

The story of International Widows Day



THE LOOMBA FOUNDATION
Caring for widows around the world





*Lord Loomba's mother
Shrimati Pushpa Wati
Loomba, the inspiration of
International Widows Day.*

Origins of a Global Campaign

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

The topic of President Ondimba's address was the desperate plight 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.

It does not take a genius to figure out that such injustice undermines the very communities that perpetuate it; that aside from the moral wrongs, this widespread and deeply embedded discrimination entrenches poverty and suffering, and destabilises the social fabric. What is most shocking about the plight of widows is how widespread it is, yet at the same time how invisible.

In his resolution, President Ondimba emphasised that economic empowerment of women, including widows, is critical if we want to eradicate poverty. Women, including widows, should be an integral part of the state they live in, he said, calling on all Member States, the UN itself and other international organisations, to give special attention to the plight of widows and their children, and to raise awareness about this issue around the world.

President Ondimba called on the General Assembly to institute an annual day of action to highlight this important cause and to fight discrimination against widows. The day was to be called International Widows Day, and it would take place every year on 23 June.

The journey to that General Assembly session in New York began more than half a century earlier in Dhilwan, a small rural town in the State of Punjab in India, when a wealthy local businessman, Jagiri Lal Loomba, succumbed to the still widespread scourge of tuberculosis. The date was 23 June 1954.

This was a tragedy for Jagiri's wife Pushpa Wati and the seven children of the family – 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 very day of his father's death, 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. From a happy, fulfilled wife, his mother was instantly transformed into a desolate widow.

Years later, when Raj married Veena Chaudhry, he was enraged when the priest asked his mother to sit away from the altar lest, as a widow, she brought bad luck to the young couple. "Why," he recalled recently, "a mother who gave me birth, a mother who brought me up, who educated me and always wished well for me – how could she bring me bad luck?"

Pushpa Wati Loomba was a strong woman, determined to ensure her children's prospects were not harmed by this tragedy. Her husband had ensured that the family was provided for. To give her children the best chance in life, Pushpa Wati resolved to devote the whole of their resources to ensuring that all the children, including the girls, received the best education possible, right through to university.

Like his siblings, Raj studied hard and went on to build up his business in the UK and India, but he never forgot the impact of those events. He realised how lucky he had been, and that many others were not so



Raj Loomba launching the International Widows Day initiative at the House of Lords, London, May 2005.

fortunate. "What if my father had not been able to leave us money?" he wondered. "My mother would not have been able to send us to college or give us nutritious food and good clothes to wear. The images and the state of poor widows and their children I had seen in my younger days all came rushing back to me",

Raj realised that if he had been the son of a poor widow, he would never have been able to build a major fashion company in London. "I would have grown up illiterate, possibly plying a rickshaw in some suburban town in Punjab".

Widows in India

For millions of widows from poor backgrounds in India, the situation is bleak. It is not unusual for them to be blamed by the family for the husband's death. Property and wealth is often taken away. A young woman who is widowed shortly after marriage cannot return to her own family, as she is thought to bring bad luck. The fate that awaits many widows is that they must wear plain white clothing, cannot work, find it difficult to remarry and are unable to pay for their children's schooling. It is not unusual for older widows to be abandoned by their families and even child widows can face a life of destitution.

So in 1997, after his mother had passed away, Raj and his wife Veena established a Foundation in his mother's memory to focus on the injustices suffered by widows and their children in his native India, building up a nationwide programme that has transformed the lives of more than 100,000 people.

The sin of omission

But soon he began to see that the problem is by no means confined to India alone. Widows face unimaginable abuse and discrimination in many countries, including in Asia and Africa, where they are often subjected to degrading treatment, deprived of the means to support themselves and their families. 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 predecessor of UN 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 2000s, there seemed no chance that this issue would ever rise to the consciousness of the international community.

So it was that Raj Loomba, half a century after that fateful day in Dhilwan, resolved on a plan to transform the fate of millions of the most disadvantaged and marginalised people in the world. A plan to eradicate discrimination against widows.

So deeprooted are the customs and prejudices that have sustained this injustice for centuries that Raj knew he would need the support of governments, international organisations, NGOs, researchers, educators, philanthropists and all people of goodwill to bring about changes not only in legislation and targeted support, but in attitudes and cultures the world over.

On 26 May 2005, Raj Loomba rose to address a meeting in the Cholmondeley Room at the House of Lords in London.

"The plight of widows," he told his audience that day, "is an important hidden issue in many countries. Millions of widows and their children are the poorest of the poor, often invisible, forgotten and unheard. In many countries across Africa, Asia and elsewhere, widows can lose their human rights, land and property, and can be exposed to violence and abuse".

Before an audience of leading politicians, businesspeople, humanitarian activists and journalists from the UK, India and around the world, Raj Loomba and Loomba Foundation President Mrs Cherie Blair launched an annual, global day of action to tackle the prejudice that lies at the heart of widows' suffering. The day, they announced, was to be known as International Widows Day. The date on which



it would take place each year was 23 June: the date on which, as a 10-year old boy, Raj had lost his father and witnessed first hand the injustice of what happened to his mother because she became a widow.

On 23 June 2005, exactly four weeks after the launch, Raj Loomba and local schoolchildren released 1,000 multi-coloured balloons into the sky at Tower Bridge in London to mark the first International Widows Day, and similar events took place in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Uganda and South Africa.

So International Widows Day was born.

Raj Loomba knew that no amount of scholarships, sewing machines and fundraising events – so effective in transforming the lives of tens of thousands – could be leveraged to make a lasting impact on this global problem. To change the culture globally, the international community must be engaged. Governments must be persuaded, cajoled or shamed into helping. Communities must be encouraged to collaborate. Aid programmes must be focused not only on today's need but on educating and empowering people to break the cycle of deprivation. So the first International Widows Day was never an end in itself: it was the beginning of a journey.

An ambitious strategy

Tirelessly supported by Cherie Blair, Raj Loomba set about plotting the course from Tower Bridge to United Nations Plaza. From the start, he was determined to persuade the United Nations to adopt International Widows Day as one of its own official days of action. That would provide a platform to engage all governments, and to create structures through which human rights campaigners, community organisations and people of goodwill could all collaborate.

How to get there? The strategy had to be ambitious. Connect with partners in other countries. Knock on the doors of the corridors of power. Persuade good people to become champions. International Widows Day activities were planned with two objectives in mind: to raise public awareness and to engage the international community.

International Conference

On the second day of action on 23 June 2006, widows groups, public figures and political leaders were brought together by the Loomba Foundation to take part in an International Widows Conference at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in London under the patronage of HRH The Prince of Wales. Chaired by the broadcaster Alastair Stewart, the conference heard moving contributions from widows' representatives from Africa and Asia and was addressed by videolink by then US Senator Hillary Clinton and Sir Richard Branson.

An important early breakthrough was support from the Commonwealth, many of whose 53 member nations have deep-rooted cultural discrimination against widows in their communities. Keynote



speaker Don McKinnon, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, supported the Foundation's call for UN recognition of International Widows Day and described the battle for widows' rights as "a silent war fuelled by culture and stigma". Mr. McKinnon firmly linked the issue with that of global gender discrimination, pointing out that women are disproportionately represented in worldwide figures of poverty and illiteracy. "The privations and discrimination attaching to widowhood," the Secretary-General pointed out, "add to the considerable disadvantage already faced by women in many countries". He called for action to be taken on international, governmental and non-governmental levels.

Foundation President Cherie Blair also addressed the conference, calling for continued international action to relieve the plight of widows. Other keynote speakers included cabinet ministers from India and the UK, and John Lennon's widow, Yoko Ono, who condemned the social taboo that shrouds the issue of widowhood all over the world.

Following the Conference, a Bollywood Concert was held in Trafalgar Square, hosted by the well-known Indian talk-show host Shekhar Suman and watched not only by the Conference delegates but by thousands of members of the public.

The culmination of this remarkable day was the release of balloons by Cherie Blair in Trafalgar Square and simultaneously by Delhi's Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit in the capital of India. The events were widely publicised, including interviews on Sky and ITV, and coverage from BBC News, Times of India, The Sun, The Mirror, Hindustan Times, Daily Express, Channel 5, Asian Voice and many others.

US Senator Hillary Clinton addresses the International Widows Conference 2006 from Capitol Hill.

A new front

In 2007 Raj Loomba opened an important new front in the campaign. Conscious that the invisibility of widows as an issue was due at least in part to the lack of reliable data – as noted in UN Women’s 2001 report about the “sin of omission” – the Loomba Foundation resolved to gather the hard evidence that is needed to underpin policy-making and legislation at national and international level.

As part of the Foundation’s Focus on Widows project, the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House in London agreed to undertake a global survey of awareness of and attitudes towards widowhood. And in July 2007, the Foundation set out its framework for research into widowhood:

1. Develop reliable statistics and information about discrimination against widows, eg:
 - a. How many widows are there overall and by country,
 - b. How many widows’ dependents overall and by country,
 - c. Quantify causes of widowhood including conflict, HIV/Aids and other diseases
 - d. Quantify prematurely terminated education as a result of widowhood
 - e. Quantify victims of child labour, prostitution, drug and people trafficking as a result of widowhood
 - f. Set out, by region and country, forms of widow discrimination, eg customary laws and traditions, employment practices, inheritance
2. Carry out research:
 - a. To establish the significance of widow discrimination as a factor in structural poverty globally and by country
 - b. To demonstrate effectiveness of tackling widow discrimination in addressing and alleviating structural poverty
 - c. To identify benefits of educational programmes on widow discrimination in tackling structural poverty, eg
 - i. educating children of poor widows
 - ii. raising awareness of the consequences of discrimination against widows

To mark the third International Widows Day on 23 June 2007, balloons were simultaneously released in Nairobi, Dhaka and Colombo. In New Delhi, Raj Loomba hosted at a dinner to mark the occasion attended by the Minister for Women and Child Development, Renuka Chowdhury, and by 200 students of the Loomba Foundation’s education programme, accompanied by their widowed mothers. In London, Foundation President Cherie Blair launched a blimp airship over Trafalgar Square.

*International Widows Day
2007 in Sri Lanka.*





The Shri Jagiri Lal Loomba Secondary School in Dhilwan.

Recognition

Signs that the campaign was making an impact emerged in 2008, with the announcement in June that Raj Loomba had been appointed a Commander in the Order of the British Empire in the Queen's Birthday Honours List, in recognition of his charitable and humanitarian work.

That same month, the Foundation became a UN-accredited NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) for the first time, associated with the UN Department of Public Information. A few weeks later, President Paul Kagame of Rwanda endorsed the campaign for UN recognition.

On 23 June 2008, to coincide with the fourth International Widows Day, the Loomba Foundation published the results of the survey conducted by Chatham House with *worldpublicopinion.org*. This survey – across a sample of 17 developing and developed countries – uncovered evidence of widespread widows' disadvantage. Twelve countries saw at least 40% of respondents reporting varying degrees of disadvantage, from 'a great deal' to 'some'. On average, 63% reported widows receiving worse treatment than the general population. The significance of this research was that it demonstrated that discrimination against widows is not exclusive to any one culture, society or region.

2008's International Widows Day was the most global yet, with events organised in seven countries on four continents. In London, a concert was held in Trafalgar Square with an international cast of entertainers. In Leicester, the first Asian woman Lord Mayor, Councillor Manjula Sood – a widow herself – marked International Widows Day by releasing multicoloured balloons at De Montfort University.

In Raj Loomba's birthplace of Dhilwan, balloons were also released by the Deputy Commissioner of Kapurthala District at the Shri Jagiri Lal Memorial Senior Secondary Government School, while in Delhi, British High Commissioner Sir Richard Stagg hosted a lunch for Loomba Foundation beneficiaries and released balloons to mark the day.

In Sri Lanka, 450 widows from Hambantota District attended an event organised by the Women's Development Foundation and the

Hambantota Youth Business Trust, marking the day by releasing a thousand balloons and planting a tree.

In New York, a lunch for international women of influence was hosted at the United Nations by Foundation adviser Elbrun Kimmelman.

Candles were lit and a tree was planted in a ceremony in Damascus, Syria, organised by the local partner of the Prince of Wales' international charity Youth Business International, which was also involved in the celebrations in Nepal.

In Kenya, more than 100 widows involved in the Loomba Foundation Entrepreneurship Programme attended a ceremony with their children where balloons were released to mark the occasion.

Appeal to the UN

On the fifth International Widows Day on 23 June 2009, events took place in many countries including India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Kenya and Rwanda. The international campaign had clearly been gathering steam and at an event in the House of Lords, Foundation President Cherie Blair issued a direct appeal to the United Nations to recognise the importance of the issue and adopt International Widows Day as an official day of action.

Raj Loomba reminded the audience of its importance in the global fight against poverty. "Poverty is the curse of mankind," he said, "but when you put it in the context of widows and their children, it creates a new dimension in inhumanity."

A breakthrough year

The research work set in train three years earlier bore fruit with the completion of the Foundation's global study of the plight of widows, published as an appendix to a powerful appeal in the book *Invisible Forgotten Sufferers: Why the UN should recognise International Widows Day* on the eve of International Widows Day 2010.

Weeks earlier, on 26 May, the preliminary findings of the study were

revealed at a London briefing of diplomats representing 30 countries. On 22 June the book was presented to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon in New York, followed by a dinner attended by 27 UN Permanent Representatives including Mr Hardeep Singh Puri, the Permanent UN Representative for India, who was the guest of honour.

Containing unprecedented information about the scale of the problem, country by country, with detailed information about causes and consequences, this first ever worldwide study of widowhood was a powerful argument that this issue had been neglected by the international community for far too long.

In 2010, International Widows Day was celebrated in at least ten countries: India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Nepal, Syria, South Africa, Rwanda, the United States and the United Kingdom.

Five years of hard-nosed campaigning, detailed research, and building support across the globe bore fruit when President Ondimba of Gabon proposed to the 65th General Assembly of the United Nations that it should grant official UN recognition of International Widows Day – a motion that was accepted unanimously.

It was a great achievement – but Raj Loomba had always been clear about one thing. International Widows Day is not an end in itself: it is a tool to help change the world. The real campaign could now begin in earnest.

Message to Member States, 2011

Ban Ki-Moon

UN Secretary-General 2007–2016

This first International Widows' Day is an occasion to call attention to the many "firsts" that women must face when their husbands die. In addition to coping with grief, they may find themselves for the first time since marriage without any social safety net. Far too often, widows lack access to inheritance, land tenure, employment and even the means to survive.

In places where a widow's status is linked to her husband, she may find herself suddenly shunned and isolated. Marriage — whether she desires it or not — may be the only way for a widow to regain her footing in society.

Of the approximately 245 million widows in our world, more than 115 live in extreme poverty. In countries embroiled in conflicts, women are often widowed young and must bear the heavy burden of caring for their children amid fighting and displacement with no help or support.

Some of these widows are teenagers — or even younger. The death of their husbands can leave a terrible legacy these widows must endure throughout their remaining years.

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 recognised 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 recognise the important contribution of widows, and we must ensure that they enjoy the rights and social protections they deserve.

Death is inevitable, but we can reduce the suffering that widows endure by raising their status and helping them in their hour of need. This will contribute to promoting the full and equal participation of all women in society. And that will bring us closer to ending poverty and promoting peace around the world.

THE LOOMBA FOUNDATION

The Loomba Foundation, London, New Delhi and New York, 2019

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

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The Loomba Foundation

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