

Elisabeth Braw comments for Foreign Policy

Outraged over India's widow burnings? Thought so. But widow burnings are rare compared with the cruelty widows young and old put up with every day. They're exploited, discriminated against, sexually abused, and denied their legal rights. Perplexingly, there's little or no international outrage over their fate. That has to change, says U.N. Women's acting head, Lakshmi Puri, who has made widows' rights one of her priorities. If widows don't have the same rights as everyone else, society can't move forward.

EB: Why, when there are so many other pressing issues on the agenda, should countries focus more on widows?

LP: Yes, there are many priorities, but countries can't progress when one part of their society is literally left out in the cold. There are more widows than ever before due to armed conflicts, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the age difference between partners, with many girls being married off to much older men. In too many countries, women are vulnerable after their husbands' death: They face discrimination, are disinherited from property, and have very little access to resources and opportunities, including land, decent work, and an income.

In many cases, widows are also victims of exclusion, exploitation, violence, and stigmatization because they're not only widows but also live in poverty or in remote or rural areas. Widows are bearing the brunt of conflicts, natural disasters, displacement, harmful traditional practices, and HIV/AIDS. An estimated 115 million widows currently live in poverty, and 81 million have suffered physical abuse, some from members of their own family. Many of them are young widows who were child brides.

EB: What's the worst place in the world to be a widow today?

LP: It's clear that widows are most affected in places where there's an intersection of poverty, remoteness, and culture and tradition being misinterpreted. That results in multiple discriminations against women. All over the world, in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, widows are the invisible people. For many women, the loss of a husband is only the starting point, the first of many traumas.

I grew up in India, a country that has seen much progress. Yet, in India alone there are an estimated 44 million widows. And I've seen firsthand the devastating effects of discrimination against widows, of life-threatening and traumatic mourning and burial rites. I've seen how widows are forced into poverty, evicted from their homes, denied their rights, and often rendered invisible and voiceless.

Across the world, the poverty they suffer is often made worse by little or no access to credit or other economic resources, and by illiteracy or lack of education. And in many countries, but particularly across Africa and Asia, widows find themselves the victims of physical and mental violence -- including sexual abuse -- related to inheritance, land and property disputes. In sub-Saharan Africa there's the additional problem of HIV/AIDS: Widows are blamed for their husbands' death from AIDS, and widows living with HIV are extremely vulnerable.

EB: Whose job is it to ensure that widows get a more humane situation?

LP: As a society, we can't move forward if widows don't have the same rights as everyone else. We -- national authorities, the United Nations, civil society, NGOs, and the public -- must ensure that widows of all ages and their children are treated as equal human beings. We know that widows are more than victims: They're mothers, farmers, caregivers, heads of households, and part of the labor force. They're contributors to family, society, and economy.

We at U.N. Women promote programs and policies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to end violence against widows and their children, alleviate their poverty, and educate widows of all ages. Empowering them through access to adequate health care, education, decent work, full participation in decision-making, and lives free of violence and abuse would give them a chance to build a secure life after bereavement. In India, where young girls become widows -- largely due to the huge age gap between husband and wife -- we're working with partners to advance the rights of widows by providing skills training and livelihood support so that widows can take care of a business and their lives. And in Guatemala, we're working to advance the rights of widows, mostly from the indigenous community, who lost their husbands in internal armed conflict. We support organized widows to address conflict-related sexual violence and strengthen political dialogue to rebuild peace and the rule of law and to receive reparations.

EB: Many countries are moving toward democracy. Do better laws mean more rights for widows?

Yes, because true democracy and women's rights are interlinked. Women's empowerment and the protection of women's rights are our greatest weapon to prevent discrimination and violence against women and girls. When women and girls who're widowed have the full protection of the law, they can claim their rights to land and property. When they have equal status in their families and their husbands' families and society, they're treated as equal human beings, not as an object of derision, shame, suspicion, or pity.

More generally, gender equality and women's empowerment are usually seen as soft issues, but you see a strong link with foreign policy. Where's the connection?

Gender equality is already a key aspect of the foreign policy of many Western democracies and also increasingly among countries that want to play on the world stage and want to contribute to peace and security, economic growth, social development, and environmental sustainability. In each of these areas, women's empowerment has a critical role to play. If a country wants to make an impact through its foreign policy, it's in its own interest to promote women's empowerment. Many countries have already adopted this strategy and are seeing women's empowerment as instrumental to success in these international areas and domestically as well.

EB: You mentioned widows' situation in your home country of India. Widows apart, India has been seen as the poster child of liberal democracy in the developing world. Now we're suddenly seeing a string of atrocious rapes. Do these rapes point to a more disturbing reality?

LP: Yes, these cases have shaken India, and they have focused global attention on violence against women and girls in India. Violence against women in India takes different forms: acid attacks, rapes, domestic violence, workplace harassment. At the heart of it lie sexism and negative attitudes towards women. The public outrage over these rapes prompted the government to set up a special commission that quickly set up new recommendations on ending violence against women. This, in turn, led to a public debate about the issue, including how to train the police to be gender-sensitive, but equally about prevention, for example addressing gender stereotypes and cultural norms in Indian society. Respect for women is deeply rooted in Indian culture and traditions. For example, three female gods are central in Hinduism. At the same time, sexist behavior and discrimination against women has become rooted over time. So, the rapes have rekindled the gender-equality debate in India like never before.

EB: So, as horrendous as the rapes were, it was good for India to have that wake-up call?

LP: Absolutely. India has had a female prime minister and female chief ministers of some of the largest states, and thanks to quotas 40 percent of our 1.5 million village and district councilors are women. But there's been a conspiracy of silence around crimes against women. A big part of the problem is poverty; poorer women and women in rural areas are more vulnerable. Women are even trafficked.

From negative to positive, from widows to women in general: Which developing country is the best country in which to be a woman today?

We're not in the business of grading countries, but the important thing to know is that awareness in developing countries about gender equality has never been higher. It's no longer a soft issue of human rights but an issue that matters for economic growth. That's a great leap. Countries are realizing that when you

invest in women, you invest in communities and entire nations. Women are the highest-return investment you can have. That's why they shouldn't just get microcredit but proper bank loans. But every change begins with awakening and accountability, and many countries are now very advanced in this area, for example Brazil, India, South Africa.