

International Widows Day

Debate held in Grand Committee, House of Lords,
on Thursday, July 6, 2023

Question asked by The Lord Loomba CBE

Responding on behalf of HM Government
The Rt Hon. The Lord Mott OBE,
Lord-in-Waiting, Government Whip

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*Question for Short Debate in Grand Committee,
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“Lord Loomba to ask His Majesty’s Government what steps they are taking in response to the United Nations’ International Widows Day and to empower widows to achieve economic independence in the face of continuing discrimination and prejudice affecting their opportunities and life chances as well as those of their dependants.”



Lord Loomba

Lord Loomba (CB)

My Lords, I declare my interest as chair and founder trustee of the Loomba Foundation.

I was only 10 years old when my father died in India in 1954. It was a tragedy for my mother and my siblings, but for me, the shock of what happened next has remained with me all of my life. On that same day, before my father had been cremated, my mother had to remove all

her jewellery and bindi—the sign of a married woman in India—and to wear only white clothes to signify her for ever as a widow. I had always known my mother as a happy and fulfilled person. Now she was instantly transformed into a troubled widow, shunned and facing imposed obstacles. My mother was determined to make sure that we were not harmed by the tragedy and she devoted all her resources to ensuring that all of us—boys and girls—received the best education possible.

As I came to realise years later, we were the lucky ones. Tens of millions of widows from poor backgrounds face penury, with customs and traditions making it difficult for them to support themselves or to pay for their children’s education. Many fall into destitution, with very little opportunity for their children to escape a similar fate. So, in 1997, after my mother passed away, my wife and I established a foundation in my mother’s memory to help poor widows and their families.

Our first target was to fund education for children of poor widows throughout India, and we built a programme that has transformed the lives of more than 100,000 people. We soon came to realise, however, that this is a global issue, with widows facing serious abuse and discrimination in countries all around the world. There was little or no prospect of this changing. The problems of widows are invisible—not seen or acknowledged anywhere.

A 2001 United Nations Development Fund for Women report noted that widows are painfully absent from the statistics of many developing countries and rarely mentioned in reports on women’s poverty, development, health or human rights. We have since worked in dozens of countries on four continents to support and empower widows and to counter cultures of discrimination, such as customary “cleansing” rituals in which a widow is required to drink the water used to wash her dead husband’s body, or to be raped by one of his relatives. These practices, common in some countries, violate the dignity of widows and are a public health issue.

Widows are also regularly accused of killing their husbands—including by transmitting HIV/AIDS—in India, Nepal, Papua New Guinea and sub-Saharan Africa. Systematic seizure of property and evictions by the late husband's family remain widespread in 18 African countries as well as in Bangladesh and India.

In many sub-Saharan African rural societies, widows are literally “inherited” through forced remarriage to a brother of the deceased husband to keep the property of the husband and his children inside the husband's family. Among the Luo ethnic group in Kenya, this is encouraged because women are expected to continue bearing children—a widow's status and security depend on having many sons.

Customs and prejudices that feed discrimination against widows is so deep-rooted that the support of Governments, international organisations and all people of good will is needed to bring about significant change. This means not just changes in laws or giving aid but altering prevailing attitudes and cultural norms around widowhood. We need a sustained global campaign to address egregious violations of human rights.

That is why on 26 May 2005, at an event here in the House of Lords, the Loomba Foundation launched International Widows Day. After five years of tireless campaigning together with Loomba Foundation president Cherie Blair, 23 June was unanimously adopted as International Widows Day by the UN General Assembly, the day my dear mother became a widow.

Over the last 14 years, UN member states have worked to tackle the issue, but the problem still affects more than 1 billion people, with more than 100 million widows and their dependants living below the poverty line. I have been grateful throughout this time for the support of the UK Government, who have expressly recognised that widows suffer double discrimination, both for their gender and their status as widows.

International Widows Day was born in this building, and the Gov-

ernment have played their part in making it an official effort of the international community. I was grateful for the opportunity to put an Oral Question last week and to raise this Question for Short Debate today. However, it is noteworthy that while a Motion on International Women's Day is tabled by a Minister each year, properly addressing the plight of widows on International Widows Day is left to the lottery of Questions submitted for ballot by noble but ordinary Members of your Lordships' House.

We can and must do much more to address the plight of widows. We must stop treating them as a subset of gender discrimination. We must see that we are talking about the poorest of the poor, who often have no one to turn to or speak for them. We must see that widowhood, which hangs over all women, drives discrimination against girls from the day they are born, leading families to prioritise education and opportunities for sons over daughters. We must realise that without specific action on widows, we will never achieve the ambition of the UN sustainable development goals to leave no one behind.

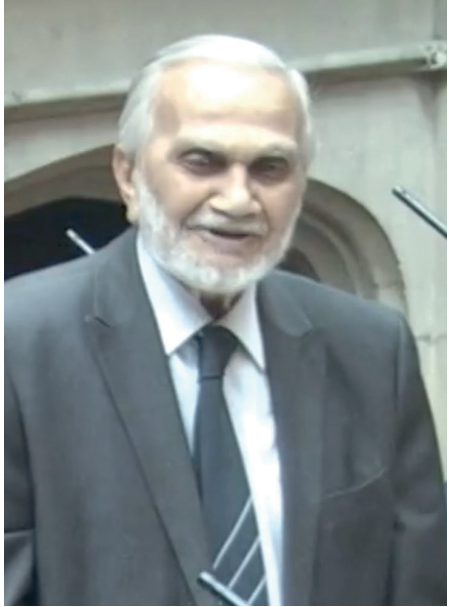
I have three simple questions for the Minister. First, will he support a focused study of changes in legislation and attitudes in UN member countries over the last two decades to inform effective policy development? Secondly, will he support an international campaign of education and awareness based on the evidence? Finally, will he consider scheduling a debate on International Widows Day next year from the Dispatch Box?

Lord Parekh (Lab)

My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, for initiating this debate. I thought I would raise two issues with the Minister and make some other points. We have been talking about widows for a long time in this House. Those of us who come from the Indian subcontinent vividly recollect what it means to be a widow and the kind of suffering women have to go through, so this is not a new subject. It

is a very painful subject, and we have raised it again and again. I want to ask two questions which have not been asked before.

First, who is a widow? I am told that a widow is somebody whose husband has died. What is a husband? The manner of thinking and talking about marriage and social relations is undergoing fast changes, partly because of the impact of feminism and partly because of radical ideas, so that the old categories of married/not married/widowed/divorced make less and less sense. For example, if two people have been cohabiting and



Lord Parekh

one of them dies, is the cohabitee a widow? In same-sex marriages, if two men are married to each other and one of them dies, is the other man a widow? If he walked into my office and said “Professor, I am a widow”, I would be horrified to hear that. So the first question that this House, with its distinguished concentration of intelligence and wisdom, will want to address is who is a widow and whose future and whose past are we talking about.

My second question is far more important. A widow is a cultural construction. To be a widow in India is a very different experience from being a widow in the United States. As the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, said, what does being a widow in India mean? I speak from experience, because I saw what happened with my grandmother and other widows. You will not wear fancy dress. You will not eat fancy food. You will slowly withdraw from public occasions. You will not allow your shadow to be cast on newly born children or newly married couples. In other words, you lose all your human rights. What do you do?

To be a widow means to be not just depersonalised but depersoned. You no longer count as a person. What do we need to do to improve their condition? The suggestion that they should somehow be economically better off or economically empowered simply does not do. The problem is not economic. My grandmother suffered those handicaps, and having a lot of money would not have helped her.

The problem requires a revolutionary change in the culture. It is a cultural problem, not an economic one. It is a cultural problem in the sense that people in the community hardly ever recognise that widowhood is a social condition, not an identity. That is an important difference. Old age is a social condition but if you turn it into a matter of identity, that entails rights and obligations and all sorts of things, as is increasingly happening in the modern world. So when widowhood is turned into a matter of identity, it has to be counted as such. That can be done only at the cultural level, not the economic level.

I end by suggesting that the revolutionary cultural change required to deal with the problems of widows is enormous. In India, which I observe regularly, the problem has been with us for at least 300 years. In the 19th century, one of the greatest reform movements was the remarriage of widows, because widows were not allowed to remarry. Not only that, but a widow was seen a threat because she would seduce your husband or entice him or other members of your family away. What do you do? The widow was not only an ill omen but a threat.

In those kinds of situation, how do social reformers fight those ugly practices and beliefs? That is precisely the point—cultural change requires fighting the beliefs and practices through which people define themselves. I suggest that economic power is useful but not enough.

Lord Hussain (LD)

My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, for securing this debate. I will focus my contribution on African widows. In Africa, ir-



Lord Hussain

respective of ethnic group, widows are among the most vulnerable and destitute women in the world.

It is a common concept throughout Africa that death does not end a marriage. While the widow may have no rights to ownership of her husband's property, she is usually expected to fulfil obligations towards her deceased husband through participating in traditional practices. In return, she may be allowed to remain in her home and to have rights to cultivate land. In the past, this pattern of shared duties and obligations in an extended family

protected the widow and her children. Today, the custom is more likely to be used to oppress and exploit them. The low status, poverty and violence experienced by widows stems from discrimination in inheritance, custom, the male-controlled nature of society and the domination of oppressive traditional practices and customary codes, which take precedence over constitutional guarantees of equality, modern laws and international human rights standards for women.

Widow abuse is visible across ethnic groups, income, class and education. Legislative reform in compliance with international treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has largely failed to take precedence over local interpretations of customary law. In some cases, widowhood may deprive women of their home, agricultural land, assets and even their children. The poverty of widowhood causes children, especially girls, to be withdrawn from school.

A wave of genocide created 500,000 widows in Rwanda. Some 60% of adult women were widowed by the wars in Angola and Mozambique. After the genocide, many widows became victims of their husband's male relatives, who, rather than protect and support them, denied them any access to their husband's land or property.

Through the association of widows NGOs, widows' inheritance has been the subject of reforms in the law of many countries in Africa. Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, Zambia and Zimbabwe are among those whose Governments have legislated for equality in inheritance rights, in compliance with obligations under the Beijing platform for action and human rights treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

However, it is clear that at local level, discriminatory customary rules on inheritance still apply, even though constitutional guarantees or modern laws exist. In rare cases in which courageous women have defied threats of violence and taken their cases to court, some independent and creative judges have decreed that international law, as laid down, takes precedence over custom and religion. On the other hand, many widows have shown remarkable determination and courage in the face of tragedy and, either individually or in co-operation with other widows, become self-supporting entrepreneurs, running small businesses, farming and supporting their children and other dependants.

The strength of widows' groups in Uganda, such as the aid organisations, is a model of what can be achieved when widows organise themselves. Widows' groups in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Swaziland are heightening awareness of these issues and providing training and income generation, health, care and shelter for destitute widows and their families. More of these groups need to be encouraged to develop so that widows are not seen as recipients of welfare relief but women whose contribution to the economy and potential role in society should be properly acknowledged.

However, taboos on discussing such intimate topics have allowed for little research on this aspect of widow abuse in Africa. In the light of this, can the Minister say what more can be done with the help of international partners to obtain some reliable data on the state of widows in war-torn countries such as Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia?

The Lord Bishop of Exeter

My Lords, I am most grateful to the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, for securing this debate and for his determination to raise public awareness of the economic plight of so many widows across the world. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition which has shaped the values that undergird our country, there is a strong tradition of caring for “the widow, the orphan and the stranger”, and we find that trio of vulnerable individuals recurring throughout Scripture. To put it another way, one of the litmus tests of a society is how it treats those who are most vulnerable to exploitation— those without obvious defenders.

With regard to widows, in the New Testament we are encouraged to make financial provision for those over the age of 60, which is the origin of the historic qualifying age for female retirement pensions, now long since superseded thanks for our increasing longevity in Britain. As we have heard from other noble Lords, provision for widows across the globe varies enormously. However, this debate gives me the opportunity to ask the Minister about our own situation with pensions. I am under the impression—I hope not mistakenly—that all the main parties are committed to maintaining the triple lock on old-age pensions. Can the Minister confirm that His Majesty’s Government are indeed committed to this, lest in lecturing other nations, we be at fault ourselves?

Discussion of the empowerment of widows to achieve economic independence can act as a sort of mirror on the values of a culture. For example, in our own culture, the glamourisation of the young, the



*The Lord Bishop of Exeter,
The Right Revd Robert Atwell*

famous and the beautiful is having the unfortunate effect of sidelining older people in our communities, whose voice—apart from in your Lordships’ House—is often under-represented. When a society glamourises the young at the expense of older members in the community, it is in danger of losing sight of the gift of experience.

Of course, widows are not a homogenous group, and we should be wary of talking about them and all “older people” in an undifferentiated way. Above all, we need to challenge the narrative that caricatures older people as a burden and instead talk positively, using the language of gift and blessing. Older members of a society have a honed wisdom which should not be squandered. Taking seriously this challenge could positively impact thinking across various policy areas, including health, social care and end of life care.

Internationally, as we have heard, the picture is very varied, and widows can be very young. The UN estimates that of the approximately 258 million widows globally, no fewer than 1.36 million are children. The consequences of widowhood for children given in marriage before they are 18 can be severe and lifelong. Even for those women who are not children when they are widowed, many face complex

and harmful prejudices, as we have heard, and financial instability. One in 10 widows worldwide lives in extreme poverty.

In that context, I will highlight an organisation doing inspiring work. Five Talents works with the Anglican Church in rural areas of eastern Africa, Myanmar and Bolivia to help those with no access to financial services to begin savings groups. They receive training and microfinance loans to set up and grow small businesses. Five Talents works with the marginalised and no less than 78% are women, many of them widows, who go on to run successful businesses. It is a superb example of empowering women towards financial independence.

With so much to draw on, I hope that this debate encourages widows in every land to share their insights. Their experience should be a toolbox from which we all gain wisdom.

Lord Davies of Brixton (Lab)

My Lords, as previous speakers have said, we owe a debt to the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, for raising this issue today. We should also put on record our thanks for the work he has done through the foundation, in his mother's name, to put this issue before us. It clearly does not get the attention it deserves. Thanks are due to the noble Lord for obtaining this debate today and for his dogged determination to ensure that this is not a one-off. Having another debate next year so that we can assess progress is clearly important.

One of the big successes of the noble Lord's campaign was the establishment of International Widows Day, the purpose of which is to educate people about this issue—as we are doing now—to mobilise changes and the resources to achieve them, and to celebrate the successes that are possible. That is why this debate is important.

When someone is widowed, they obviously have to deal with grief and loss, but all too often there is economic uncertainty beyond that. I said uncertainty but I mean poverty, and that is the problem: it leads



Lord Davies of Brixton

to poverty all too often. This brings me to the focus of my remarks: a large part of that is about pensions and inadequate provision for people who have to face the problems of widowhood.

In this country, the concept of a pension gap between men and women is receiving additional attention, but we still have a long way to go before achieving solutions. It is clear

that the same pattern is being followed around the world. In fact, in preparing for this debate, I was somewhat concerned by—but ought to have known about—the lack of work being undertaken in this area. There is a lot of work on pensions, such as researching their effectiveness and changes in policy, but work on the specific issue of how the pension system works for widows is conspicuously lacking. The noble Lord asked the Minister to promise more research in this area, and more information is clearly needed so that the problems are clearer.

We do know about some of these problems. The fact that women are discriminated against in pay means that they end up with worse pensions; and women, in practice, tend to undertake more caring responsibilities, which, as things stand, rarely give rise to pension rights. That is the central problem. What to do about it and where the money will come from is the area that needs more work.

In the UK, pension rules by and large do not discriminate against women, although the fact that the rules as they apply to widowhood are extremely complex is a de facto problem. Probably hundreds of thousands of women—I think the DWP has acknowledged this—face problems accessing their rights because they do not know them or the system is so difficult to negotiate.

However, the biggest problem is the whole concept of derived rights. Women do not accrue pension rights in their own right. All too often, the pension system is established on the basis that the man is the breadwinner and the woman the caregiver. We are moving away from that. There is still a big historical legacy of that in the UK system, but it is endemic in pension systems throughout the world. We need to do research on derived rights and contingent rights: women need rights to a pension that is not linked to their marital status. The third area where more work needs to be done is lack of awareness. All too often, when someone is widowed, they simply do not know what is available, or there is no advice or access to advice, or to the information that would enable them to obtain the help available.

There is a focus on innovation and technology for gender equality, and we can very much look to technology to provide the information and support that people need to access the pension rights to which they are entitled.

The Earl of Sandwich (CB)

My Lords, every time I hear my noble friend Lord Loomba in these debates, I feel that he personifies international development at the ground level, where it matters. Poverty, hunger and ill health are the three issues heading the UN's priority list of sustainable development goals. Gender equality is also on the list. Women and girls who have suffered violence or rape, or been widowed or separated, deserve much more attention at the international level, and this is what they are receiving through International Widows Day.



The Earl of Sandwich

No one can have anything but admiration for the work of the Loomba Foundation and the efforts that my noble friend has made not only in changing lives in India but in influencing our Government. This was especially true during the coalition, when we had a real department for international development that began to focus on gender equality and violence against women, including widows. I expect that our new Minister will say that this policy continues, but this week's news that our core aid programme, including the one helping women and girls, is being raided yet again to assist, in

this case, the climate change budget, is not encouraging. I hope that the Minister has a few words ready to reassure us on that subject.

Normally, when visualising a developing country, we think of a static rural or urban population, small enterprises, the cultivation of crops and schemes such as water conservation. I remember from my time in India that widows often joined credit and loan schemes in which women played a leading role, often well ahead of men, in accountancy, saving money for funerals and communal activities. We in the West, with our demands for separate living and housing, still have a lot to learn about community and the need to back up weaker members of society.

I raise the case of another neglected group: the widows of migrants and widows who themselves become refugees or migrants. In the case of migrants, it is their death that separates husband and wife and leaves the family divided. It is not an easy subject for the FCDO,

but it is also connected to the UN agencies. This week we have been discussing the Government's plans to prevent migrants coming to the UK, and even the present Bill allows exceptional or vulnerable cases. I argue that widows separated from migrant husbands are an exceptional category. If possible, they should be identified by the UNHCR well before they leave detention centres and climb into small boats.

I have seen research which shows that both the UN and the EU, in an attempt to slow migration, have been financing detention centres, mainly in Libya. These centres separate men and women, including husbands and wives, and torture and maltreat people even though they are in so-called care. They are denied food and medical facilities offered by the UN itself. It is mainly the men who risk their lives on boats; in many cases, they leave their widows in these centres, which are often run or dominated by the local militia or traffickers demanding enormous sums from families via mobile phone.

I have visited refugee camps in different parts of the world and have seen the excellent work they do. However, after reading about Libya, I am less charmed by the UN agencies, even the International Organization for Migration, for which I had a lot of respect. The irony is that European policies are being turned on their head. Detention centres, by becoming a source of aggression or a playground for militants, simply aggravate the problems of migrants, many of whom are being turned into refugees. Only a very small number happily return to their homes. Surely it is time for an international conference to bring the relevant countries together to tackle the crisis of migration.

Finally, in Darfur, Sudan, reports show that women and girls are suffering violence, rape and murder on a daily basis, but access is so difficult that they are beyond international protection. I know the FCDO is doing its best to maintain programmes for them in Sudan.

Baroness Hussein-Ece (LD)

My Lords, I congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, on securing this important debate and on all his work in establishing International Widows Day, drawing attention to it and addressing the issues faced by widowed women. He set out very clearly so many of the problems that widowed women are still facing.

The United Nations reports that armed conflicts, the Covid-19 pandemic and displacement and migration have left many more women newly widowed in recent years. I will focus my remarks on the plight of Afghan women. Today, the situation of women's and girls' rights in Afghanistan has reverted to what it was pre-2002, when the Taliban previously controlled the country. Any progress on women's rights in the intervening 20 years has been rolled back.

We recall that restoring rights for women was one of the cornerstones of the United Kingdom's invasion of Afghanistan. Now, over two decades later, girls in Afghanistan have been banned from secondary school and women from tertiary education. Women and girls have been banned from entering amusement parks, public baths, gyms and sports clubs. Women have been banned from working for NGOs. Since the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021, women have been excluded from public office and the judiciary. Today, Afghanistan's women and girls are required to adhere to a very strict dress code and are not permitted to travel more than 75 kilometres without a mahram. They are compelled to stay at home. They are invisible.

Over 2.5 million women in Afghanistan have been widowed by decades of conflict and war. They face political and economic insecurity, educational inequality, sexual violence and poor health. That is especially pervasive among Afghan women and children, who were left displaced, illiterate and facing severe post-traumatic stress disorder from living in a war zone for so long. Most of these women were forced by their circumstances to marry young and have children,



only to become the sole breadwinner of the family after their husband's death. Infant mortality is extraordinarily high in Afghanistan—it is the highest in the world—particularly in rural areas, where only 3% of pregnant women are attended in their deliveries by a skilled professional.

Baroness Hussein-Ece

Save the Children gives the example of a

26-year-old widow with four children who has no male guardian to escort her when she leaves home. Therefore, she now finds it very difficult to access humanitarian aid. Save the Children reports that it has been unable to restart the majority of food security and livelihood projects which provide life-saving assistance to women like this one and her children.

The ban on female NGO staff in Afghanistan has been disastrous as the country faces a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, with an economic crisis, severe drought, high food prices and extreme poverty. Households supported by women have much lower incomes than families supported by men, and a staggering 96% of female-headed households are not eating enough food due to these restrictions. Women and children are now malnourished and, in many cases, starving. They are being sentenced, as one Afghan woman put it, to “death in slow motion”. This death sentence for Afghan women and girls can be lifted only by major and wide-ranging policy changes by the Taliban.

What efforts are we making together with the international community to continue to provide essential support to Afghan women, to prioritise women's and girls' rights in all engagements with the de facto authorities, and to demand the immediate reversal of those edicts and policies that abuse women's and girls' rights? Are we taking proactive measures to support Afghan women to engage in decision-making processes in Afghanistan about Afghanistan?

We know that, when equipped with vocational and economic tools, women can change their lives and those of their children, often regardless of their circumstances. We have heard some very good examples today, and historically around the world there have been some very good examples of women being able to do that if they are given the support and the right tools.

These women have, in effect, been abandoned by the West. I am in touch with quite a few charities that support widowed women and their children. They are small charities run by other Afghan women, mainly from this country, who are trying to make a difference. However, such small charities are only the tip of the iceberg, so I ask the Minister what efforts we are making to alleviate this suffering.

Lord Collins of Highbury (Lab)

My Lords, I too thank the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, for all his work on establishing International Widows Day and for his ongoing work with the Loomba Foundation and in particular the World Widows Report, which has been a regular feature of our debates and the information we have had.

As this debate has recognised, widows can face multiple forms of abuse, stigmatisation and hardship following the loss of their partner. One particularly nasty aspect of that discrimination can include losing their home. Often without property rights, they lose their homes, which are taken away by family members.



Lord Collins of Highbury

Bangladesh, in supporting widows into work. It would be good to hear from the Minister on that.

The eradication of discrimination against widows is critical to achieving the UN sustainable development goals—as we have heard in the debate—of ending poverty and hunger, achieving gender equality, reducing inequalities and creating sustainable communities. However, as the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, has stressed today and in other debates, policy-making must be based on evidence. When the Loomba Foundation embarked on its International Widows Day initiative, it simultaneously began a research programme to shine light on the issue, uncovering its scale, its many forms, its roots and its devastating impact on the economy of many countries. Its World Widows Report has provided researchers, aid agencies and Governments with the means to understand the issue and to form policies capable of addressing it.

It is clear from the evidence that a number of the sustainable development goals adopted by the UN in 2015 will not be achieved unless specific and urgent attention is paid to this issue. How will the Gov-

We have heard in previous debates and Questions about how the FCDO's new international women and girls strategy will support grass-roots, women-led civil society organisations to reach out to the most marginalised women and girls. One aspect which I am keen for the Minister to reply on is how that civil society reaches out to organised women's groups and in particular trade unions, which have been active, particularly in

ernment continue, through British expertise and research, to help UN member states develop and implement effective evidence-based policies, as urged by the noble Lord, Lord Loomba?

I conclude with reference to the responses we heard when the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, asked an Oral Question earlier this year. The noble Lord, Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park, referred to the 2019 Commission on the Status of Women, which saw the UK directly help

“secure the first-ever UN-level recognition of the need to invest in adequate measures to protect and support widows”.

He also referred to the UK helping

“to ensure that widows’ rights were recognised in the 2022 Commission on the Status of Women’s agreed conclusions”.—[Official Report, 26/6/23; col. 453.]

We all support these good policies, but can the Minister tell us how we are turning them into concrete action that will address the issues that noble Lords have highlighted in this debate?

Lord Mott (Con)

I thank the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, for tabling this debate to mark UN International Widows Day, and all noble Lords for their contributions. I also personally thank the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, for his time today discussing the incredible work of his foundation.

Before I get into more detail, I will answer one of his questions which I know is so important to him. He asked if we will give consideration to scheduling a debate on International Widows Day next year from the Dispatch Box. He will be aware that it is customary for the Government to schedule a debate on this subject. I certainly hope this will be possible next year, if parliamentary time allows. He has my personal support, and I will make sure that the Chief Whip is aware of this representation.



The Rt Hon. The Lord Mott

UN Women estimates that there are 258 million widows worldwide, and the UK Government recognise that many of them face multiple forms of hardship, stigmatisation and abuse. We have heard many stories and examples in this debate. Protecting their rights and improving their situation is a core element of our work promoting women's rights and gender equality around the world.

At this stage, I would like to answer the question from the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Exeter on the triple lock. The Prime Minister has promised to stick to the triple lock policy, which ensures that state pensions increase each year in line with the highest of the previous September's inflation, wage growth or 2.5%.

Today, we are specifically focusing on the economic independence of widows. There are of course many biological and cultural reasons why there are more widows than widowers, and why they are more likely to be disadvantaged economically. Starting from an early age, girls are more likely to miss out on education in some parts of the world, reducing their chances of gainful employment as adults.

In many societies, as we have heard today, women tend to marry

older men and are less likely to remarry. There are an estimated 1.3 million child widows who married before their 18th birthday and have lost their husbands to conflict, natural disaster or illness.

In the workplace, women are more likely to be paid less than men and more likely to have paid an economic price for having children and caring responsibilities. These economic disadvantages are compounded into old age by the fact that women tend to outlive men. Globally, one in four women are legally covered by a comprehensive social security system, and UN Women has estimated that nearly one in 10 widows worldwide lives in extreme poverty.

In many countries women are disadvantaged by laws and customs that restrict their rights to inheritance and land ownership, as well access to employment, credit and banking facilities. This inequality and lack of provision hurts most women, but it has a particularly bruising impact on widows of all ages, as well as their children and future generations.

In our country's gender and social inclusion analysis, we aim to highlight the specific local and overlapping discriminations faced by vulnerable populations, including widows and widowers. This absolutely includes those who have lost same-sex partners and partners who are not legally married. This would cover the cultural point mentioned by the noble Lord, Lord Parekh, as well as economic vulnerabilities. We support efforts to address all forms of discrimination against these groups, as part of our efforts to secure their human rights.

The UK Government are committed to promoting gender equality and the rights of women and girls around the world. In March, the Foreign Secretary launched the Government's first international women and girls strategy. It sets out how we will use our diplomatic and development levers to stand up for the rights and opportunities of women and girls throughout their lives. To tackle poverty and leave no one behind, we are focused on the three Es—educating girls, empowering women and girls and championing their health and rights, and ending gender-based violence. We target our interventions towards

the main life stages to achieve lifelong and intergenerational impacts.

The noble Lord, Lord Loomba, raised three questions and I will answer the second and third ones together. Through the international women and girls strategy, we are committed to using world-leading research to deliver quality programmes and policies for women and girls and to share the UK's expertise and technical knowledge globally. While we do not have a dedicated research platform on issues facing widows, we support the efforts of other researchers in this space to help both our efforts and those of other development partners to leave no one behind.

The noble Lord, Lord Hussain, raised the issue of widows in Africa and empowerment. The economic empowerment of women is key to their independence and a central part of our new strategy. I was particularly interested to hear the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Exeter talk about Five Talents. The UK Government are investing in female entrepreneurs, women's businesses and decent jobs in key sectors employing women, such as agriculture and manufacturing. For example, since 2017, our Work and Opportunities for Women partnerships have benefited more than 115,000 women, providing them with access to more diverse and lucrative jobs and improved working conditions. Since 2018, we have invested more than £31 million in schemes to raise rural incomes and improve food security for agricultural communities, targeting a 50% participation rate by women farmers.

We have also advocated for and invested heavily in providing 12 years of quality education for girls in developing countries. The UK Government have spent £885 million over 10 years in the global education challenge and £38 million to support the crucial work of women's rights organisations around the world. In July 2021, the UK co-hosted the Global Education Summit with Kenya and raised \$4 billion for the Global Partnership for Education. The UK remains a key donor to the GPE.

We have allocated up to an additional £18 million to the UN Global

Programme to End Child Marriage, on top of the £39 million we had already invested. This flagship programme has supported 8 million adolescent girls across 12 countries. Two-thirds of them have demonstrated increased knowledge and skills on their rights, relationships, sexual and reproductive health, and financial literacy. Some 744,000 of the most at-risk girls were supported to access or remain in formal or informal education.

The UK's development finance institution, British International Investment—BII for short—also supports the economic empowerment of women in developing countries. BII aims to ensure that at least 25% of its investments between 2022 and 2026 align with the 2X Challenge. This aims to mobilise \$3 billion from the private sector to provide women with better jobs and improved access to leadership opportunities, finance and enterprise support, as well as products and services that enhance economic participation and access.

Prejudice, sexual harassment and gender-based violence are all barriers to women finding and staying in work, as we have heard today. In 2022, the UK ratified the Istanbul convention, which is the gold standard for combating violence against women and girls. We also ratified the International Labour Organization's violence and harassment convention—the first international treaty to recognise the right of everyone to work free from violence and harassment, including that which is gender based. The UK Government are also investing a further £67 million in the What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls programme, which will systematically scale up proven approaches to prevent violence against women and girls worldwide.

The noble Lord, Lord Davies of Brixton, raised the issue of pensions and social protection. We are working with partner countries to help to strengthen their social protection systems. Since 2019, we have invested £19 million to support countries to build social protection systems that are better able to respond to the specific needs and potential of the most vulnerable women and girls, including widows and those in communities gripped by conflict and other crises.

I reassure the noble Earl, Lord Sandwich, that the FCDO will continue to prioritise spending on women and girls to ensure a strong focus on gender equality in our programming. Our human rights diplomacy in the UN and beyond and our revised disability, inclusion and rights strategy also support the rights of older women and widows.

To conclude, the UK Government recognise that many widows around the world face exclusion, economic hardship, stigmatisation and abuse. Through our strategies, development programmes and diplomacy, we are promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls around the world so that they can realise their full potential throughout their lives and achieve economic independence. We will continue to empower women, provide them with economic opportunities, challenge social norms and laws and dismantle barriers until every woman and girl is able to enjoy their rights and freedom and realise their potential. I end by quoting from the Loomba Foundation website, which says that,

“the first International Widows Day was never an end in itself: it was the beginning of a journey”.

Sitting suspended.



Verbatim transcript from Hansard July 6, 2023

Speaker photographs from Parliamentlive.tv

This debate can be viewed at <https://parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/d3aab097-8636-4b1f-9d82-884ff22914a2>

About International Widows Day

Established by Lord Raj Loomba in 2005 as an annual day of action to highlight the plight of destitute widows and their dependent children all over the world, International Widows Day was unanimously adopted by the United Nations 65th General Assembly following a five-year campaign in 2010.

While awareness of this issue, for so long invisible and ignored, is now increasing, the scale of suffering is vast with nearly a billion people affected by such discrimination around the world. It is one of the key issues to be addressed in efforts to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to end poverty, promote well-being for all at all ages, achieve gender equality and leave no-one behind.

Eradicating deep-rooted prejudice against widows requires a culture change in many societies, with Governments and civil society working together through legislation, education, social support and community outreach to bring light where previously there has been only misery and darkness, and to restore widows and their families to a life of hope and dignity.

Governments, voluntary organisations and people of goodwill are working together in many countries to achieve this, galvanised by the platform of International Widows Day on 23 June each year.



At the United Nations, New York, in 2010: Lady Cherie Blair, CBE, KC, Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, Lord Raj Loomba, CBE



On the first UN International Widows Day on June 23, 2011, the then Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon sent a message to all member states, in which he said:

“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 recognized 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 recognize the important contribution of widows, and we must ensure that they enjoy the rights and social protections they deserve.”

Educating the children of poor widows

When widows are left destitute, deprived of inheritance rights and unable to work, they cannot afford to send their children to school and thus the injustice visited upon the mother creates a cycle of poverty that can last generations.

This is why the first programme instituted by the Loomba Foundation in 1998 was to fund the schooling of children of poor widows, with a target of educating at least one hundred children in each of India's then 29 States within a decade.

With the support of the Government of India, business and individual supporters, that target was reached within seven years and to date, the Loomba Foundation's education programme has transformed the lives of nearly one hundred thousand people in India.



The Loomba Foundation's education programme was inaugurated in 1999 by India's then Prime Minister, the Hon'ble Atal Bihari Vajpayee, in a ceremony at his residence in New Delhi.

Empowering widows to be independent



India's Prime Minister, the Hon'ble Narendra Modi, inaugurated the Loomba Foundation's programme to empower 5,000 impoverished widows in his constituency of Varanasi in 2016.

In 2012, the Loomba Foundation expanded its programme to economic empowerment, working with partners including the then Prince of Wales' global charity Youth Business International, Oxfam GB, Rotary India Literacy Mission, Lions Clubs International and local providers to deliver skills training and equipment to thousands of widows across three continents, including in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Syria, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, South Africa, Guatemala and Chile.

The success of this programme was also enhanced by support from Governments in India and in all the countries in which empowerment programmes were delivered.



THE LOOMBA FOUNDATION

Caring for widows around the world

Presented by The Loomba Foundation.
UK Registered Charity No. 1064988

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