

Tuesday 3 July
14.00 - 15.00
Palais Nations
UN Geneva
Room XXV

Photos: WUNRN, Oberon's Grove, The Indian Express



Child Widows: Forgotten Human Rights

Chair: Zarin Hainsworth OBE - Chair WRI

Speakers include:

Dr Adebisi Adebayo, Chief, IAC Geneva Liaison Office
Ruby Woods - NAWO YWA

Dr Fulata L. Moyo, PhD, Circle of Concerned African
Women Theologians

Marina Plesons, WHO Consultant, Adolescents and
At-Risk Populations Team (HRP)

Katherine Ainsworth - NAWO YWA

WRI
Widows' Rights International
Charity Number 1069142

Widowhood in all its forms is insufficiently recognised as a human rights issue. Least discussed are child widows. The increase in child marriage has led to an increase in child and young widows.

This interactive panel of experts and activists will highlight the challenges, share best practice & possible solutions including key actions for implementation.

rsvp:
administrator@widowsrights.org
Register (if you do not have
a UN pass)
[Register](#)



WIDOWS
DEVELOPMENT
ORGANISATION



ROZARIA
MEMORIAL TRUST
PROVIDING TOTAL CARE FOR THE ELDERLY AND DISABLED

NAWO
Connecting Women

Event Programme

Introduction

Zarin Hainsworth OBE

Current status on child marriage

Marina Plesons, WHO Consultant, Adolescents and At-Risk Populations Team (HRP)

Strengthening accountability mechanisms to prevent and address child marriage

Alfonso Barragués, Deputy Chief, UNFPA Geneva Office

Ending child marriage to end child widowhood

Dr Adebisi Adebayo, Chief, IAC Geneva Liaison Office

The work of Naserian to stop child widowhood, A film from Naserian

Child Marriage as a harmful traditional practice

Dr Fulata L. Moyo, PhD, Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

What role can the international community have in better protecting child widows at a local level?

Henry Snowball, NAWO YWA Youth Delegate

The importance of keeping accurate data on child widows

Katherine Ainsworth, NAWO YWA Youth Delegate

Child widows: mothers versus children

Ruby Woods, NAWO YWA Youth Delegate

Plight of child widows within the context of widowhood

Zarin Hainsworth OBE

Q&A

Thanks and Close

Panel Biographies

Zarin Hainsworth

Zarin has worked tirelessly for many years as a leader and supporter of a range of organisations working towards gender equality, diversity and women's access to their human rights. She works to promote gender equality, diversity and women's rights at grassroots and international levels. In 2011 she was named by One World Action as one of the 'Unseen Women Who Changed the World' for her work with Maasai widows in Tanzania through the charity Naserian.

Marina Plesons

Marina Plesons is a consultant with the World Health Organization's Department of Reproductive Health and Research and Human Reproduction Programme, working specifically on Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health (ASRH). She has an MPH from University of Washington. She is also the co-founder of Health Advocacy Innovations, a nonprofit working to improve the accuracy of pediatric MDR-TB treatment.

Alfonso Barraqués

Alfonso Barraqués is the deputy chief of the UNFPA.

Dr Adebisi Adebayo

Dr. (Mrs) Bisi Adebayo is the Chief Focal Point at the Liaison Office of the Inter African Committee on Practices Affecting the Health of women and Girls, Dr. Adebayo holds a PhD in Population Studies from the University of Liverpool, United Kingdom. She has a sustained interest in human rights issues, youth, gender and women's health. She has carried out a lot of research and written several times on the root causes of the status of women as well as on different socio-economic issues.

Dr Fulata L. Moyo

Fulata Moyo is a scholar-activist who interrogates religious resources in search of gender and ecological justice and defence of women's rights. She is a member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Her research and activist interests focus on how African women's storytelling, theologies and feminist/womanist liberative interpretation of sacred texts and religion inform the quest to end gender based violence. She earned a PhD from the School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa in Human Sciences with a focus in gender and sexual ethics.

Henry Snowball, Katherine Ainsworth, Ruby Woods

Henry, Katherine and Ruby are NAWO Youth Delegates.

Summary of event

On Tuesday 3rd July 2018 in Palais des Nations, Widow's Rights International held the panel event, Child Widows: Forgotten Human Rights. The panel was chaired by Zarin Hainsworth and panelists included several experts on the subject as well as three NAWO youth delegates. The event aimed to address the issue of child widowhood as well as the harmful practices linked to it: child marriage and the stigmatisation of widows. The severe lack of current and available data on child widows, the consequences of child marriage and widowhood in addition to calls to action were further discussed.



The panel

The event began with a presentation from WHO's Marina Parsons, who framed the session by discussing the current status of child marriage. Her presentation shed light on the current statistics surrounding child marriage including how 12 million girls under the age of 18 are married each year and that the areas where it happens the most are South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF. Child marriage: Latest trends & future prospects. New York: UNICEF; 2018.). She also addressed the issue of child marriage from the perspective of the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG 5.3, and how, at the current rate of child marriage reduction, this goal will not be reached by 2030. She highlighted key lessons to be learnt from previous interventions to reduce child marriage. These included: how there is little evidence that laws on their own make any substantial contribution to discouraging or eradicating child marriage; the importance of fidelity within programmes aimed at preventing child marriage and how solutions must be local and contextual with a multi-faceted and multi-sectoral approach.



Marina Plesons giving her presentation

UNFPA's Alfonso Barragués spoke about child, early and forced marriage from a human rights perspective, addressing it specifically as a human rights violation. In his presentation he reinforced the idea that it is a global phenomenon and the necessity for local and contextual solutions. He also brought forward the idea that child marriage is a cause and consequence of other human rights violations, such as denial of access to education. He discussed the Human Rights Council mechanism the Universal Periodic Review and highlighted that lots of attention has been brought to child, early and forced marriage in the most recent cycles. He stressed the importance human rights accountability mechanisms in the reduction of child, early and forced marriage as they ensure member states pay attention to the issue and that they view it as a human rights violation.

Dr Adebisi Adebayo then spoke about the link between child marriage and child widowhood and the idea of harmful traditional practices. She highlighted the importance of interventions like this event in stopping harmful traditional practices from perpetuating and going unnoticed. She began by sharing some statistics on child marriage in an African context, notably how 17% of married girls under 18 are in Africa, how 15 of the top 20 countries where child marriage is prevalent are in Africa and how 39% of girls in Sub-Saharan Africa are married before the age of 18. She also shared some examples of harmful traditional practices present in Africa that were linked to child marriage. She described child marriage as the root cause of child widowhood and therefore shared several ways to combat child marriage in order to ultimately combat child widowhood. She cited poverty, tradition, fear for the safety of a girl and a lack of political will as some of the main barriers to ending child marriage in Africa. A key solution she drew upon was ensuring all African states sign, ratify and implement the African human rights mechanisms aimed at combating child marriage.

A short film from the grass roots organisation Naserian was then shown. The film consisted of three Maasai women discussing their experiences as widows in their communities. Naserian has worked hard to give widows a voice and change perceptions about them in these communities.



Attendees at the event

Dr Fulata L. Moyo spoke about the religious context of child marriage and subsequent widowhood. Dr Moyo shared details of her own widowhood in 1999. She considers herself to be a privileged widow as she had had an education and was teaching at a university at the time, meaning she was in a position to make informed choices and support herself economically. As a part of a religious community, pastors and fellow Christians would visit her after the death of her husband to provide support and guidance. They would tell her about a passage in the Bible, in which it is said that God becomes the husband to all widows so she had no reason to worry. As she had been taught to read literature from a feminist perspective she was inquisitive, leading her to question to whose benefit the story was being told and how the story related to her personal situation. Dr Moyo continued to tell the story of a young girl who married her husband after she became pregnant from ritual sex. This husband was very ill due to HIV and AIDS, and soon died leaving the young girl alone, with no property and a child to care for. She became a maid in the city as to provide for her child and herself; here she was victim to much gender-based and sexual abuse. When Dr Moyo first met the girl she was unable to talk about her experience, and prayed to God as her husband. Overall Dr Moyo emphasised the importance of creating safe spaces in which these girls can share their stories, contributing greatly to their healing process. Education is fundamental to stopping child marriage, but supplying resources and education for periods is also vital. Education on reading sacred texts should also be provided, teaching people not to take scripture for its word-level meaning but to delve deeper into it and apply it to your personal situation. She emphasised that bringing religious and traditional leaders into the fight against child marriage is also vital.

Henry Snowball spoke about how limited data currently held on child widows is a barrier to their receiving of protection and support. He shared that many organisations are working to prevent child marriage and protect child brides but give little focus to child widows due to this dearth of information. He highlighted that child widows have their status constricted due to three factors; their marital status, age and gender. He also spoke about the many social restrictions placed on widows in many parts of the world and how grassroots organisations

such as Women for Human Rights- Single Women Group are working to overcome them. He called for a more effective system to collect data on child widows and more effective protection methods from states and governments.

Katherine Ainsworth spoke about the importance of keeping accurate data on child widows. She recounted how prominent themes in her research of accounts of child widowhood were masking and silencing. She emphasised how child widows are one of the most vulnerable groups in our society and how it is our duty to protect them. Due to their absence from data and reports, she said, child widows suffer from, above all, a lack of attention and consideration on an international scale. She highlighted that Adequate and appropriate data needs to be gathered in order to design a policy which focuses on empowering child widows. She called for accurate data on child widows to be recorded and made widely available for international viewing and comment. She also called for Girl Widows to have their rights established in formal legislation, something which they currently do not have.



Ruby Woods giving her presentation

Ruby Woods focused on the conflicting identities of child widows of the mother and the child and she emphasised how they are made invisible and vulnerable by their marriage. She spoke about how many child widows are also mothers and how they are left in vulnerable positions where they can't care for their children. She pointed out how this may also lead to the perpetuation of child marriage. She called for the introduction of more small scale schemes like that of Naserian who "empower Maasai widows to uphold their rights and live fulfilling lives". She also called for every child to have access to a midwife to ensure that child widows are supported in the most critical moment of their lives. She emphasised that child widows are still children who want the same freedoms as all other children and drew upon key principles to support child widows as children. These included the freedom to express oneself, education as a catalyst for change and the importance of support networks, such as ones set up for Lebanese child brides by the organisation Girls Not Brides. She called for replications of the schemes of Naserian and Girls Not Brides that

she discussed, state investment, political will, and international dedication to ending the plight of child widows.

In summary, the event highlighted that ending child marriage is crucial in ending Child Widowhood. Key statistics in a global and African context surrounding child marriage were shared as well as approaches to eradicating it. Child Early and Forced Marriage was also discussed from a human rights perspective and the utilising of human rights accountability mechanisms also encouraged in the process of ending CEFM. Harmful Traditional Practices were discussed and the necessity to question them and intervene was highlighted. Alongside addressing Child Widowhood from the perspective of ending child marriage, the status of existing child widows was also discussed. The importance of accurate and adequate data and legislation in protecting child widows was emphasised. Finally, giving child widows the support they need by replicating grassroots schemes similar those of Naserian and Girls Not Brides was a key initiative to be brought forward.

Zarin Hainsworth closed the event by stating that only a snapshot of the diversity of problems regarding child marriage and widowhood were able to be covered. The importance of continuing talking, not only to fight the taboo surrounding child brides and widows, but also so that action can be discussed. Zarin called that we keep on calling out these harmful practices in order to work towards change, and commented that a resolution will hopefully be reached regarding child marriage soon in the Human Rights Council. The importance of collaboration with both widows, brides and the communities it takes place in was further highlighted, as ultimately these are the people any work done will affect the most.

Questions and Answers

How do you fight the problem of harmful traditions when no legislation is in place?

- Dr Adebayo answered this question by suggesting the need to talk about the practice of child marriage in addition to the need of education to the parents, through religious and community leaders, around the impacts of child marriage as they are the ones who give away the child. The need for counselling and support for both the child and family was also mentioned. Dr Adebayo further suggested that education on both human rights and female sexuality at different levels across different age groups so that girls know their rights. Furthermore she suggested going to the government and encouraging them to remove double standards. She also recommended the need for shelters that girls can go to in order to escape or get support for her situation. Dr Adebayo summarised by stating that child marriage is not a domestic issue, but a human rights violation which needs to be tackled.
- Ruby Woods suggested that there was a need for small scale education schemes, teaching the girls their rights, helping to put an end to the cycle of child marriage and by consequence child widowhood. She also stated the need for education and support surrounding child marriage to come from her community rather than external forces, as it will more likely be taken seriously if change stems from within the community.
- Henry Snowball commented on the importance of the work done by NGOs and other organisations in order to stop these harmful traditions, using Naserius as a case study.
- Alfonso Barragués spoke about Human Rights Mechanisms influencing decisions in the form of advocacy. The UNFPA encourages youth engagement meaning that young people learn about their rights and how to enforce and advocate them.

Why are certain harmful marriage religious practices not being denounced by the international community?

- It was again suggested that there is a need to engage both religious and community leaders in order to denounce these practices among the people who partake in them; rather than it just being something which is often only denounced by governments and organisations with no further action taken.
- Marina Plesons spoke about how engaging religious leaders is important to educating more of the international community in regard to these issues. In Mozambique for example, religious leaders have been education on sexual violence and other topics by progressive religious scholars. In Nepal religious leaders are conducting awareness programmes to other religious leaders.

-

The event was rapporteured by Sophia Macadam and Anna Chappell, NAWO Youth Delegates

Photos by Isadora Bursey, NAWO Youth Delegate