



WIDOWHOOD

The Link
to

Human Trafficking

EDITED BY
Heather Ibrahim-Leathers

WRITTEN BY
Victoria Elizabeth Mueller



Global Fund For Widows

Widowhood and Human Trafficking

According to the UN's Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking, women and girls comprise 79% of the global trafficked population¹. Among the most vulnerable and overlooked within this already endangered population of trafficked individuals are widows. In fact, the Global Fund for Widows maintains that widowhood is inextricably linked to human trafficking. In many regions across the world, whether it affects the widow herself, her children, or both, trafficking is often an inevitable consequence of a woman losing her husband.

In order to fully understand the role of human trafficking in widowhood however, it is necessary to investigate the economic consequences that women face when they become widows. Across the world, but particularly in Asia and Africa, when a woman is widowed, either when her husband dies, is killed, becomes "permanently missing" as a result of unrest, or simply abandons her, she is subject to economic discrimination. In many of these regions, women had previously relied on their husbands for financial support in order to run their household. The dissipation of this economic safety net often leaves widows and their families in extreme poverty. Furthermore, cultural barriers and the expectation of women to act as childcare providers often contribute to widows' lack of marketable skills. One of the most notable and glaringly degrading aspects of becoming widowed in developing areas within Africa and Asia is the disinheritance that widows face. When a woman's husband is deceased or goes missing, she often immediately loses all of her household income. While in most countries the inheritance of marital property by widows is protected by statutory law, social or cultural codes will often

prohibit this inheritance. With their agency undermined following the death or disappearance of their husbands, widows are treated as transactional pawns in familial politics.

What does this lack of financial stability, limitation on marketable skills, and disinheritance mean for widows? When widows are left without economic support and have no feasible means to find employment—or at least safe and dignified employment—they are launched into an intergenerational, ever-expanding cycle of poverty. The loss of property coupled with the loss of an income, and thus savings, additionally generates a lack of access to health care and education for a widow and her family, which ultimately elevates her desperation. As a means of coping with these immense financial and emotional stresses, a widow must take drastic measures to provide for her family.

Because it is so difficult for a widow to find work, she must undergo high risk behaviors to find decent employment. Widows are often recruited into trafficking through fraud. Traffickers lure women into believing that they are being recruited to legitimate jobs in the manufacturing or service sectors. Motivated by a need to support their families and the prospect of earning a living wage, widows are thus manipulated into participating in the human and sex trafficking industries.

The correlation between widowhood and trafficking extends beyond the widow herself, however. In the most desperate scenarios, widows may be forced to sell their children in to the brutal underworld of forced labor and human trafficking. In an effort to provide security or safety for their children, widows are often forced to marry off their young daughters into child marriage, effectively fueling the cycle of child marriage and child widows. When children are forced into marriage (and thus often widowhood), they are far more subject to assault, violence, and being sold into trafficking. In addition, a widow's children must often surrender their

education to assist their families financially. This forgoing of a child's education also leaves them more vulnerable to trafficking.

In South-East Asia, particularly in Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia and Vietnam, decades of armed conflict have resulted in an upsurge of the widowed population. In many scenarios, according to the UN Division on the Advancement for Women's (UNDAW) Women2000 report on widowhood, widows become internally displaced, seeking refuge in the hills, or moved at gunpoint to camps in West Timor, where they became rape victims. In Cambodia, a significant portion of the male population was killed in the Indochina Wars and subsequent genocide, causing approximately 35% of rural households to be headed by women, often widows. With extreme poverty becoming more widespread, thousands of widows find themselves pushed into sex trade. For these women, economic opportunity is so limited that some Cambodian studies suggest that as many as 90% of sex workers view prostitution as their best available option.

According to the UNDAW, in Myanmar, poverty derived from conflict causes widows to be especially susceptible to malnutrition and subsequently violence and sexual harassment by soldiers. The industry of trafficking, which is innately more common in developing countries, is exacerbated in Myanmar because of the economic crisis and limited foreign aid. Reports suggest that the immense pressure for widows to provide for their families coupled with a thriving sex industry both in Myanmar and the neighboring Thailand force many widows into trafficking as the only opportunity for employment. Even worse, many widows are compelled to sell their daughters to trafficking agencies.

In South Asia, widows face similar perils. The UNDAW reports that in India, inheritance and land disputes have caused thousands of widows to be disowned by their relatives. Given

their lack of education, training, and marketable skills, these widows are similarly forced into becoming exploited, unregulated domestic laborers, often as house slaves within the deceased or disappeared husband's family. Alternatively, they may turn to begging or prostitution as a means of coping. The sexual and economic enslavement of widows at temple sites such as Mathura, Varanasi and Tirupati has been well documented in international media. At these sites, thousands of widows live in abject poverty, with younger ones being forced into prostitution, while older ones are left to beg and chant for alms from pilgrims and tourists. The day-to-day sufferings and degradation of Indian widows, including the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse by relatives, however, are for the most part concealed. Regional studies on trafficking suggest that Bangladesh and Nepal are both epicenters of the trafficking of young girls to the brothels of India. Daughters of widows are especially prone to being recruited to this trade as they lack male protectors and an education. Women's NGOs in Bangladesh report that the number of Bangladeshi girls vanishing in this fashion is reaching monumental proportions.

In Africa, abuse against widows transcends all ethnic and socioeconomic groups. As in many other regions, widowhood and the poverty that arises from it correlate directly to the withdrawal of children, especially girls, from school. In some ethnic groups, degrading traditional practices such as mourning and burial rites, which often involve extreme physical and sexual violence, are very common. In many countries, widows must cope through exploitative informal sector work, begging, sex work, and inserting their children into child labor, which may involve sex work as well.

Ultimately, the connection between widowhood and trafficking in any of its forms, whether that be domestic labor, sex work, or child prostitution to name a few, is indisputable. Because widowhood leaves so many women and their families in such a vulnerable state,

trafficking becomes an inevitable means of coping with the economic desperation. More concerningly, it is not just the widows, but also their children, that are susceptible to the vicious market of human trafficking. As a result, the intimate connection between widowhood and trafficking has far-reaching, intergenerational, ever-growing implications, which is of serious concern from a human rights perspective. According to Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”. The physical, emotional, and financial obstacles widows and their families must undergo are flagrant violations of international human rights legislation.

It is worth noting, however, that the struggles widows face have never specifically been integrated into the language of international human rights law. It is imperative to urge the incorporation of widows’ rights into international legislation in order to ensure their basic economic and social rights and to ultimately reduce the prominence of the heinous human trafficking industry, to which widows are so extremely susceptible.

Works Cited

https://www.unodc.org/documents/Global_Report_on_TIP.pdf

https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/wom_Dec%2001%20single%20pg.pdf

<http://ijmcr.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Paper845-58.pdf>

<https://sojo.net/articles/modern-day-orphans-and-widows>

<https://wunrn.com/2016/12/widowhood-a-systemic-violation-of-human-rights-an-economic-social-humanitarian-crisis/>

https://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf

<https://www.ssa.uchicago.edu/sex-trafficking-cambodia-complex-humanitarian-emergency>

<https://medcraveonline.com/JHAAS/human-rights-and-trafficking-in-women-and-children-in-india.html>