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Weaving a Web of Support for Widows Worldwide



Margaret Owen with widows of Rwanda

Widowhood Changed The Way I Looked At Human Rights

by Margaret Owen © Margaret Owen – 2005

Founder of Empowering Widows in Development (EWD), now renamed Widows' Rights International (WRI), and now convenor of the network WIDOWS FOR PEACE THROUGH DEMOCRACY(WPD)

DATE: 11/15/05 **ORIGIN:** EUROPE / U.K.

In all the years that I had worked as an international lawyer, in areas of women's status – immigration and asylum, family planning and abortion rights, education and employment issues - I had never once considered the position of "widows."

Like so many people, especially in the West, the word "widow" conjured up a picture of a meek little grey-haired old lady, sitting discreetly and patiently behind lace curtains, knitting for her grandchildren and generally looked after by, and looking after, her happy surrounding family. So it was a great shock to me when at the age of 58 I suddenly found myself widowed.

I experienced for the first time the mild, subtle but definite discrimination that exists in my generation and my class towards women who have lost a husband. No longer was one asked to dinner parties; people crossed the road rather than

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Weaving a Web of Support for Widows Worldwide

have to face talking to someone so recently associated with a death; if I did get invited out it was to take pot-luck in the kitchen with the children and grandmothers – never to a social occasion where only couples and single men could be accommodated. How different for men! Widowers, on the contrary, were “lionized”, chased, collected and invited everywhere. Invariably older as well as younger English widowers get married fairly quickly after bereavement, to women often young enough to be their daughters. Whilst we older widows have little chance of finding a new partner.

But all these small tribulations were bearable, for I had heaps of women friends, and interesting work to do. I was lonely, of course, for my husband died just when my children had left home but before they were old enough to have families of their own. I could hardly imagine that one day I would be the proud grandmother of seven grandchildren. In 1990 my youngest son was still a student, and all four children were still struggling to find their chosen careers and fulfillment. Nor that I would discover suddenly a whole new career and way of life opening up for me to last, I believe, till the day I die

Two years after my husband died I was teaching Judicial Administration in London to Commonwealth judges. One of my students, a Malawi magistrate, begged me to help him get medical treatment for his sick baby. I invited his wife and baby to London as my guests as I had managed, through a pediatrician friend, to get them admitted to a country hospital near my rural cottage. The first words she uttered as she entered my house and gazed round my living room were, “You mean your husband’s brothers let you stay in this house and keep all these things?”

These words, dramatically catylistic, rang in my ears over and over again, stirring some old recollections I had of African widows disinherited by their brothers-in-law, but the memories of anything I had read on these lines was vague and lost in the mists of time. However, two months later, winging my way to UCLA in Los Angeles as a Visiting Professor to teach a course on “Law, Women, Development and Health”, the Malawi woman’s words came back to me. I knew that the first thing I would do, once free to browse in UCLA’s library, was search out references to widowhood. But there was barely anything of note to read, apart from the odd treatises on “sati” (the ritual burning of a Hindu bride with her husband’s body) and esoteric accounts of missionaries work with some African widows in the 19th century.

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Weaving a Web of Support for Widows Worldwide

Nothing to add to what I had begun to find anecdotally, about the terrible discrimination, abuse and violence that so many millions of widows, in South Asia and Africa particularly, were subject to, every day of their lives. For example, the grinding poverty and homelessness due to lack of inheritance rights; repellent life-threatening and degrading mourning and burial rites; the grim coping strategies for sheer survival, and the impact of all these injustices upon their children, who are withdrawn from school and forced into exploitative child labor and prostitution.

The Swedish Government's International Development Agency (SIDA) gave me my first grant to study the subject of widowhood and I visited six countries in the Africa and Asia regions to research my first book, *A World of Widows*. Around this time, the fourth World Women's Conference was held in Beijing, and I was able to chair the very first international workshop on widowhood issues, attended by activists and women lawyers from a number of developing countries. It was the first occasion that this hidden area of women's status was brought out of the shadows and publicly discussed. And it was there, in Beijing, that the participants agreed that widows should have their own international organization. We chose its title EMPOWERING WIDOWS IN DEVELOPMENT (EWD), resolved that it would have its headquarters in London and that I would be its first Director and International Advocate. Its aims were to promote awareness of the human rights abuses relating to widowhood, ensure that both their many needs and their important and crucial roles were addressed and recognized, and be an umbrella for all the various and diverse widows' associations that had sprung up in some countries.

Returning to London, I set about establishing the very first and only international NGO for widows. Since 1999 my voice has been heard regularly at the Status of Women Commission and every year since then we have held meetings at the UN, often in collaboration with UNIFEM and UNDAW in the context of implementation of the relevant themes of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). Also, the UNDAW commissioned me to author their publication "Widowhood" in their Women 2000 series. This is available, free, in all the official UN languages, at UN information centers worldwide. _Gradually, awareness is spreading.

In 2001, our UK Government joined with the Swedish Government to fund the first International Conference on Widows' Rights, held in London. Widow activists came from more than a dozen countries, including Afghanistan,

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Weaving a Web of Support for Widows Worldwide

Kosovo, Nigeria, Malawi, Tanzania, India and Sri Lanka. This historic meeting initiated follow-up national and regional conferences in South Asia. We hope we will soon see similar regional events taking place in Francophone as well as Anglophone Africa. We need also to ensure that widows have representation and organizations in the Middle East, Latin America, the Balkans and Eastern Europe where issues of widowhood poverty, discrimination and injustice have still to be addressed. For it is clear that no real change will come about in the status of widows unless they themselves are the “Agents of Change”.

Today more and more widows are beginning to “band together” to form their own associations, campaign for changes in the laws on inheritance, land rights, and persona status. They are challenging contemporary attitudes, harmful customs such as “property grabbing” and “chasing-off”, and repellent traditions, such as “ritual cleansing, scarification and shaving rituals. Literacy and income-generating training are helping to make widows economically independent, and this is seen as the surest way of eliminating violence perpetrated by their relatives. This year, I developed a draft “WIDOWS CHARTER” based on international law, which was presented at a UN meeting, and has been taken on board by several partner groups in the developing world as a tool for lobbying for law reform.

However, and inevitably, we are unable to keep pace with the rapid changes in the international scene as armed conflict, ethnic cleansing, the scourge of AIDS, and child marriage to far older, often sick, men have resulted in an unprecedented explosion in the numbers of widows. In several poor countries, generally patriarchal in culture, afflicted by wars and disease, it is thought that over 50% of all adult women may be widows or wives of the “disappeared”. In Iraq, today, 65% of women are estimated to be in this category, although there are no official statistics. Many are very young mothers, some of them, still children. They struggle to survive not only in extreme poverty, but amid intense discrimination and exclusion. In the turbulent instability of post-conflict situations gender violence escalates. Widows and their daughters are the most vulnerable to sexual abuse, rape, trafficking, prostitution and other forms of economic exploitation. They desperately need our support.

Widows in most traditional societies, whether at peace or in conflict, are mostly perceived as inauspicious and bringers of bad luck. The names for widows in vernacular languages reflect this attitude. Across the regions and cultures the local names for widows mean “whore”, “witch”, “sorceress”. When traditional,

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customary and religious laws co-exist with modern laws, widows' lives are determined by interpretations of the latter, with dire consequences for their welfare.

Unable to access the modern justice system, they are often quite beyond the scope of the international human rights legal frameworks.

Moreover, few developing countries have bothered to gather statistics and data about their situation. Yet it is the publication of statistics that can effectively shame and galvanize governments into action. Widows' groups are beginning to undertake their own surveys, filling the gap in knowledge, and providing the details of their day-to-day lives which are crucial to forging the policies needed for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the real observance of international standards of human rights. In August, 2005, I was part of a team, meeting in Sri Lanka, that has established SANWED (South Asian Network for Widows Empowerment in Development). This initiative will bring together, under a regional umbrella, all the widows' groups in the 5 countries in the region, to strengthen the international voice. In December widows' activists from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Bhutan and Sri Lanka will brainstorm in Chennai, Southern India, to develop new strategies for empowering widows and ensuring their rights. Later this year I will address the International Federation of Women Lawyers' (FIDA) annual conference on Widowhood and Human Rights.

How privileged I have been to discover this hidden area of women's human rights. In the decade since I started this work, I have met so many wonderful women across the world. I am amazed by their resilience, courage, wisdom, love and selflessness. They have risen from the depths of despair and abandonment to rebuild their lives. No longer alone, they take their strength from the togetherness of widows, in their communities, countries, regions and now in an international sisterhood!

On the one hand, the world is a less safe place for women – especially the widows and their children – who bear the brunt of war, corruption and gender violence. But I see hope in the fact that more women are now in decision-making positions, that governments are realizing that they must involve civil society, particularly women's organizations, in the development of policies to combat poverty and discrimination.

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A marvelous development this year was the announcement, by the UK Prime Minister's wife, Cherie Blair, of the date of an INTERNATIONAL WIDOWS DAY. It is June 23rd.

Let us all work together, wherever we are, to ensure that this day is celebrated in every country, so we may mark the crucial roles widows play in society and the progress made to ensure their rights.

Margaret Owen has been working as an advocate for the status of women's issues since 1982. Since 1994, Margaret's work has been specific to the status of widows in developing countries.

Margaret chaired a Workshop on Widowhood at the Beijing Fourth World Women's Conference, has chaired or was a panelist on various international panels on widowhood held at the UN Commission on the Status of Widows, and was a consultant to the UN Division for the Advancement of Women.

Margaret is the author of *A World of Widows*, published in 1996 and has been funded by SIDA (Swedish International Development Agency) to research her next book, *Voices of Widows*. She is responsible for the formation of the NGO, Empowering Widows in Development (www.widowsrights.org), and set up the Network, Widows For Peace and Reconstruction.

Margaret has participated in conferences, seminars and research pertaining to widows in India, Zambia, Bangladesh, Rwanda, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Uganda and Kosovo.

Comments or inquiries about this story?

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