

Not seen. Not heard.

With the the first UN-recognised International Widows Day on Thursday 23rd June, [Mia de Graaf](#) investigates the invisible existence of the world's women in mourning

Wednesday 22 June 2011



A widow from Vrindavan. Indian widows are conventionally expected to wear white.

In India the state of a widow is often described as “living sati” – sati being the old tradition in which she would be expected to throw herself onto her husband’s burning funeral pyre. Today things have developed, and thankfully this is not commonly practised. But alive they hold an existence competitively degrading and dehumanising.

Rosa, the daughter of a Nigerian widow, wrote to the International Widows Fund in a bid to draw attention to the plight that bereaved women suffer that is largely undetected by the world aid radar: “My uncle Leo went to hire mobs and touts who carried sticks and weapons to clobber my mother and siblings with. My uncle Christian gathered all the women of the Duruigbo clan who carried firewood and canes to beat my mum with.”

It is not a unique case, as became apparent on the release of the first comprehensive study of widows worldwide last year. Rosa’s mother is one of 245 million widows in the world. 100 million of these women live in poverty, suffering various forms of abuse and discrimination at the hands of tradition and apparent “customary laws.” Dependent upon these women are 500 million children, forming, in total, an approximate number of $\frac{3}{4}$ billion victims.

The research by Vijay Dutt was published by The Loomba Foundation, a charity set up by Lord Raj Loomba – earning his lordship for his charitable efforts – in 1997. “Widows have been very badly mistreated,” he says, “It is shocking to see that in some countries, when a woman loses her husband, she is ritually forced to have sex with her brother-in-law, and if the brother-in-law is not there, the father-in-law. And if the father-in-law is not there, anybody in the street. And she has to go through this whole process for a week to ‘cleansed’ herself. This is dehumanising for a woman”

“

In some countries when a woman loses her husband she is forced to have sex with her brother-in-law to 'cleansed' herself

”

Loomba in fact bears a personal attachment to the cause, as he set up the Foundation in honour of his widowed mother: "It is quite normal in India that children build a hospital or a school or an ashram in honour of their loved ones and I thought of doing something like that initially. But then I thought that if my mother hasn't done what she did, God knows where the family would be today."

His mother, Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba, unlike many of India's 30 million widows, managed to teach all of her children, in spite of her lack of formal education. In Raj Loomba's case he reached University and succeeded in becoming a highly successful entrepreneur.

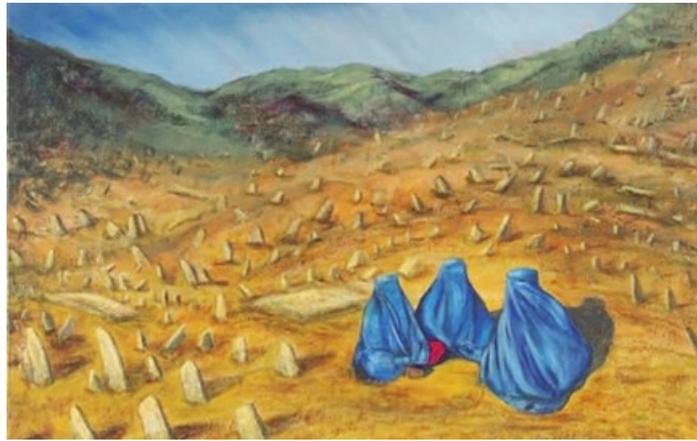
Often, though mourning the loss of a husband, widows are denied the right to work or remarry. Further, with a prevalent tradition of young girls married to 80-year-old men at the age of nine still intact, their inevitable rejection means income is entirely out of reach. And yet, despite the magnitude of sufferers, they remain the "untouchables." Loomba, therefore, fell into an unusually fortunate fate when his mother took it upon herself to elevate her children's position in any way possible.

"I was only 10½ years old when my father died, in Punjab, India," he explains, "His body wasn't even cremated yet, but my grandmother ordered my mother to remove her bangles, jewellery and bindhi - which is the sign of a married woman - and asked her not to wear coloured clothes ever again. I was too young to apprehend the situation, but gradually I saw that her life had totally changed. Before, she was a happy wife. Now, she was a very distressed widow.

"Later, when I got married, the ceremony was taking place and the priest asked my mother to move away from the altar - the reason being she was a widow and she could bring bad luck to me. I became very angry. Why, 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?"

The Loomba Foundation has since grown in both size and support to an unprecedented size, gaining the support of Richard Branson, and Cherie Blair as a figurehead - appointed President of the Foundation six years ago. And now, the late wake-up call has finally chimed. On Thursday 23rd June The United Nations will observe International Widows Day for the first time. It's been a long road: The Loomba Foundation, have been petitioning for global recognition of the cause since 2005, when they set up the day of recognition in the UK, in a bid to build momentum. Last year on Wednesday 22 December, the motion was passed.

The task at hand, having jumped their biggest hurdle yet, is to give a voice to a cause largely under-researched, and to project it. Directly involved in the communication of the cause this International Widows Day is Reeta Sarkar, artist, founding trustee of The Loomba Foundation, and Raj Loomba's daughter, who has been commissioned to do a series of paintings depicting the cause. "It's quite difficult to get the message across about the plight of widows because they are invisible," she says, "They are invisible suffers, and they are faceless. My passion stems from a lot of the difficulties that are there, and how they are to be addressed - saying: 'how do we do it?'"



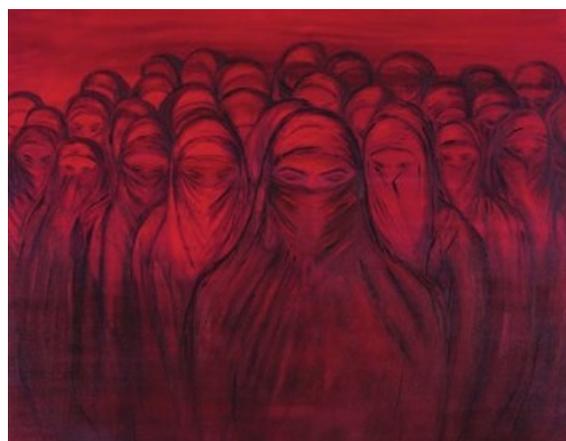
Widows of Kabul. Painting (c) Reeta Sarkar

“You can have natural disasters going on in the world, and they’re televised, aid gets involved, money is sent abroad, and things are done for them, but there is, like the series says, a hidden calamity going on that we’re not taking any notice of or doing anything about.”

For Sarkar, India is a big part of her life, and her travels lay a strong grounding for her work: “It is very debilitating to see how these people are expected to live in places like Varanasi and Vrindavan and to go into their tiny little cubby whole where they live and they have their basic amenities to just function, they have nothing else in their life and they are ostracised and marginalised and shunned to the point at which they have nothing to their name and beg. And then they can also be discriminated against and abused. I think it’s a social crisis to be perfectly honest with you. There are all these women out there and no one is prepared to take responsibility or look after them or help them or even give them the right to their human rights – they all have them but they’re just not being looked after.”

The primary challenge the Foundation face in projecting the stigma of a widow’s social state is that it is not addressed by The Millenium Development Goals. “Even though widows come into the group of women where women have the equality, the gender, and also the empowerment – the widows within the women’s group is a different group altogether which has not really been recognised until now.” The MDGs focus, rightly, on gender equality. Yet widows are a degraded margin that requires more specific attention.

Sarkar’s series follows a variety of women – many with their back turned, their face covered, or their face not even drawn – in isolation. “Sometimes paintings can speak louder than words. It mattered to show that actually the face doesn’t matter: know that they are suffering and that they are invisible and nothing’s being done about it. The question is: who are they? Does anyone know?”



Widows in Afghanistan. Painting (c) Reeta Sarkar

Undertaking the six-month project, arriving finally at her series that will be hung for two weeks in the United Nations Headquarters, alongside works donated by Yoko Ono, Sarkar trawled the Internet and heard from the Foundation about the increased research into the cause worldwide. One of Sarkar’s most striking images in particular, ‘Widows in Afghanistan’ (pictured right), is her portrayal of the particularly

large role played by conflict in the crisis. With the dark red painting amass with burkha-clad figures, Sarkar comes close to capturing the incomprehensible number of women that have been outcast:

“The whole concept of this painting is that there’s a multitude of widows who are suffering from the conflict in the world; there are millions of these widows. It was just an artistic idea that I had really to show lots of women who are all in the same sort of dress and going off into the background and you can just imagine: how many of these women are there? There are millions and millions more widows coming up all over the world through conflict, even the uprising in the Middle East at the minute. The rate is clocking up, the figure is changing as we talk.”

Indeed, the crux of this crisis is distant: fundamentally, though natural crises act as a degenerative fuel, it is a revolution of social perspective that’s needed to make a marked change. Yet on Thursday 254 million women will be acknowledged for the first time ever. It’s certainly a start.

You can donate by sponsoring Chris Parsons’ bike ride from London to Gibraltar [here](#)



Most Read Discussed

1. [The World’s Rudest Word](#)
2. [Fresher Initiations](#)
3. [The F**k it Philosophy](#)
4. [Life behind closed doors: the hidden York sex trade](#)
5. [On the Frontline of social work](#)
6. [The great white rescue](#)

Write for Nouse Features

[Get in touch with the editors](#)

More in Features

[York: The UK’s Human Rights City](#)

[Q & A with Mark Smith](#)

[Heartaches and Pain](#)

[A Quirky Christmas](#)

[Extinction Rebellion Q&A](#)

[That \(Not So\) Festive Feeling](#)

[Website Credits](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Advertising](#)
[Archives](#)
[Student Discounts](#)
[Print Editions](#)
[Mini-Sites](#)
[Nouse on Twitter](#)
[Nouse on Facebook](#)
[Nouse on Google+](#)

© 1964–2018 Nouse

[Policies](#) |

