fundraising challenge..

Assets to society

The Central Jail in the Haryana State city of Ambala was the setting for the launch of an empowerment scheme for 1,000 widows and women prisoners across all 19 district jails of Haryana. The project was launched on 23 December 2016 by Haryana’s Health, Sport and Youth Minister Anil Vij and Lord Loomba, who emphasised the Loomba Foundation’s mission “to make prisons a place of reformation and give the incarcerated beings a chance to become an asset to society upon their release.”

New schemes

In 2017 the Loomba Foundation began its programme to empower 2,000 widows in Vrindavan, often described as the ‘City of Widows’, and Amethi, including the distribution of sewing machines through its partnership with Lions Club International, which had been launched at an event in New Delhi on 8 August 2016.

On 23 June 2017, the Loomba Foundation in partnership with the Rotary India Literacy Mission launched a scheme that delivered training and startup support for 4,300 poor widows in five States. This programme not only increases the numbers but also considerably extends the range of skills and trades offered, including Beauty & Wellness, Health & Care, Security, Telecom Services, Tourism & Hospitality, Handicrafts, Food Processing, Textiles & Apparel, Agriculture and Automotive.

Loomba Foundation supporter and champion Chris Parsons raised many thousands of dollars for widows back in 2011 when he cycled from London to Gibraltar and in 2015 with his “Walk for Widows”, walking 30 marathons in 30 days in India. On 3 February 2020, just weeks before the world was paralysed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Chris embarked on his next venture, to raise US\$450,000 to empower 5,000 widows and dependent youths in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. His plan was to cycle 4,500 km in 45 days, from Kanyakumari in the south to Srinagar in the north. In the event he had almost achieved his ultimate objective when the pandemic forced him to cut short the journey at Jammu on the 41st day. Due in no small measure to his heroic efforts, however, the empowerment programme is now under way.



Chapter 4

Unseen, invisible, unheard: A global story



PHOTO © 2016 AMY TOENSING.

Above Recently widowed Solome Sekimuli and her family in Luwero District, Uganda faced eviction after her husband died.

The Loomba Foundation began its programmes to care for poor widows and their children in India because that is where the charity's founders, Raj and Veena Loomba, had experienced first hand the injustice of entrenched attitudes towards widowhood, and also because the scale of the problem in that country is vast.

The more they spoke up about the marginalisation of widows, however, the more they came to realise that this issue is by no means confined to India, or even South Asia, alone. Customs vary from country to country and region to region, but in many parts of the world widows are at the bottom of the social heap – abused, cast out of society, deprived of their property and sometimes of their children too. All too often they are invisible and unheard, the poorest of the poor, unable to support their own dependants. As in India, so too in other parts of the world, the impact of this discrimination is highly detrimental for society as a whole, since it destabilises communities, creates extreme poverty that can last for generations, and gives rise to prostitution, drug trafficking, slavery, child labour and violence.

It was clear – as confirmed by the UN's Division for the Advancement of Women in 2001 – that the world was largely ignorant of the severity, prevalence and wider societal impact of discrimination against widows, and the Loomba Foundation resolved to address this with research and evidence capable of underpinning meaningful action.

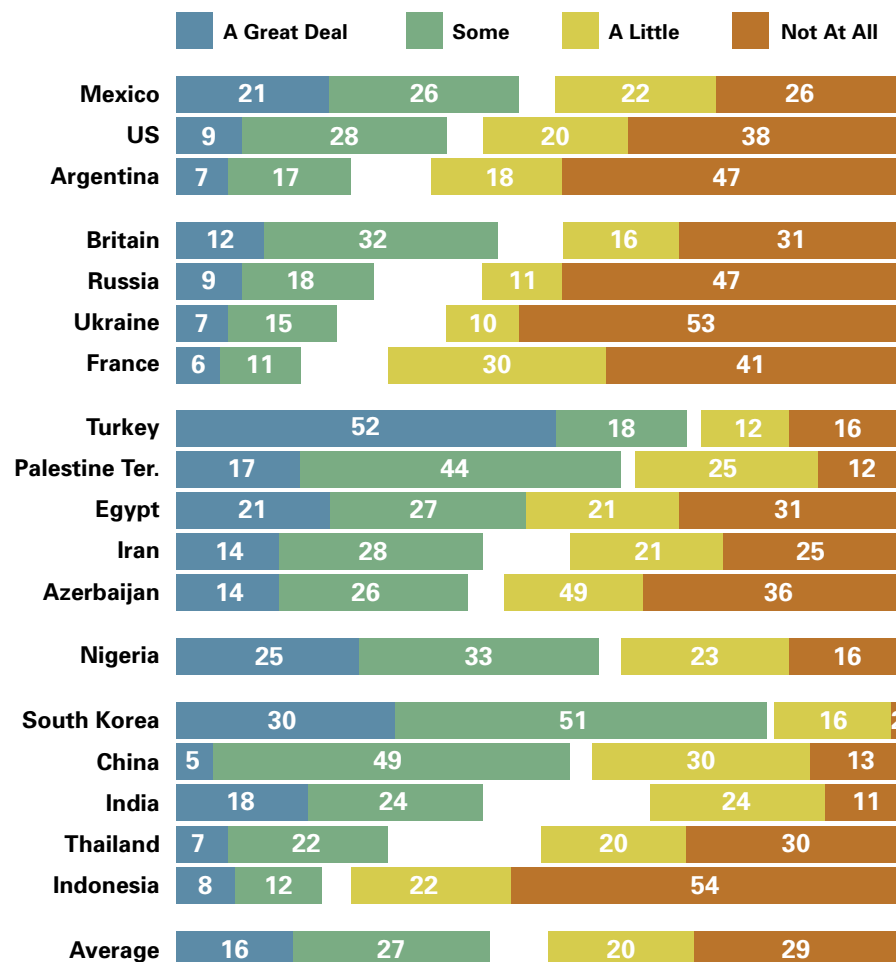
Chapter 5

The facts: Researching and disseminating data about the plight of widows

Right World Public Opinion and Chatham House survey.

“To what extent are women in your country who are widowed treated worse than other women?”

In 2008, a Loomba Foundation-commissioned survey of 18 countries across all continents by World Public Opinion and the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House found a widespread perception that widows were socially disadvantaged with, on average, 63% reporting that widows were treated worse than the general female population: evidence that widows’ deprivation is not exclusive to any one society, religion or region.

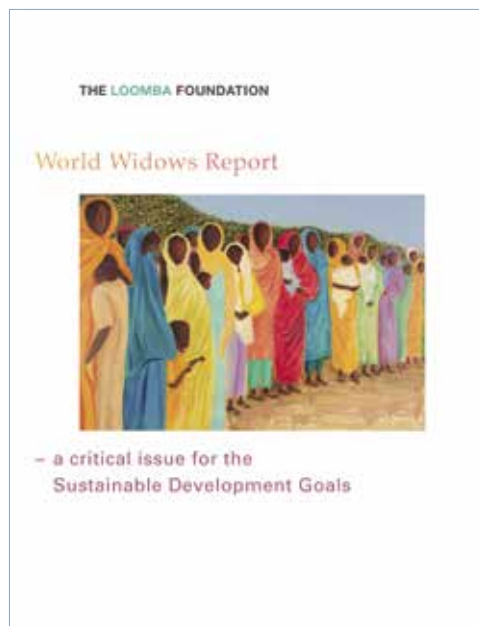


In 2010, in an appendix to the book *Invisible Forgotten Sufferers* by Vijay Dutt, the Loomba Foundation published a Global Widows Study, examining disparate existing data sources to establish widow numbers in different regions of the world, their relative proportion in the female population, principal causes and drivers of widowhood underlying these numbers, traditions and customs that lead to abuse, and the social and economic impact of discrimination.

Five years later, in 2015, the Foundation published the World Widows Report, offering a unique complete, country by country, regional and global quantitative breakdown of data about widows.

The World Widows Report brings together data from national and international census archives with disparate and inaccessible material from unusual and hard to find sources, including in-depth studies in academic journals and reports by international development organisations. Its findings included:

- The global affected population numbers 258m widows with 585m children.
- Of these, 38m widows live in extreme poverty where basic needs are unmet.
- Since 2010 there has been a significant exacerbation in conflict areas in the Middle East and North Africa, notably the Syrian civil war.
- Worst affected by conflict are widows in Afghanistan, Iraq, South Sudan, Central African Republic and Syria; by the Boko Haram insurgency, those in northeast Nigeria, southeast Niger, west Chad and north Cameroon.
- In Sub-Saharan Africa the worst conditions are faced by evicted and abandoned widows with dependants and by those caught up in the Ebola crisis areas, which is further exacerbated by traditional ‘cleansing’ rituals.



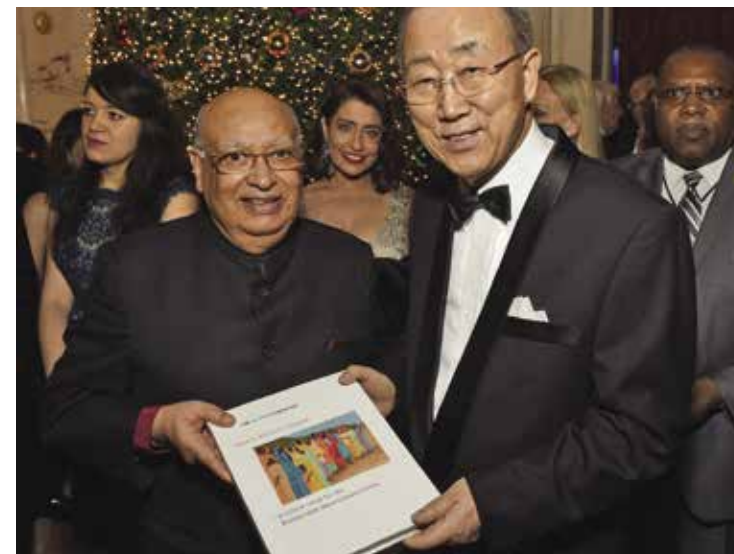
Above *The World Widows Report*, Loomba Foundation, London, 2015.

Right Presenting the World Widows Report to Prime Minister Modi of India (left) and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon (right).

- Widows with only female children and child widows aged between 10 and 17 face severe discrimination in many developing countries.
- Social norms around sexual behaviour remain counterproductive with extreme poverty as a driver of 'exchange sex' and 'survival sex' relationships and poor quality healthcare.
- Widows in western and developed countries have also been affected by cutbacks in social welfare and increased insecurity.
- Customary 'cleansing' rituals, where widows are required to drink the water with which their dead husband's body has been washed and to have sex with a relative, continue to spread disease and violate the dignity of widows in many Sub-Saharan countries.
- Widows are regularly accused of killing their husbands either deliberately or through neglect – including by transmitting HIV/ AIDS – in India, Nepal, Papua New Guinea and Sub-Saharan Africa.

- Systematic seizure of property and evictions by the late husband's family remains widespread in Angola, Bangladesh, Botswana, Republic of Congo, DR Congo, India, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

To aid and encourage further research, the data in the World Widows Report has been available in machine-readable format on the Foundation's website at www.theloombafoundation.org/our-work/research. Researchers are encouraged to inform the Loomba Foundation and, where appropriate, submit their work for publication or inclusion in future editions of the World Widows Report.





Chapter 6

International Widows Day

Opposite Presenting the first global widows study to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon in 2010, from left: USA Trustee Dr Peter Rajsingh, researcher Valerie Karr, Lady Blair, Lord Loomba and India Trustee Balbir Kakar.

Right Lord and Lady Loomba with Lady Blair and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Below right Lord Dholakia, Lady Blair and Lord Loomba at the 2005 launch of International Widows Day at the House of Lords, London.



A global day of action

As we have seen, the Loomba Foundation extended its reach beyond India, with education and empowerment programmes in other countries across Asia, Africa and South America. Raj Loomba realised, however, that the problem could never be fully addressed without concerted global action to raise awareness, fight injustice and change deep-rooted cultures. This is why, on 26 May 2005, the Loomba Foundation launched a flagship new

initiative: to designate 23 June as International Widows Day – a global day of action to bring the plight of widows to the attention of the world, so that in time it may be eradicated. On the day the initiative was launched at the House of Lords in London, Raj Loomba also initiated a campaign to persuade the United Nations to give the initiative its official recognition.

From the beginning, International Widows Day galvanised support from a wide range of organisations: grassroots organisations, NGOs, governments, corporations and individuals around the world.

The first International Widows Day, on 23 June 2005, was marked by the release of coloured balloons by local schoolchildren at Tower Bridge in London, and by similar activities in other countries including India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Uganda and South Africa. On 21 October 2005, the Loomba Foundation launched the International Widows Day initiative at a dinner attended by Secretary-General Kofi Annan and hosted by the United Nations Association in New York, in the UN Delegates Dining Room.





Above Yoko Ono and Hillary Clinton address the first International Widows Conference at the Foreign Office in London.

Opposite Open-air Bollywood concert in Trafalgar Square, London.

Building up support

Every effort was made to engage governments and the international community. On 23 June 2006, the second International Widows Day, the Loomba Foundation sponsored an International Widows Conference at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in London with the Prince of Wales as Patron-in-Chief. Chaired by Loomba Foundation President Cherie Blair, with broadcaster Alastair Stewart as master of ceremonies, the conference heard from grassroots widows organisations' representatives, alongside a wide range of speakers including Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon; India's Minister for Women and Child Development Renuka Chowdhury; British Cabinet Minister Baroness Amos; John Lennon's widow Yoko Ono; and, by video conference, Senator Hillary Clinton of New York – all pledging support to this long overdue global initiative.

Following the conference, an open-air Bollywood concert took place in Trafalgar Square, attended by 300 VIP guests and thousands of members of the public. Presented by Indian TV personality Shekhar Suman, the concert included performances by 4x4 Bhangra Group; Kashmir Shah; Sophia; Sunidhi Chauhan and Bhangra icon Jazzy B, who sang tracks from his chart-topping albums. After the concert, multi-coloured balloons were released by Cherie Blair in Trafalgar Square and, simultaneously, by Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit in New Delhi, in a ceremony attended by the Delhi State Health Minister and 100 Loomba scholars with their widowed mothers. The events of the day were widely reported in British, Indian and international media.

Loomba Foundation President Cherie Blair launched a 'blimp' airship in Trafalgar Square to highlight the third International Widows Day in 2007. Balloons were simultaneously released in Nairobi, Dhaka and Colombo, while in New Delhi, India's Minister for Women and Child Development Renuka Chowdhury was the Chief Guest at a dinner to celebrate both International

Widows Day and the Loomba Foundation's tenth anniversary. Mrs. Chowdhury commended the Foundation's pioneering work and committed herself to doing all she could to remove the taboo of widowhood, to give widows a chance to live a life of fulfilment and dignity. This event was presided over by Dr L.M. Singhvi, the Chair of Trustees in India.

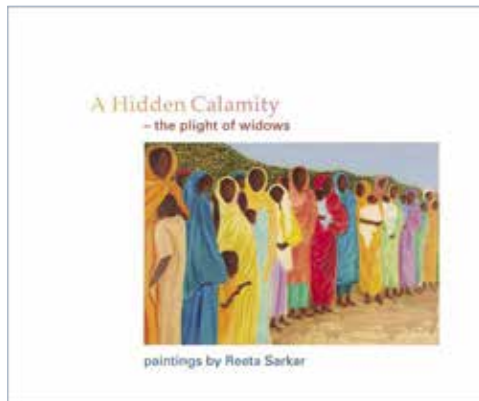
Milestones

Three years after the launch of the Loomba Foundation's initiative, the critical importance of the cause was becoming more widely accepted and understood among governments and international organisations, and in recognition of the Foundation's work, Raj Loomba was appointed a CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) by Queen Elizabeth II. There was no let-up, however, in the Foundation's determined campaign to make International Widows Day a UN-designated global day of action.

On 23 June 2008, the fourth International Widows Day, white doves were released from Trafalgar Square, London, after an open-air concert presented by the GMTV broadcaster Clare Nasir featuring the Icelandic opera singer Cortes; Bhangra musicians Malkit Singh and Channi Singh; Bollywood dancer Honey Kalaria and Bhangra singer Mona Singh. Balloons were released at ceremonies in Leicester, New Delhi, Dhilwan, Colombo and Nairobi, with meetings and ceremonies also taking place in Damascus, Kathmandu and New York.

One week later an important milestone was achieved on the road to UN recognition. On 30 June 2008, the Loomba Foundation received accreditation as an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) associated with the UN's Department of Public Information, supporting its role in raising awareness about the plight of widows internationally, and on 31 July, Dr. Paul Kagame, the President of Rwanda, wrote to the Secretary-General urging recognition of International Widows Day.





Above *A Hidden Calamity* by Reeta Sarkar.

Right Sir Richard Branson at the Starfish project in South Africa.

The fifth International Widows Day was marked on 23 June 2009 with an appeal by Loomba Foundation President Cherie Blair to the United Nations to give the day its official recognition. Founder Chairman Raj Loomba underlined the global importance of the cause. "Poverty is the curse of mankind – but when you put it in the context of widows and their children, it creates a new dimension in inhumanity." Events to mark the day took place in London, New York, New Delhi, Kathmandu, Nairobi, Colombo and Dacca.

South Africa

In 2006 the Foundation joined forces with Virgin Unite, the charitable arm of Sir Richard Branson's group of companies, to provide community rehabilitation support for 1,500 HIV and AIDS orphans in South Africa, managed by the Starfish Greathearts Foundation in five townships near Johannesburg over 18 months.



A hidden calamity

Ever since the Loomba Foundation was established, an important part of its work was to build up knowledge about the nature and extent of discrimination against widows, first throughout India and then around the world. On 22 June 2010, the eve of the sixth International Widows Day, an exhibition of paintings on the subject of widows by Reeta Sarkar titled *A Hidden Calamity* was opened by Yoko Ono in the United Nations building in New York, and the Loomba Foundation published *Invisible Forgotten Sufferers: The Plight of Widows around the World*. This is an impassioned account by Vijay Dutt which incorporated, as an addendum, *The Global Widows Report*, the first ever worldwide study of the issue.

The next day, events marking the sixth International Widows Day were held in 11 cities in four continents. An evening reception in the Map Room at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in London brought together many of the Loomba Foundation's longstanding supporters. In Birmingham, Lord Mayor Councillor Len Gregory released balloons outside the Town Hall with local schoolchildren. At an evening function in New Delhi a ceremonial lamp was lit and guests heard from a range of speakers, including Mrs. Ravinder Kaur, a widow who had benefited from the Loomba Foundation's empowerment programme, and a video message from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

The Bangladesh Youth Enterprise Advice and Helpline (B'Yeah) paid tribute to widows at a special event attended by ten widows, including two who were direct beneficiaries of Loomba programmes. One of these, Mrs. Amena Begum, related how she was left destitute a year earlier when her husband died, but thanks to the Loomba empowerment programme she had been able to set up her own business, now employing four other needy women in the community. Mrs. Begum was awarded the B'Yeah Entrepreneur of the Year Award. In Sri Lanka, the fourth consecutive International Widows Day event was celebrated in



Hambantota and organised by the Hambantota Youth Business Programme in collaboration with the Women Development Federation. The day included a release of balloons at Hambantota District Chamber of Commerce and a meeting at the Nimbarama Temple in Hambantota where plants were distributed among 150 widows. With support from the Loomba Foundation, Hambantota Youth Business Programme has provided financial and mentoring support to 48 underprivileged members of female-headed households aimed at creating economic independence.

In Nairobi, the International Widows Day event organised by Kenya Youth Business Trust brought together widows including Loomba Entrepreneurs who had been trained and supported under the Foundation's empowerment programme and who were interviewed by a local radio station, sharing their personal experiences since receiving loans and the differences they have made in their communities through their economic independence. In Nepal, where 40 women were receiving support under the Loomba empowerment programme, a rally was organised in the cultural city of Bhaktapur.

BIDAYA, Youth Business International's network member in Syria, celebrated International Widows Day by planting a tree in the botanical garden near the Damascus Citadel as a common symbol of hope, while in Gauteng Province, South Africa, schoolchildren released 300 orange balloons to mark the day.

A week later, on 30 June, Oxfam and the agricultural cooperative UCODIP held a meeting in Kigali, Rwanda, to highlight the importance of action on widows and promote International Widows Day.

Success

Five years after the Loomba Foundation launched its initiative, its campaign bore fruit. On 22 December 2010 the United Nations General Assembly, on a motion proposed by president Ali Bongo

Ondimba of Gabon, unanimously resolved to adopt International Widows Day as an officially recognised global day of action, to take place every year on the date when, in 1954, Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba had become a widow: 23 June.

In 2011, the Loomba Foundation's Chairman Trustee Raj Loomba was elevated to the House of Lords, offering an additional and effective platform for raising important humanitarian issues including the plight of widows, and on 23 June – the first UN-recognised International Widows Day – the United Nations organised an International Widows Conference at the United Nations in New York chaired by Mme Ban Soon-Taek, wife of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, with Lord Loomba and Mrs. Blair both participating.

The following year, on 23 June 2012, UK Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg and his wife, Miriam González Duránte, hosted a reception to mark International Widows Day at 10 Downing Street in London.

The reception was preceded by a Celebrity Walk on London Bridge, organised by the Loomba Foundation to raise awareness of the plight of widows and their children around the world. Exercising an ancient right held by Freeman of the City of London which allows him to walk livestock over the bridge, Lord Loomba led a herd of 20 goats accompanied by 20 prominent women, including Loomba Foundation President Cherie Blair, the singer and entertainer Cilla Black and media celebrity Nancy Del'Olio. The walk symbolised the fact that goats are a lifeline for many widows in South Asia and across Africa, providing milk and carrying water and firewood from faraway places to their homes.

The Loomba Foundation's expertise and valuable contribution on the subject of worldwide discrimination against widows was further recognised when in July 2012 it was granted Special Consultative Status by the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

Top President Ondimba of Gabon introduces the Resolution to adopt International Widows Day at the UN General Assembly.

Above Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg addresses guests at the Banqueting House, London.



Opposite Cilla Black, Cherie Blair and Raj Loomba.

Right International Widows Day virtual Conference, 2021.

In 2013, the third UN-recognised International Widows Day was marked by events in many countries, including a five-kilometre charity run in Hyde Park with participants from all over England.

The following day, an International Widows Day Conference at the House of Lords heard from the Acting Head of UN Women, Lakshmi Puri, politicians from the UK and India, and campaigners including Bianca Jagger. In recognition of the Foundation’s achievements in making the international community aware of the widespread discrimination against widows, UN Women appointed Lord Loomba its first Women’s Rights Champion.

The 20th anniversary of the Loomba Foundation was marked with a special event in London on 22 June 2017, when Loomba Foundation Patron Dame Joanna Lumley launched a blimp outside the Palace of Westminster. The following day, International Widows Day, a Gala Dinner at the Dorchester Hotel was attended by the High Commissioner of India and the First Lady of Rwanda among 300 distinguished guests.

The following year, International Widows Day was celebrated with a special event at the Vigyan Bhawan in New Delhi with 800 guests including the Vice-President and Law and Justice Minister of India.

Varanasi was the Foundation’s focus for International Widows Day in 2019 with an event attended by 250 widow beneficiaries of the Empowerment Programme, with the Minister for Women’s Welfare, Mother and Child Welfare in the State of Uttar Pradesh as Chief Guest, while on the next day in London Lord Loomba hosted a dinner in the Cholmondeley Room at the House of Lords on the theme of Skills for Widows.

When in-person events became impossible during the global Coronavirus pandemic, the Loomba Foundation hosted a virtual conference for International Widows Day 2020, with a panel

comprising Lord Loomba; Loomba Foundation President Cherie Blair; Sierra Leone’s First Lady Mrs Fatima Maada Bio; Ms Simone Mensah, the Vice President of the Sylvia Bongo Ondimba Foundation in Gabon; the CEO of Indian Government Agency Niti Aayog, Mr Amitabh Kant; and Loomba Foundation Trustees Dr Peter Rajsingh and Mr Harjiv Singh.

The number of events to raise awareness around the world has grown substantially since International Widows Day was adopted by the United Nations, and each year on 23 June the UN Secretary-General sends a message to all member states to remind them of the issue. The Loomba Foundation continues to be involved in organising such events and supporting others in their efforts. In this way, International Widows Day has become established as a cornerstone in the ongoing campaign to eradicate all discrimination against widows from the world.



Chapter 7

Today

Right Lord Loomba speaking in the House of Lords to urge Government support for mothers fleeing Ukraine with their children. 17 May 2022.

In natural disasters and calamities, it is always the weakest who suffer first, most acutely, and for the longest time. Conflicts and wars, through greater male mortality, drive up numbers of widows, and they also fuel sexual violence against women. Mindful of the impact on widows and single mothers, the Loomba Foundation has made every effort to support those affected by the global health pandemic and by the conflicts in Afghanistan, Ukraine and elsewhere.

In April 2020, the Loomba Foundation donated 100,000 surgical face masks to Niti Aayog in India, to help fight against Covid-19. The Loomba Foundation worked closely with HLL Lifecare Ltd, a nodal company of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India.

When Afghanistan fell to the Taliban in August 2021, Lord Loomba raised questions in the House of Lords urging the Government not only to help those fleeing the country, but also to support women and girls who were left behind.

In 2022, the war in Ukraine has seen millions fleeing that country, the majority mothers with dependent children. Lord Loomba has proposed a debate in the House of Lords to ensure their particular needs are considered and addressed, and the Loomba Foundation has launched a partnership with Barnardos to support refugee families in Britain.



PHOTO © 2022 parliamentlive.tv

Chapter 8

Impact and the future

Right Mrs Bakkiyalakshmi is a 34-year old widow with two young sons, supported by the Assisi Aid Project, India.

The impact of a quarter century's campaigning – and in particular the global annual focus of the UN-accredited International Widows Day since 2011 – is nowhere better illustrated than in Resolution 76/252 adopted by the UN General Assembly on 15 March 2022 “addressing the situation of widows” – something unimaginable in 1997 when widows were absent from the international policy discourse.

Yet as the wording of the Resolution makes clear, this awareness is a starting point for action, not a destination in itself. It recognises that “all aspects of life for widows in many parts of the world are negatively affected by various economic, social and cultural factors, such as lack of access to inheritance, land tenure, employment and/or livelihood, social safety nets, health care and education, harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage”; and that “laws, policies, customs, traditions and practices that act to restrict women's, including widows', equal access to credit and loans also prevent them from owning and inheriting land, property and housing and exclude them from participating fully in development processes, and that they are discriminatory and contribute to increasing the poverty of women and girls”.

The Resolution notes, as the Loomba Foundation has argued for many years, “the absence of high-quality, reliable, timely and disaggregated data and gender statistics on the estimates of widowhood and particular information on the needs and roles of widows, which prevents comprehensive and useful analysis and policy action”; and calls on Member States “to collect and analyse high-quality, timely, reliable and globally comparable data on the status of widows, disaggregated by age, sex, income, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographical location or other characteristics relevant in national contexts, in order to close the existing information gap on widowhood and ensure that future surveys and censuses accurately report on household composition and the relationships of household members and female heads of households and correctly designate widowhood



status, and ... to provide support for developing countries for capacity-building on data collection”.

It details many more of the ways in which widows, and by extension all women and girls, are severely affected by this discrimination and calls on all Member States as well as the UN and other organisations “to acknowledge the situation of widows and urgently address all forms of discrimination, violence, marginalization, stigmatization and exclusion experienced in certain parts of the world by widows of all ages and to work towards eliminating all forms of discrimination against widows and ending harmful practices”, listing a number of areas such as inheritance, registration of customary marriages, social protection and economic empowerment as important areas where action should be taken.

Right Fati Abigail Abdulai, Executive Director of the Widows and Orphans Movement, Ghana..

Below right International Widows Day event organised by the Cometotogether Widows and Orphans Organisation in Kenya.



A Loomba Foundation survey of widows support organisations carried out this year in 11 countries confirmed that much remains to be done to deliver progress for widows on the ground.

In India, Assisi Aid Projects reports that its efforts are focused on enabling widows to “learn about their rights and advocacy skills and attempt to influence their local state and community governments to implement supportive legislation.” Several organisations point to the existence of a state pension scheme for widows, which one describes as “very very meagre but everything starts from one step”.

In Nepal, the Women for Human Rights group says International Widows Day has helped to mainstream widows’ issues and led to a number of social security schemes.

Sri Lanka’s Centre for Equality and Justice is more critical, saying that “not much is done and this issue is not given any priority by the State Government. At local level, it is ad hoc and is dependent on who is at the decision-making levels.”

While in Ghana there has for many years been an Intestate Succession Law that in theory protects the rights of widows, the Widows and Orphans Movement there reports that in practice little is done to enforce such rights. “In northern Ghana,” they say, “women are not allowed to inherit property, especially land. Laws have been passed – including this year the Land Act which reiterates the rights of women to inherit land, but “little work is done to attain these outcomes. Most communities continue to practise customs that do not uphold and promote the dignity of widows and orphans, and instead encourage dehumanising widowhood rites.”

The Cometotogether Widows And Orphans Organization in Kenya is more optimistic, praising the Government for adopting policies to help widows. In Malawi by contrast, the Women for Fair Development organisation reports that talking about widows

Right Dr. Eleanor Nwadinobi,
President of the Widows
Development Organisation in Nigeria.

discrimination “is a taboo because they are not economically empowered” and they express the hope that International Widows Day can help make a difference.

The Great Trinitas International Charity Foundation in Nigeria reports that “In 2015, the Nigerian government outlawed stigmatizing practices against widows under the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Law, and offenders are subject to a 500,000 naira (\$1,220) fine or two years in prison, but so far only 23 out of Nigeria’s 36 states have formally adopted these laws into their own statutes, as cultural practices continue nationwide regardless of the law.” A lot still needs to be done, they say, “as maltreatment and actions against widows are still being practiced widely in Nigeria irrespective of the government laws”

HEART Care for Widows Welfare, also in Nigeria, echoes the sentiment, saying that “the main issue is the enforcement of the laws and making them public known to widows through establishment of communication channels.” The Widows and Orphans Empowerment Organization adds that “not much has been done on implementing legislation to support widows in Okigwe local government or Imo State in Nigeria”.

In Rwanda the national Government and the Municipality of Kiguya have actively supported some of the Loomba Foundation programmes, and the Survivors Fund (SURF) in that country reports that “Rwanda reformed the succession law, to enable the surviving spouse to inherit property. Also, matrimonial law was revised so that a widow will no longer have to wait for 300 days from the death of her first husband in order to remarry”.

The Jamil and Nyanga Jaward Foundation in Sierra Leone point out that legislation does not mean the job is done, saying that “establishing the rights of women when it comes to inheritance and the registration of customary marriages in 2007 has been an important step in improving the status of women, which is the primary challenge that women face when their husbands die



Opposite The Loomba Family at the House of Lords, 2019, from left to right: Samantha Loomba, Devina Loomba, Roma Loomba, Lady Loomba, Lord Loomba, Reeta Sarkar, Rinku Loomba, Raashi Sarkar, Arisa Loomba.

Below Advocate Bonnie Mzimba, Executive Director of the Powerhouse Development Services, South Africa,

as interference and dispossession by extended families is still rife, because enforcement is currently poor." They state that the campaign "has not yet had any meaningful impact," adding that "the problems widows experience when we started working in Sierra Leone are still prevalent"

In South Africa, PowerHouse Development Services point to the country's progressive constitution as a safeguard for women. "The courts have been instrumental in the development of the law because widows are now empowered to seek legal help and fight for their rights. They are no longer afraid and those in far flung rural areas are assisted to secure their legal rights and their dignity." This is, they say "an area of further lobbying and programme development for PowerHouse Development Services. There is a continued need to push back on the traditional and patriarchal standpoint on widowhood in South Africa"

The Centre for Widows and Children Assistance in Tanzania inform us that "the Government has not yet enacted laws to

support widows" and that the customary law of inheritance, which discriminates against widows and girls, remains in force. They add however that "the Government, through the Ministry of Community Development, Gender and Children, together with other stakeholders, has developed a strategic plan on the issue of widows." The Government's positive intent is also hailed by the Tanzania Widows Association, which says that "our Government support us on preparation and commemorating, and they always speak on measures that will be taken to protect widows."

Gradually but encouragingly, greater awareness leads to definitive action that can make a difference.

In February this year, a Bill presented to the House of Representatives in Nigeria to prohibit discrimination against widows and all forms of repressive and degrading widowhood practices passed its Second Reading and was referred to the Women's Affairs Committee for further legislative action.

In May, the Government of Maharashtra, India's most populous state whose cities include Mumbai, Pune and Nagpur, banned ancient widowhood rituals outright on the grounds that they violate human rights, dignity of women and such practices have no place in the era of modern science.

There is growing goodwill based on greater knowledge, but we have still only scratched the surface of the problem, and so we will continue working with Governments, international organisations and partners around the world, raising awareness through International Widows Day and carrying out further research to underpin policy and, ultimately, to change cultures so that girls and women can fulfill their potential, and widows can take their rightful place as valued and treasured members of all our communities.





Contact

THE LOOMBA FOUNDATION

To keep up to date with the campaign for widows and the work of the Loomba Foundation, follow us on

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