

WIDOWS FOR PEACE THROUGH DEMOCRACY (WPD)



WIDOWS IN ARMED CONFLICT BRIEFING PAPER BY WPD/ 8TH JULY 2009

FILLING THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

Although widows make up a significant proportion of the female population in all societies, their numbers have risen to quite extraordinary and unprecedented levels in conflict-afflicted countries, although there are, as yet, no official statistics.

Rough estimates vary widely. In Afghanistan, it is thought that there are over 2 million widows, with 70,000 in Kabul alone. Also in Kabul, nearly all of the 37,000 street children are, according to a UN report, fatherless.

In Iraq, there are probably more than 3 million widows, although the numbers may be much higher in both Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in other countries afflicted by war. The numbers are exacerbated by the existence of many women who are the wives of the disappeared or missing.

In Rwanda, it is suggested that as many as 70% of all children are dependent upon widowed mothers. In Eastern Congo, over 50% of all women are widows. Nepal, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Burundi all similarly need to identify the impact of such increases in widowhood and address these women's particular needs, protect their vital roles as supporters of children and other dependents, and ensure they have the opportunity to participate in decision-making relating to peace-building, reconstruction and development.

THE NEED FOR MAPPING

The lack of reliable data is the greatest obstacle to raising proper awareness of the urgency of addressing widowhood issues in countries emerging from conflict. Governments, donors, INGOs and the UN are without the vital information needed to develop effective policies to guarantee protection of the human rights of widows and their dependents, to ensure they can access basic services and resources, to protect them from violence and traditional practices, and to give the legal protection required to safeguard their rights to inheritance, property and land-ownership.

However, conventional methodologies for gathering census data are not designed to identify the inherent inequalities of widowhood or to reveal the unpaid and vital economic contribution widows of all ages make to society. Widows may, in fact, be excluded from national censuses because they are homeless, or are constantly moving between households headed by relatives or refugee camps. Sensitive but vital information on widows' social and economic support systems and coping strategies (such as,

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withdrawing children from school, begging, dependency on child labour, prostitution, and even suicide) must be gathered for appropriate action to be taken.

UN SCR 1325. This resolution requires all actors engaged in conflict resolution and management to: '*consolidate data on the impact of armed conflict on women and girls*'; and to analyse the impact of conflict upon women and girls. However, particularly in conflict-afflicted countries, there is no accurate data from which to extract the quantity and ages of widows, since the conflict itself will have caused huge demographic changes in the population, rendering any existing data largely obsolete.

Nevertheless, it is essential that alternative methods of gathering information on widows are utilised so that appropriate actions can be taken to attempt to relieve the plight of this very vulnerable and large category of women and ensure that their voices inform the development of policy.

THE SOLUTION: EMPOWERING WIDOWS TO MAP AND PROFILE

The richest source of information comes from widows themselves, and a wealth of narrative and anecdotal material exists, gathered through the initiatives of small grass-roots associations of widows banding together and undertaking their own surveys, conducting research and identifying needs and roles.

WPD has devised an alternative method of gathering such vital information, used successfully in Nepal, and serving as an example of best practices.

WHR-SWG of Nepal has mapped and profiled 44,000 widows in 52 of the country's 75 districts. WHR has even trained illiterate widows to conduct surveys and is currently working with the government census department to accommodate this data in the nation's upcoming census.

Data and information gathered in this way has been presented in a number of meetings held at the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Such mapping and profiling projects, given the right support from funding partners and the UN, could be effectively undertaken in the DRC, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Actions to ensure that widows' voices are heard are essential for proper implementation of UN SCR 1325, CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action and achievement of the MDGS. It is only when Donors cease regarding women as a homogeneous whole and develop a differentiated understanding of the various distinct categories of women who suffer particularly oppressive treatments – such as widows – and support these women organising themselves in order to collectively articulate their needs, hopes and describe their roles that progress can be made to reach international goals for women and girls.