



**THE LOOMBA FOUNDATION**  
*Caring for widows around the world*

1997–2017 **Twenty successful years**  
fighting injustice against widows



Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba

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*www.theloombafoundation.org*

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# Foreword

Cherie Blair CBE, QC

President of the Loomba Foundation

*OPPOSITE:* Cherie Blair at the Loomba Foundation's launch of International Widows Day in 2005.

When the Loomba Foundation was established in 1997, it took on a tremendous task. Widows in many countries and communities face gross discrimination and injustice when their husbands die. Often they are cast out of society and deprived of their possessions, unable to continue supporting their children. The outcome is destitution and despair that can last for generations.

The charity was created because Raj Loomba had seen this injustice in his own life. He knew some of the indignities that many widows suffer in silence, and decided to do something about it.

In the 20 years that have passed since, the Loomba Foundation has transformed the lives of more than 200,000 of the most disadvantaged people in a dozen countries, by empowering widows to be economically independent and giving their children a future through education.

It is impossible for one charity to help all those affected. There are too many, and mostly they are invisible, unheard, the poorest of the poor. So the Loomba Foundation has carried out substantial research to improve our understanding of the problem, and started a worldwide awareness campaign by persuading the United Nations to recognise 23 June as International Widows Day, a day of global action.

I have been delighted to be associated with the Loomba Foundation's important and on-going work, first as a Patron and since 2004 as its President. I wish the Foundation and all its supporters well on this milestone anniversary.



# Introduction

## Lord Raj Loomba CBE

### The Purpose

*The Loomba Foundation was established to care for widows and their children, and to change the culture that discriminates against them.*

*OPPOSITE:* Lord and Lady Loomba.

*BELOW FROM LEFT:* Dr. Singhvi and Prime Minister Vajpayee. Cherie Blair with Loomba scholars in Mumbai. Sir Richard Branson with Raj Loomba.

In large parts of the world, the social status of women and girls is determined by their relationship with men. No matter what their personal qualities and achievements, millions of married women find that when their husband dies, their status dies with him and for many this means humiliation and destitution – not only for them but also for their dependent children. This issue is as widespread as for many centuries it has been neglected. For too long, widows have been invisible and unheard.

The Loomba Foundation was established 20 years ago to care for widows and their children, and to right this wrong. We can only do so with the help of others, which – as shines through these pages – we have been more than fortunate to receive. There are too many to mention, but on the occasion of our 20th anniversary it is right that I express my personal thanks to individuals whose tireless efforts have been instrumental in the Foundation's success.

First among these is the late Dr. L. M. Singhvi, the Indian High Commissioner to the UK when the Foundation was established. When Dr. Singhvi learned of our plans, he went out of his way to support us. Later he agreed to chair our Board of Trustees in India, facilitating the launch by Prime Minister Vajpayee and the launch of many of our schemes by supporters including State Governor Gopalkrishna Gandhi. We are forever in his debt.

Words are also incapable of expressing our gratitude to Mrs. Cherie Blair, who supported the Foundation alongside her husband, the then Prime Minister Tony Blair, and agreed to serve as our President from 2004. Mrs. Blair has selflessly given of her time, attending meetings and events in the UK, India, the USA and Africa, and meeting with many

of the widows and children who have benefited from our programmes.

The Loomba Foundation would not have been able to develop as it has without the wise counsel of Lord Navnit Dholakia, a trustee for many years, whose contribution has played a major part in our organisational development, our direction, and our programmes.

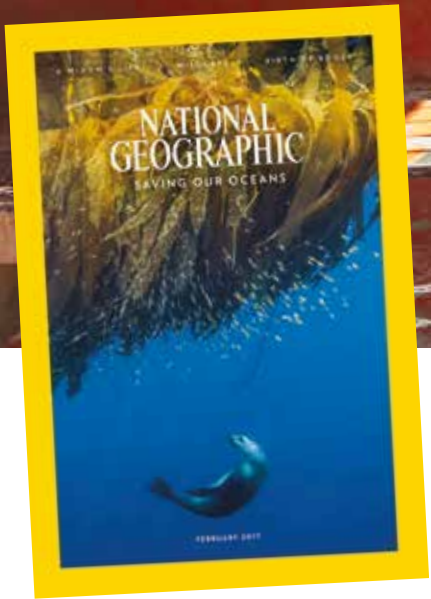
Special thanks are also due to our Patron-in-Chief, Sir Richard Branson, who has supported us in numerous ways including broadcast appeals, inflight collections on Virgin Atlantic flights, and funding the scholarships of 500 children in five states for five years. I am grateful too to Shamin Lalji, who became a trustee in 1999, and her husband Shiraz Lalji, for their financial support of our education programmes in Nagapatinam and Mumbai and our empowerment programme in Srikakulam, as well as their participation in many of our activities around the world.

Last but not least, I express my heartfelt gratitude to my wife Veena and our children, Rinku, Reeta and Roma, all trustees who have supported our work in a multitude of ways. Without their personal support and understanding, it would not have been possible for me to lead this organisation to the point where we have placed our cause on the policy radar of the United Nations.

Our work is far from done, but the terrible plight of many millions of widows and their dependents is now more visible to the international community and many governments. With our numerous supporters we will continue the work not only to transform the lives of individual widows and their families, but to drive out the scourge of this cruel discrimination forever.







# Chapter 1

## The beginning

### The Inspiration

*Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba, pictured on the cover, was widowed on 23 June 1954. She ensured that all her children received a good education.*

*OPPOSITE:* Vrindavan, 21 November 2013. Two widows at the entrance of Merra Sehbhagini Mahila Ashram – a government ashram supported by the organization Sulabh International. Ranjana (left) is a young widow and also the warden for the ashram. Lalita (right) is also a widow and a resident of the ashram. The two women visually represent the generational changes taking place for widows in India. Photograph and story © Amy Toensing (see page 42). Featured in *A Widow's Life*, National Geographic Magazine, February 2017.

*THIS PAGE:* Launching the Loomba Foundation in London (right) and New Delhi (far right).

The story of The Loomba Foundation begins on 23 June 1954 when Jagiri Lal Loomba, a successful businessman in the small Punjabi town of Dhilwan in the far North of India, died after battling tuberculosis, which was a widespread threat to public health in India. His wife Pushpa Wati – Pushpa means flower in Hindi – was left at the age of 37 to care for the family's seven children.

In accordance with custom, Jagiri's mother – a widow herself – that same day ordered her daughter-in-law to remove her Bindi, the sign of a married woman, take off all her jewellery, and never to wear brightly-coloured clothing again. In an instant, Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba's world had been shattered: she went from being blessed and happy to disconsolate and sorrowful.

The contrast had a profound impact on her ten-year old son. "I was too young to apprehend the situation," Raj Loomba now recalls, "but gradually I saw that her life had totally changed. Before, she was a happy wife. Now, she was a very distressed widow." In years to come, Raj would discover that the family still had much to be thankful for compared to the misery of others. But that was little comfort now, as he watched his mother's despair.

The traditional injustices visited upon widows remained an ever-present feature of their lives and twelve years later, when

Raj married Veena Chaudhry, "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, who educated me and always wished well for me – how could she bring me bad luck?"

The injustice meted out to his mother – symptomatic of a deep-rooted culture that brings misery to millions – is something Raj Loomba never forgot. When his mother passed away in 1992, her son, by now a successful businessman in the UK, resolved to do something about it. Five years later, in 1997, Raj and Veena Loomba established the Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba Trust – as The Loomba Foundation was initially known in the UK – to care for widows and their children, and to change the culture that discriminates against them. From the outset, the Foundation's focus was not just on developing meaningful ways of improving the lives of those who suffered from this discrimination, but also on engaging governments, industry and wider society. On 25 March 1998, the charity was officially launched in London in the presence of British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his wife, Cherie Blair.

A year later, on 31 March 1999, the Prime Minister of India, Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee, in a ceremony attended by UK High Commissioner Sir Rob Young, inaugurated the Foundation in New Delhi by lighting a ceremonial lamp at his residence.

The time had come to start making a difference.





# Chapter 2

## Education

### A better future

*The curse of widowhood sets in train a cycle of deprivation that can last decades.*

*OPPOSITE:* Vindravan, 22 November 2016. Gunjan, eight, sells flowers for prayer offerings to the holy Yamuna River. Her father died three years ago, and Gunjan's earnings are the primary income for her family: her mother, two sisters and a brother.

*Photograph and story © Amy Toensing (see page 42).*

*BELOW RIGHT:* The launch in India with Prime Minister Vajpayee. Roma Loomba compères the launch of the Foundation in India.

To give her children the best chance in life, Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba made sure they were all well educated. "Fortunately for us," Lord Loomba now recalls, "my father had left enough money. My mother spent it educating all of us at the best institutions."

Raj Loomba studied at Iowa State University in the USA. His sisters graduated from Punjab University, at a time when many girls in India did not even go to school. There was little money left by the time the girls were all married and it took Raj Loomba many years to build his own international fashion business from the ground up, but none of this would have been possible without his father's wealth, combined with his mother's determined focus on education. "If I'd been the son of a poor widow," he says, "I would have grown-up an illiterate man, possibly plying a Rickshaw in some suburban town in Punjab."

In India, there are some 46 million widows – almost 10% of the female population of marital age – and of these, more than 15 million live in abject poverty. If there is an inheritance it is often taken by the husband's relatives. By custom widows – even child widows – are not permitted to remarry and it is very hard for them to find any form of employment. As a consequence, their children are unable to continue their education and instead are put to work at a very young age to help support the family. The curse of widowhood thus sets in train a cycle of deprivation, with consequences that blight communities and last for many decades.

The Loomba Foundation saw that if it could fund the education

of the children of poor widows, it would not only transform the conditions of that family but also provide for a better future for all its members. Thus, the first of the Loomba Foundation's aid programmes began at the inauguration of the Loomba Foundation in India on 30 March 1999 by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, with the launch of the Delhi State Programme funding 49 girls and 51 boys up to secondary graduation, and beyond for those who wished to go into higher education. This was part of a bigger target: to fund the education of at least 100 children of poor widows in each of India's 29 States.

### Becoming a Loomba Scholar

Beneficiaries are selected purely on the basis of need, without regard to religion, ethnicity or gender. The Loomba Foundation is proud to support the education of children from all religions and social groups. When selected, the Loomba Foundation opens a bank account in the joint names of the mother and scholar and automatically transfers the scholarship sum into that account each month. Each Loomba scholar is guaranteed funding of 500 Rs per month for at least a five-year period. No payments are made to third parties.

### Natural disasters

On 29 October 1999, the strongest cyclone ever recorded in the North Indian Ocean – and one of the most destructive – made landfall in the east coast State of Odisha, causing 10,000 fatalities of which 8,000 were in the town of Jagatsinghpur. Mindful of the disproportionate impact on widows and their families of natural disasters, the Loomba Foundation launched



# Lives Transformed

## Rakhee Misri



Rakhee's father had escaped conflict in Kashmir but lost everything and sadly died, leaving his family destitute. His widow, Reeta Misri, was determined that her children should continue with their education but was unable to fund it. She learned about Loomba Scholarships from the programme's local coordinator and her application was quickly accepted. Rakhee was a Loomba scholar from 2005, when she was 11, until 2016, passing her matriculation in 2010 and 12th Grade in 2012. She went on to gain her Bachelor's degree and is currently employed by Ramtech Associates. She is also pursuing her Master's degree from Indira Gandhi Open University.

## Shriya Sus



Shriya, a Computer Applications engineer who graduated in 2016, is a young professional with a promising future, currently working part-time and studying for Banking qualifications. She has come a long way since 2005, when she was in 5th Grade and her widowed mother was unable to keep her at school. The Loomba Foundation stepped in and supported Shriya for 11 years through school, university and the prospects of a good career.

## Sanjeet Kumar Sharma



Sanjeet's father, a casual labourer, was the family's sole breadwinner when he died, leaving Sanjeet and his three sisters to be cared for by his mother Bimla Devi on her own without any means of support. It would not have been possible for Sanjeet to continue with his schooling without the support of the Loomba Foundation, which provided him with a scholarship from 2005, when he was 13 years old and in Grade 7. Sanjeet passed his 12th Grade in 2010 and went on to Jammu University, where he obtained his Bachelor's and then his Master's Degree in Commerce and Marketing, with the Foundation's support throughout. Sanjeet's sisters are both married and, with a good position at a leading apparel retail company, Sanjeet is able to support his family.

## Gunjan Raina



When her father died, Gunjan and her brother were raised by their maternal grandfather while their mother tried to earn a living but in 2005, when Gunjan was 14, she could no longer afford to stay at school and this is when the Loomba Foundation stepped in with a scholarship. Sadly, Gunjan's mother became paralysed and died a few years later, but with the moral and financial support of the Loomba Foundation Gunjan persevered with her education, completing 12th Grade in 2009 and going on to Kurukshetra University, where she gained a technology degree in 2014. Gunjan is now an established airline industry professional with three years' experience, employed as a process developer and network engineer.

its Odisha State programme on 5 January 2001, at a ceremony attended by State Governor M. M. Rajendran. Administered by Nilachal Seva Pratisthan, an Indian Government-accredited NGO, this Loomba Foundation-funded programme educates 100 children who have lost their father (or in some cases both parents).

Just three weeks after the Odisha State Programme was launched, another disaster struck, this time in the city of Bhuj in Gujarat, over in the far north-west of the country. The Bhuj earthquake, which registered 7.7 on the moment magnitude scale, killed 20,000 people, injuring a further 167,000 and destroying 400,000 homes. In the midst of such devastation, widows, lacking wider community support, are always hardest hit – and of course, thousands more are created with immediate consequences for themselves and their dependents. The Loomba Foundation responded by establishing a programme in Gujarat State to educate 50 children from Bhuj and 50 from Ahmedabad and surrounding areas. This programme was launched on 5 November 2001 by Edward Marsden, chairman of the British Council in India.

#### **The programme grows**

In a ceremony attended by 500 guests on 18 January 2002, India's then Finance Minister, Yashwant Sinha, launched the Rajasthan State Programme to educate 100 children of poor widows. The Rajasthan programme is supervised by Raj Kumar Bhandari, a well respected Rotarian in Jodhpur. Later that year, in July, the Punjab State Programme started with 100 students – although it was not officially launched until 24 April



2003 at Guru Nanak Dev University in the holy city of Amritsar, in a ceremony attended by Lord Dholakia of Waltham Brooks and Lord Williams of Mostyn from the UK.

The Loomba Foundation's aid programme had now gathered momentum and the Punjab programme was one of four launched in 2003. The Andhra Pradesh State Programme with 100 Loomba scholars was officially launched by the UK Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, Patricia Hewitt, on 5 January in the presence of India's Minister of Chemicals and Fertilizers, Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa, and the Acting British High Commissioner, Mark Runacres.

In July of that year, 66 girls and 34 boys in the State of Haryana became Loomba scholars when that State's programme was added to the list and on 8 September, the Uttarakhand Pradesh programme for 110 scholars was launched by the State's Governor, Sudershan Agarwal, at the Raj Bhavan (Governor's Palace). The last of the programmes to be launched in 2003 was in the State of Arunachal Pradesh in the far north-east of the country. The programme, for 100 scholars, was launched by Chief Minister Geong Apaang at his residence on 14 November. Attendees included the State Governor and former Indian Cabinet Secretary V.C. Pande, and the Deputy Prime Minister of India, L. K. Advani, who distributed cheques to the Loomba scholars.

To deliver its scholarship programme in the eastern State of Tamil Nadu on the Bay of Bengal, the Loomba Foundation partnered with local NGO, the Sriram Welfare Foundation, which provided additional funding to match. The Tamil Nadu



*BELOW FROM LEFT:* An assembly of Loomba scholars. Sir Richard Branson greeting Loomba scholars.



Programme, which thus benefits 200 Loomba scholars, was launched by State Governor P.S. Ramamohan on 13 January 2004 at the beautiful Raj Bhavan in the Guindy Park Forest of Chennai. At the end of that year however, on 26 December, the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami struck, with devastating consequences for the entire region. The worst affected area in India was the Tamil Nadu district of Nagapattinam, where more than 6,000 fatalities were reported. The Loomba Foundation responded by establishing an extended scholarship programme in the State for a further 500 girls and boys who had lost their fathers or both parents, drawn mainly from the fishermen's villages in the district. The Nagapattinam scholars were sponsored by Loomba Foundation trustee Shamin Lalji and her husband Shiraz Lalji.

The year 2005 saw the introduction of five further State programmes. On 10 May, Governor K.M. Seth of Chhattisgarh inaugurated the Chhattisgarh State Programme at the Raj Bhavan in Raipur. This programme for 100 Loomba scholars is sponsored by the British telecommunications group BT and supported by Raipur-based NGO the Mahila Sewa and Kalyan Samiti, who help with the selection of scholars and management of the programme.

Jammu, the winter capital of Jammu and Kashmir on the banks of the Tawi river, is where that State's Loomba scholarship programme was launched the following week, 18 May, by State Governor S.K. Sinha. This programme has been and continues to be sponsored by Sheetal Kapoor and Ricky Kapoor.



The imposing Raj Bhavan in Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, was where that State's programme for 100 scholars was launched by State Governor Gopalkrishna Gandhi, the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, on 13 August.

September 2005 saw the start of a programme to educate 200 children in the State of Maharashtra: 100 in nine schools in Mumbai supported by donor Martin Ciupa from Singapore, and 100 in Pune, supported by Mellon Group Europe. In October, the Loomba Foundation selected 100 beneficiaries in the state of Uttar Pradesh with the support of individual donors from the UK, and the following month, on 11 November, Madhya Pradesh State's programme for 100 scholars was launched by the State Governor Blaram Jakhar.

Development of these programmes has been possible because of the generous support of numerous donors, including Sir Richard Branson, who funded scholarships for 500 children in five States for five years, and Brijesh Nayyar, who has funded scholarships for 300 children in three States for five years. Further programmes for 100 children each were launched in the States of Assam, Bihar, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkand, Karnataka, Kerala, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, bringing the total number of Loomba scholars by 2006 to 3,610.

#### A moving target

The Loomba Foundation had beaten its first target – educating 100 children of poor widows in each of India's 29 States



*OPPOSITE:* 'A widow looks after her child', painting by Reeta Sarkar for her collection 'A Hidden Calamity' (oil on canvas, 30"x36", 2011) (see page 56).

*BELOW LEFT:* State Governor Gopalkrishna Gandhi of West Bengal congratulates a new scholar. Children in class.





within a decade – by three years, and broadened the reach of its programme. Today, the original Loomba scholars have completed their education and started building their careers on a sound foundation. Those who have gone on to higher education with the support of the Foundation include 18 students currently completing a four-year engineering degree course at Laxmi Narayana College of Technology in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh.

New Loomba scholars have taken the place of those who have completed their education and to date, more than 10,000 children of poor widows have received Loomba scholarships for at least five years, directly transforming the lives of 60,000 people in their immediate families. The programme has continued to grow with the significant support of our donors, including the Hinduja Foundation, which has funded scholarships for 500 children in five States for five years. The Foundation's recently announced partnership with the Rotary India Literacy Mission includes scholarships for 2,000 children of poor widows in India.

The importance of these achievement in transforming the lives of thousands cannot be overstated. Equally, it is a small ripple in an ocean of misery, and much more needs to be done to bring relief to the many millions of widows and their families still suffering in India and elsewhere.



## Hygiene and Sanitation

In 2006 the Loomba Foundation moved beyond scholarships for individual children to schemes to help improve their schools, entering into an agreement with the Punjab Government to renovate, refurbish and provide sanitation and drinking water for a school in Dhilwan, where Raj Loomba was born. When the school was constructed by the Maharaja of Kupurthala to celebrate his diamond jubilee in 1939 it had been a magnificent building, but it had fallen into disrepair and was in urgent need of renovation. The Loomba Foundation donated five million Rupees and this was matched by the Government of Punjab, so that the school could be rebuilt in its original glory under the supervision of the Executive Engineer and the District Commissioner. The impressive façade has been restored, and new additions include a school hall and a toilet block for boys and girls, providing the high standard of sanitation and hygiene that had been sorely lacking.

At the suggestion of Prakash Singh Badal, the Chief Minister of Punjab, the school was renamed in honour of Raj Loomba's late father and on 18 November 2008, the Shri Jagiri Lal Loomba Government Senior Secondary School Dhilwan was officially inaugurated by the President of the Loomba Foundation, Mrs Cherie Blair.

*OPPOSITE:* A senior class at the Shri Jagiri Lal Loomba Government Senior Secondary School in Dhilwan.

*Photograph © Suzanne Liem.*

*BELOW FROM LEFT:* Lord Loomba's late father, Shri Jagiri Lal Loomba. The entrance of the refurbished and renamed school in Dhilwan..





# Chapter 3

## Empowerment

### Economic independence

*Helping people to help themselves has huge benefits for well-being, confidence and self-esteem, supporting widows, their children and the wider community.*

**OPPOSITE:** India's Prime Minister launches the Loomba Foundation's empowerment programme in Varanasi.

**BELOW FROM LEFT:** Launch of the empowerment programme at Ludhiana in Punjab. The empowerment programme in Mumbai is supported by Loomba Foundation trustee Shamin Lalji, shown here third from left.

The focus of the Loomba Foundation's second principal aid programme is the empowerment of widows. If in many villages, towns and cities and in numerous countries it is impossible for widows to find employment – whether because of discrimination or lack of skills – the inevitable consequence is that they must support themselves by other means, and all too often this leads to child labour, prostitution and other forms of exploitation. The Loomba Foundation's empowerment programme invests in skills training, equipment and microfinance to help widows set up in business and become independent.

In 2007, the Loomba Foundation launched an empowerment partnership with YBI – Youth Business International – a project of the Prince of Wales International Business Leaders Forum that helps disadvantaged people in many countries start up new sustainable businesses and create jobs. Branded the Loomba Entrepreneur Programme, this partnership venture has delivered support to widows in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Syria, Kenya, Uganda, Chile and Guatemala.

Susan Wanjiru, a 20-year old widow with a one-year old baby boy, lived in a slum in Korogocho, Nairobi, with her grandmother and four siblings. Susan struggled to support her family after her husband was shot dead and her mother had been found in the Nairobi river after being raped and murdered. Susan survived on odd jobs to make ends meet, but she wanted to start a salon business. In Nairobi, the Loomba Entrepreneur Programme has been in contact with over 5,000 widows and orphans in nine communities. Some 300 of these participated in business skills training and 92 widows attended

further workshop courses on how to start up a business. More than 40 widows and children of widows – including Susan – were given loans and business mentors and those already in business have received on-the-job skills training. The success and acceptance of the programme was illustrated when three Loomba entrepreneurs had their businesses destroyed due to civil unrest. Support was soon forthcoming to enable these courageous women to re-establish their business.

In Sri Lanka there was a large proportion of female-headed households due to internal conflict in the country, labour migration and the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. Working with local women's organisations, the Loomba Entrepreneur Programme identified women who were interested in starting their own business, leading on to training and investment in jewellery, garment making and other businesses.

"Helping people help themselves in this way," said YBI Chief Executive Andrew Devenport, "has a hugely beneficial impact on the wellbeing of the families and employees." He pointed to reduced poverty and hunger, increased access to basic services, and reduced vulnerability to violence, disease and discrimination as some of the immediate benefits, alongside improvements in confidence and self-esteem, organisational skills and standing in the community for widows, their children and orphans.

Encouraged by the success of its partnerships with Youth Business International and Virgin Unite, in 2008 the Loomba Foundation launched the Loomba Entrepreneur Programme in South Africa with a dinner at the Summer Palace in





Johannesburg attended by the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his wife, Loomba Foundation President Cherie Blair, British High Commissioner Paul Boateng and South African Finance Minister Trevor Manuel. The South African programme was established to empower 100 young widows with the support of international and local NGOs.

In January 2008, the Foundation organised a landmark industry conference at Federation House, the headquarters of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) in New Delhi, looking at the role of corporate responsibility in the country's development with particular focus on empowerment of widows and educating their children. With high profile contributions from India's Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs Vayalar Ravi, British High Commissioner Sir Richard Stagg and the veteran BBC India correspondent Sir Mark Tully, the conference highlighted the benefits of enabling India's widows to work for themselves.

As a direct result of the conference, a partnership was established with health and beauty expert Dr. Blossom Kochhar to offer tuition to 100 widows and potential investment in setting up a business. The first scheme, to train 10 widows in Delhi, was launched at a ceremony at FICCI on 1 April 2008.

The Rwandan genocide in 1994 ravaged that country and – as with many conflicts and natural disasters – the hardest hit are those who are marginalised in the community: widows and their children. The Loomba Foundation had already learned

a great deal about the specific issues faced by widows in sub-Saharan Africa from its successful partnerships with Youth Business International and Virgin Unite when a chance meeting between the Mayor of Kigali, Dr. Aisa Kirabo Kacyira, and Raj Loomba at a Commonwealth Business Conference in 2009 led to an expansion of the Foundation's empowerment programme in that country. In partnership with Oxfam and with the support of the Rwandan President Dr. Paul Kagame, the Loomba Foundation delivered aid including training and startup funding to 350 Rwandan widows who were genocide survivors.

In 2012, the Loomba Foundation launched a new initiative project to empower 10,000 poor widows in India by providing each with training in garment-making as well as a sewing machine. By enabling these widows to earn money independently, an impact report from Northampton University has calculated that this scheme has directly benefited some 100,000 dependents by supporting the family and enabling children to continue in education. New local projects were launched in Bihar, Delhi, Andhra Pradesh and Puducherry in 2013; and on 10 March 2014 a reception was held at the House of Lords in London where Barry Palmer, the president of Lions Clubs International, launched a partnership with the Loomba Foundation which included the donation of 2,000 sewing machines for widows in India.

In August 2014, Punjab Chief Minister Prakash Singh Badal launched an empowerment scheme for 5,000 widows. Later that year saw the launch of further schemes in Delhi NCR, for

*OPPOSITE:* Raj Loomba, Kigali Mayor Dr. Aisa Kacyira, Cherie Blair and Veena Loomba visit a Loomba empowerment project in Rwanda.

*BELOW FROM LEFT:* A training class for widows in Patna. Loomba Entrepreneurs in Nairobi, Kenya. The launch of the Loomba empowerment programme in Punjab. Sir Richard Branson at the Starfish project in South Africa.





120 widows including 40 who were prisoners; in Mumbai, for 524 widows; Patna, Bihar (41); New Delhi (83); Hyderabad (51); Srikakulam, Telangana (500); and Puducherry (100).

According to the 2011 Population Census of India, the holy city of Varanasi in the State of Uttar Pradesh is home to 90,000 widows. The Loomba Foundation received powerful support from the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, who represents Varanasi in the Lok Sabha and who on 22 January 2016 launched the Foundation's programme to train and support 5,000 poor widows in the city. This project is due to be completed in July 2017.

#### Assets to society

The Central Jail in the Haryana State city of Ambala was the setting for the launch of an empowerment scheme for 1,000 widows and women prisoners in all 19 district jails of Haryana. The project was launched on 23 December 2016 by Haryana's Health, Sport and Youth Minister Anil Vij and Lord Loomba, who emphasised the Loomba Foundations mission "to make prisons a place of reformation and give the incarcerated beings a chance to become an asset to society upon their release." Loomba Foundation trustee Balbir Singh Kakar quoted a Sufi poem by Punjabi philosopher Bulleh Shah: "*Charhte Sooraj*

*Dhalde Wekhe, Bujhe Deewe Balde Wekhe... Jinnan Da Na Jag Te Koi, Oovi Puttar Palde Wekhe.*" (I have seen the rising sun set down, extinguished lamps getting lit up again, and orphans of those who have no one in the world also nourished).

#### New schemes

In 2017 the Loomba Foundation began its programme to empower 2,000 widows in Vrindavan, often described as the 'City of Widows', and Amethi, including the distribution of sewing machines through its partnership with Lions Club International, which had been launched at an event in New Delhi on 8 August 2016.

In the largest programme to date, launched at the Dorchester Hotel in London on 23 June 2017, the Loomba Foundation in partnership with the Rotary India Literacy Mission plans to deliver training and startup support for 30,000 poor widows – 1,000 in each of the States in India (now numbering 30 since the formation of Telangana in 2014). This programme not only increases the numbers but also considerable extends the range of skills and trades offered, including Beauty & Wellness, Health & Care, Security, Telecom Services, Tourism & Hospitality, Handicrafts, Food Processing, Textiles & Apparel, Agriculture and Automotive.

**OPPOSITE:** Launch of the empowerment partnership with Lions Club International with (left to right) Vikram Sahney, Rajesh Agarwal, Aruna Oswal, High Commissioner Sir Dominic and Lady Asquith, Lord and Lady Loomba, Balbir Kakar, Max Mongia and Sir Mark Tully.

**BELOW FROM LEFT:** Raj and Veena Loomba with the Prince of Wales, whose YBI charity partners with the Foundation's empowerment programme. Raj Loomba and Cherie Blair flank the President of Rwanda, Dr. Paul Kagame, at a state dinner to launch the widows empowerment programme in Rwanda.







# Empowered through independence

## Amirbanu Amirali Jiwani



Amirbanu, 49, is a member of the Ismaili community in Vasai, a suburb of Mumbai. Her husband, who ran an iron grill fabrication business, died after a heart attack in 2012 and two years later, when the manager of the business also passed away, Amirbanu was left without income.

To support her two children, Amirbanu started taking in some tailoring work. The Loomba Foundation stepped in not only to support the education of her children, but also providing Amirbanu with training and a sewing machine to develop her business.

Amirbanu's daughter Sunehra is now pursuing a chartered accountancy course. Her disabled son Irfan completed High School and now lives at home, making nylon wire scrubbing pads.

## Indira Vishkarma



Indira lives in Varanasi with her children. Now aged 40, she has faced serious financial difficulties since her husband died in 2010, since she lacked technical skills and could only undertake household work.

In 2015, Indira was admitted to the Loomba Foundation empowerment programme, receiving two months' training in garment cutting and stitching, after which she was given a sewing machine to help her set up in business. Indira has built up trade successfully and is now able to look after her children with earnings of up to Rs. 5,000 per month, stitching blouses, petticoats and suits.

## Ravinder Kaur



Ravinder was 33 when her husband died of a heart attack, leaving her to bring up four young children. She managed to earn Rs. 1,000 per month but could not afford to keep her daughter, then in Class VII, in school until the Loomba Foundation stepped in with a scholarship.

A few years later, the Foundation launched its empowerment programme, running a pilot training programme with the Blossom Kochhar Group which Ravinder joined as a trainee. The Loomba Foundation then assisted with finance to set up Ravinder's own hair and beauty salon, which was launched in a small ceremony by Mrs. Cherie Blair. The salon now operates successfully with Ravinder earning up to Rs. 5,000 per month and able to support her family.

## Khushboo Sharma



Now aged 21, Khushboo lost her husband five years ago and ten days later she was forced by her in-laws to leave the house without being allowed to take her daughter with her.

Khushboo had limited experience of basic stitching but lacked confidence until she received training under the Loomba Foundation's empowerment programme. On completion, Khushboo was given a sewing machine and she now earns Rs. 3,500 a month with stitching and tailoring work.

Khushboo is hoping she will be able to bring her daughter to live with her and to look after her properly.



# Chapter 4

## International Widows Day & Advocacy

### Acting in concert

*Eradicating discrimination against widows can only happen if we all work together to challenge deep-rooted cultures and traditions.*

**OPPOSITE:** UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon with the Loomba Foundation delegation presenting the first Global Widows Study in 2010, left to right: USA trustee Dr. Peter Rajsingh, researcher Valerie Karr, Mrs. Cherie Blair, Raj Loomba and India trustee Balbir Kakar.

**BELOW FROM LEFT:** Lord Dholakia, Cherie Blair and Raj Loomba at the 2005 launch of International Widows Day. Raj and Veena Loomba with Cherie Blair and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

The Loomba Foundation began its programmes to care for poor widows and their children in India because that is where the charity's founders, Raj and Veena Loomba, had experienced first hand the injustice of entrenched attitudes towards widowhood, and also because the scale of the problem in that country is vast.

The more they spoke up about the marginalisation of widows, however, the more they came to realise that this issue is by no means confined to India, or even South Asia, alone. Customs vary from country to country and region to region, but in many parts of the world widows are at the bottom of the social heap – abused, cast out of society, deprived of their property and sometimes of their children too. All too often they are invisible and unheard, the poorest of the poor, unable to support their own dependants. As in India, so too in other parts of the world, the impact of this discrimination is highly detrimental for society as a whole, since it destabilises communities, creates extreme poverty that can last for generations, and gives rise to prostitution, drug trafficking, slavery, child labour and violence.



### A global day of action

As we have seen, the Loomba Foundation extended its reach beyond India, with education and empowerment programmes in other countries across Asia, Africa and South America. Raj Loomba realised, however, that the problem could never be fully addressed without concerted global action to raise awareness, fight injustice and change deep-rooted cultures. This is why, on 26 May 2005, the Loomba Foundation launched a flagship new initiative: to designate 23 June as International Widows Day – a global day of action to bring the plight of widows to the attention of the world, so that in time it may be eradicated. On the day the initiative was launched at the House of Lords in London, Raj Loomba also initiated a campaign to persuade the United Nations to give the initiative its official recognition.

From the beginning, International Widows Day galvanised support from a wide range of organisations: grassroots organisations, NGOs, governments, corporations and individuals around the world.

The first International Widows Day, on 23 June 2005, was marked by the release of coloured balloons by local schoolchildren at Tower Bridge in London, and by similar activities in other countries including India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Uganda and South Africa. On 21 October 2005, the Loomba Foundation launched the International Widows Day initiative at a dinner attended by Secretary-General Kofi Annan and hosted by the United Nations Association in New York, in the UN Delegates Dining Room.





## Building up support

Every effort was made to engage governments and the international community. On 23 June 2006, the second International Widows Day, the Loomba Foundation sponsored an International Widows Conference at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in London with the Prince of Wales as Patron-in-Chief. Chaired by Loomba Foundation President Cherie Blair, with broadcaster Alastair Stewart as master of ceremonies, the conference heard from grassroots widows organisations' representatives, alongside a wide range of speakers including Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon; India's Minister for Women and Child Development Renuka Chowdhury; British Cabinet Minister Baroness Amos; John Lennon's widow Yoko Ono; and, by video conference, Senator Hillary Clinton of New York – all pledging support to this long overdue global initiative.

Following the conference, an open-air Bollywood concert took place in Trafalgar Square, attended by 300 VIP guests and thousands of members of the public. Presented by Indian TV personality Shekhar Suman, the concert included performances by 4x4 Bhangra Group; Kashmira Shah; Sophia; Sunidhi Chauhan and Bhangra icon Jazzy B, who sang tracks from his chart-topping albums. After the concert, multi-coloured balloons were released by Cherie Blair in Trafalgar Square and, simultaneously, by Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit in New Delhi, in a ceremony attended by the Delhi State Health Minister and 100 Loomba scholars with their widowed mothers. The events of the day were widely reported in British, Indian and international media.

Loomba Foundation President Cherie Blair launched a 'blimp' airship in Trafalgar Square to highlight the third International Widows Day in 2007. Balloons were simultaneously released in Nairobi, Dhaka and Colombo, while in New Delhi, India's Minister for Women and Child Development Renuka Chowdhury was the Chief Guest at a dinner to celebrate both International Widows Day and the Loomba Foundation's tenth anniversary. Mrs. Chowdhury commended the Foundation's pioneering work and committed herself to doing all she could to remove the taboo of widowhood, to give widows a chance to live a life of fulfilment and dignity.

## Milestones

Three years after the launch of the Loomba Foundation's initiative, the critical importance of the cause was becoming more widely accepted and understood among governments and international organisations, and in recognition of the Foundation's work, Raj Loomba was appointed a CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) by Queen Elizabeth II. There was no let-up, however, in the Foundation's determined campaign to make International Widows Day a UN-designated global day of action.

On 23 June 2008, the fourth International Widows Day, white doves were released from Trafalgar Square, London, after an open-air concert presented by the GMTV broadcaster Clare Nasir featuring the Icelandic opera singer Cortes; Bhangra musicians Malkit Singh and Channi Singh; Bollywood dancer Honey Kalaria and Bhangra singer Mona Singh. Balloons were released at ceremonies in Leicester, New Delhi, Dhilwan,

*OPPOSITE:* International Widows Day promoted with an airship over London.

*BELOW FROM LEFT:* The International Widows Conference at the Foreign Office in London heard from Yoko Ono and Senator Hillary Clinton. First Lady Sylvia Bongo Ondimba of Gabon was an influential supporter of the campaign for UN recognition of International Widows Day.





Colombo and Nairobi, with meetings and ceremonies also taking place in Damascus, Kathmandu and New York.

One week later an important milestone was achieved on the road to UN recognition. On 30 June 2008, the Loomba Foundation received accreditation as an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) associated with the UN's Department of Public Information, supporting its role in raising awareness about the plight of widows internationally, and on 31 July, Dr. Paul Kagame, the President of Rwanda, wrote to the Secretary-General urging recognition of International Widows Day.

The fifth International Widows Day was marked on 23 June 2009 with an appeal by Loomba Trust President Cherie Blair to the United Nations to give the day its official recognition. Founder Chairman Raj Loomba underlined the global importance of the cause. "Poverty is the curse of mankind – but when you put it in the context of widows and their children, it creates a new dimension in inhumanity." Events to mark the day took place in London, New York, New Delhi, Kathmandu, Nairobi, Colombo and Dacca.

### South Africa

In 2006 the Foundation joined forces with Virgin Unite, the charitable arm of Sir Richard Branson's group of companies, to provide community rehabilitation support for 1,500 HIV and AIDS orphans in South Africa, managed by the Starfish Greathearts Foundation in five townships near Johannesburg over 18 months.



### A hidden calamity

Ever since the Loomba Foundation was established, an important part of its work was to build up knowledge about the nature and extent of discrimination against widows, first throughout India and then around the world. On 22 June 2010, the eve of the sixth International Widows Day, an exhibition of paintings on the subject of widows by Reeta Sarkar titled *A Hidden Calamity* was opened by Yoko Ono in the United Nations building in New York, and the Loomba Foundation published *Invisible Forgotten Sufferers: The Plight of Widows around the World*. This is an impassioned account by Vijay Dutt which incorporated, as an addendum, The Global Widows Report, the first ever worldwide study of the issue.

The next day, events marking the sixth International Widows Day were held in 11 cities in four continents. An evening reception in the Map Room at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in London brought together many of the Loomba Foundation's longstanding supporters. In Birmingham, Lord Mayor Councillor Len Gregory released balloons outside the Town Hall with local schoolchildren. At an evening function in New Delhi a ceremonial lamp was lit and guests heard from a range of speakers, including Mrs. Ravinder Kaur, a widow who had benefited from the Loomba Foundation's empowerment programme, and a video message from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

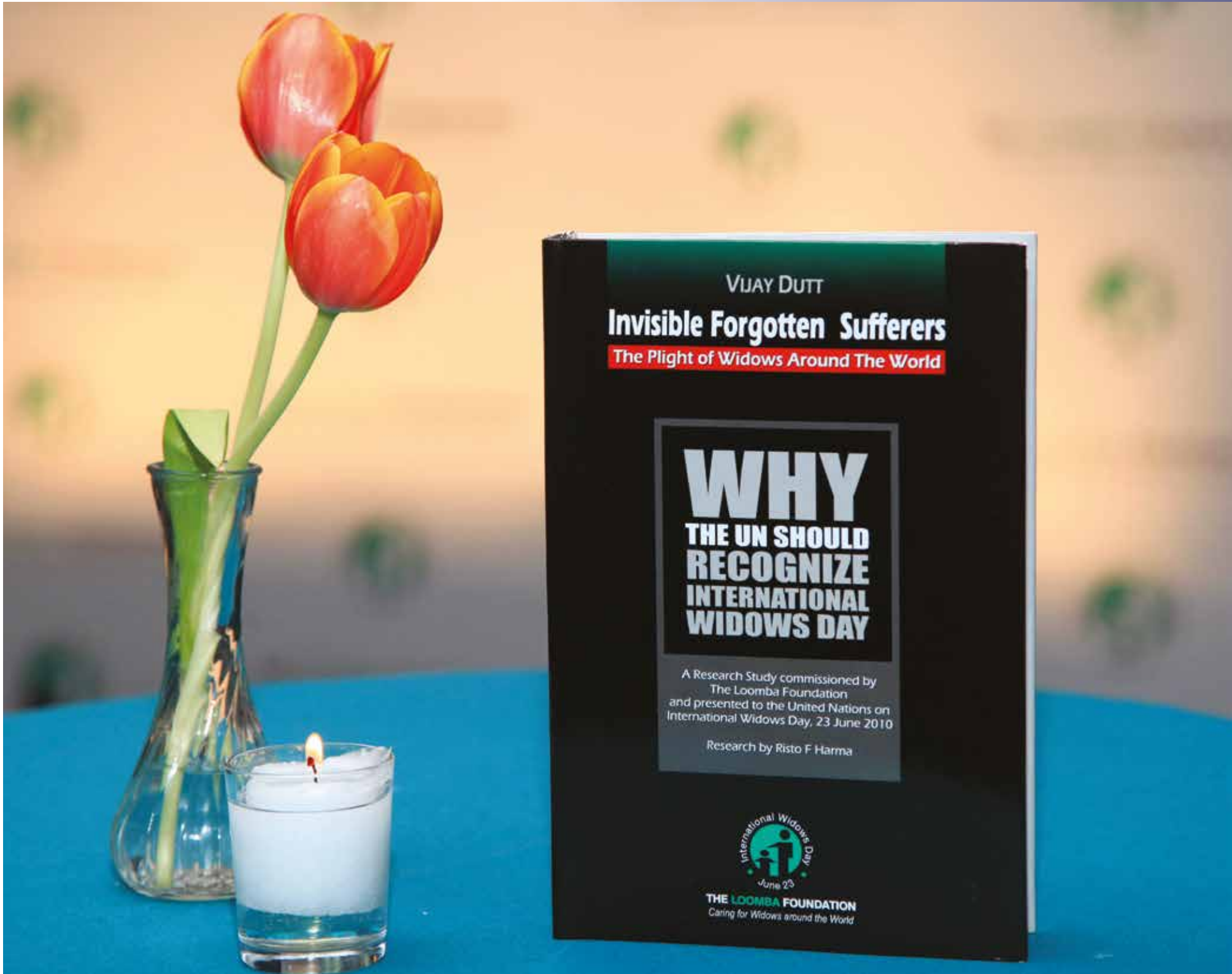
The Bangladesh Youth Enterprise Advice and Helpline (B'Yeah) paid tribute to widows at a special event attended by ten widows, including two who were direct beneficiaries



*OPPOSITE:* Open air Bollywood concert in Trafalgar square, London.

*BELOW FROM LEFT:* Doves released at the concert in Trafalgar square. Balloons released to mark International Widows Day in Kenya.





of Loomba programmes. One of these, Mrs. Amena Begum, related how she was left destitute a year earlier when her husband died, but thanks to the Loomba empowerment programme she had been able to set up her own business, now employing four other needy women in the community. Mrs. Begum was awarded the B'Yeah Entrepreneur of the Year Award. In Sri Lanka, the fourth consecutive International Widows Day event was celebrated in Hambantota and organised by the Hambantota Youth Business Programme in collaboration with the Women Development Federation. The day included a release of balloons at Hambantota District Chamber of Commerce and a meeting at the Nimbarama Temple in Hambantota where plants were distributed among 150 widows. With support from the Loomba Foundation, Hambantota Youth Business Programme has provided financial and mentoring support to 48 underprivileged members of female-headed households aimed at creating economic independence.

In Nairobi, the International Widows Day event organised by Kenya Youth Business Trust brought together widows including Loomba Entrepreneurs who had been trained and supported under the Foundation's empowerment programme and who were interviewed by a local radio station, sharing their personal experiences since receiving loans and the differences they have made in their communities through their economic independence. In Nepal, where 40 women were receiving support under the Loomba empowerment programme, a rally was organised in the cultural city of Bhaktapur.



BIDAYA, Youth Business International's network member in Syria, celebrated International Widows Day by planting a tree in the botanical garden near the Damascus Citadel as a common symbol of hope, while in Gauteng Province, South Africa, schoolchildren released 300 orange balloons to mark the day.

A week later, on 30 June, Oxfam and the agricultural cooperative UCODIP held a meeting in Kigali, Rwanda, to highlight the importance of action on widows and promote International Widows Day.

### Success

Five years after the Loomba Foundation launched its initiative, its campaign bore fruit. On 22 December 2010 the United Nations General Assembly, on a motion proposed by president Ali Bongo Ondimba of Gabon, unanimously resolved to adopt International Widows Day as an officially recognised global day of action, to take place every year on the date when, in 1954, Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba had become a widow: 23 June.

Since this was the first time the suffering of hundreds of millions on widows and their dependents had been officially highlighted by the international community, it was an important step in bringing light where for so long there has only been darkness.

The Loomba Foundation is gratified by this success, but



*OPPOSITE:* The Loomba Foundation's book *Invisible Forgotten Sufferers*, including the first *Global Widows Study* (see p. 39), was instrumental in persuading the United Nations to recognise International Widows Day.

*BELOW FROM LEFT:* Marking International Widows Day in Sri Lanka. A symbol of hope in Damascus. President Ondimba of Gabon calls on the General Assembly to adopt International Widows Day.



conscious that it is only a starting point on the road to its aim of eradicating all discrimination against widows. International campaigning, raising awareness, and delivering aid to widows and their dependents all continue to play an important part.

In 2011, the Loomba Foundation's Chairman Trustee Raj Loomba was elevated to the House of Lords, offering an additional and effective platform for raising important humanitarian issues including the plight of widows, and on 23 June – the first UN-recognised International Widows Day – the United Nations organised an International Widows Conference at the United Nations in New York chaired by Mme Ban Soon-Taek, wife of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, with Lord Loomba and Mrs. Blair both participating.

The following year, on 23 June 2012, UK Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg and his wife, Miriam González Durántez, hosted a reception to mark International Widows Day at 10 Downing Street in London.

The reception was preceded by a Celebrity Walk on London Bridge, organised by the Loomba Foundation to raise awareness of the plight of widows and their children around the world. Exercising an ancient right held by Freemen of the City of London which allows him to walk livestock over the bridge, Lord Loomba led a herd of 20 goats accompanied by 20 prominent women, including Loomba Foundation President Cherie Blair, the singer and entertainer Cilla Black and media celebrity Nancy Del'Olio. The walk symbolised the fact that goats are a lifeline for many widows in South Asia and across Africa, providing milk and carrying water and firewood from

faraway places to their homes.

The Loomba Foundation's expertise and valuable contribution on the subject of worldwide discrimination against widows was further recognised when in July 2012 it was granted Special Consultative Status by the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

In 2013, the third UN-recognised International Widows Day was marked by events in many countries, including a five-kilometre charity run in Hyde Park with participants from all over England.

The following day, an International Widows Day Conference at the House of Lords heard from the Acting Head of UN Women, Lakshmi Puri, politicians from the UK and India, and campaigners including Bianca Jagger. In recognition of the Foundation's achievements in making the international community aware of the widespread discrimination against widows, UN Women appointed Lord Loomba its first Women's Rights Champion.

The number of events to raise awareness around the world has grown substantially since International Widows Day was adopted by the United Nations, and each year on 23 June the UN Secretary-General sends a message to all member states to remind them of the issue. The Loomba Foundation continues to be involved in organising such events and supporting others in their efforts. In this way, International Widows Day has become established as a cornerstone in the ongoing campaign to eradicate all discrimination against widows from the world.

*OPPOSITE:* Cilla Black, Cherie Blair and Raj Loomba during the London Bridge Celebrity Walk.

*BELOW FROM LEFT:* Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg and his wife Miriam González Durántez at the Downing Street Reception. The Hyde Park 5k charity run.





# Chapter 5 Research

## The power of knowledge

*Research builds understanding and can drive changes in policy and culture.*

As long ago as 2001, UN Women said that “there is no group more affected by the sin of omission than widows. They are painfully absent from the statistics of many developing countries, and they are rarely mentioned in the multitude of reports on women’s poverty, development, health or human rights.”

Eradicating discrimination against widows requires action and leadership by governments as well as fundamental change in deep-rooted cultures and traditions. Neither of these are possible without deep and detailed knowledge of the problem.

This is why, when the Loomba Foundation embarked on its International Widows Day initiative, it simultaneously began a research programme to address this omission and to uncover the scale of discrimination against widows, its many forms, its roots and its impact on the economy around the world.

### International survey

In 2008, the Royal Institute for International Affairs at Chatham House in London and the WorldPublicOpinion.org international survey organisation managed by the Program for Public Consultation in Washington, D.C., were commissioned by the Loomba Foundation to build up a picture of international

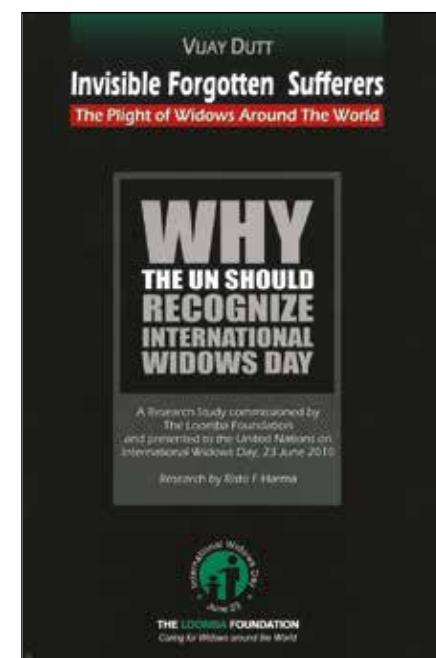
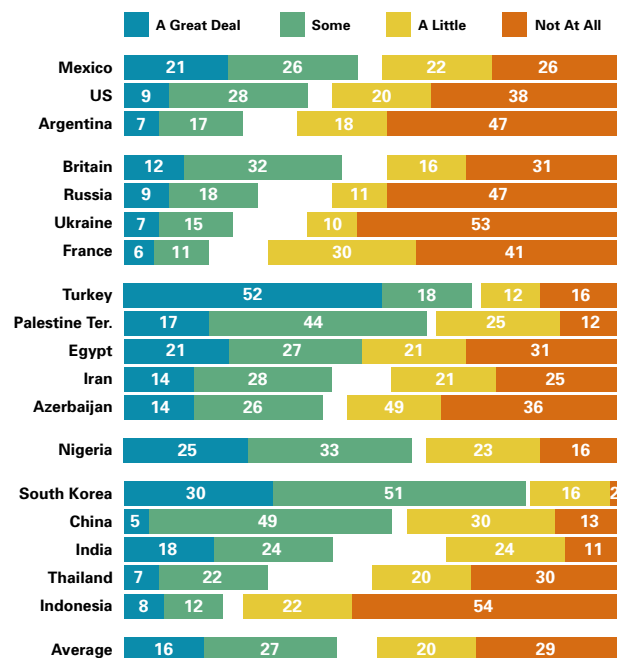
attitudes towards widowhood. The results were revealing. Of 18 countries polled, 12 saw at least 40% of respondents reporting some or a great deal of widows’ disadvantage. More than six out of ten respondents globally said that widows received worse treatment than women generally. Indicating through the geographic spread of its responses that widows’ deprivation is not exclusive to any one culture, society or region, the survey led the Loomba Foundation to undertake a far broader and more ambitious project that had never previously been attempted: to build up a global picture of existing knowledge about the treatment of widows.

### Global Widows Study

The first manifestation of this work was the Global Widows Study, published in 2010 as an addendum to the book *Invisible Forgotten Sufferers* by Vijay Dutt. The study examined disparate existing data sources to establish widow numbers in different regions of the world, their relative proportion in the female population, principal causes and drivers of widowhood underlying these numbers, traditions and customs that lead to abuse, and the social and economic impact of discrimination. The evidence of the global nature and scale of the problem that was revealed in the study was a factor in the UN’s adoption of International Widows Day on 22 December 2010.

*“To what extent are women in your country who are widowed treated worse than other women?”*

Survey by WorldPublicOpinion.org facilitated by Chatham House. Results (right) released in June 2008.



THE LOOMBA FOUNDATION

## World Widows Report



– a critical issue for the  
Sustainable Development Goals

Copies of the World Widows Report  
may be ordered at  
[www.standardinfo.london](http://www.standardinfo.london).

## The World Widows Report

The research continued on a larger scale, leading to the publication in 2016 of the first edition of the World Widows Report, which provides a unique complete, country by country, regional and global quantitative breakdown of data about widows. It brings together data from national and international census archives with disparate and inaccessible material from unusual and hard to find sources, including in-depth studies in academic journals and reports by international development organisations.

The Report showed that discrimination against widows is deeply ingrained in cultures across all continents, resulting in extreme poverty, gender-based violence, child labour, discrimination against girls, increased infant mortality and numerous other severe consequences which directly affect almost a billion people around the world. Significant change in these patterns will only come about if the underlying causes are directly addressed through legislation, education and empowerment.

Discrimination against widows is a deep-rooted feature of gender discrimination, though its form and impacts differ from place to place and from culture to culture – from shocking stories of child widows below the age of 10, and widows in some African countries forced to undergo degrading ‘cleansing’ rituals. Deprivation however extends also to developed countries, with widows in the former Soviet Union and in the United States significantly disadvantaged compared to their peers.

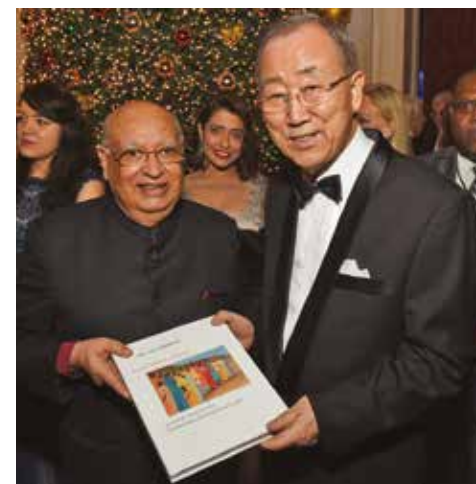
The deprivation of widows has knock-on effects on future generations, depriving dependent children of education and increasing the incidence of child labour, trafficking and prostitution. Countries affected by conflict and disease take far longer to recover as a result of the unjust treatment of their widows and these factors present major obstacles to achieving a number of the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in September 2015, including the goals to *end poverty in all its forms everywhere*, to *achieve gender equality* and to *empower all women and girls*.

The World Widows Report was presented to correspondents at a preview in London at Chatham House on 18 December 2015. On 19 March 2016, it was launched by Lord Loomba, report editor Kasper de Graaf and former UK International Development Minister Baroness Northover at the United Nations in New York, to delegates attending the 60th anniversary conference of the Commission on the Status of Women.

“Widowhood is a hidden calamity,” Lord Loomba pointed out at the UN launch of the report. “When an earthquake, tsunami or any other natural calamity happens, the world takes notice. We can measure the number of people who are killed and the financial consequences. The calamity of widowhood is far greater, affecting almost one seventh of humanity, yet it is largely invisible. This report is an attempt to put that right.”

Baroness Northover appealed for concerted action by governments, NGOs and international organisations. Describing the report as a challenge to researchers and

*BELOW FROM LEFT:* Presenting the World Widows Report to Prime Minister Modi of India, UN Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson, and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon.







governments to “fill in the gaps” and improve our knowledge further, she said it showed “how the cycle of widows’ deprivation entrenches the wider poverty that threatens the peace and stability of so many countries and communities; how discrimination against girls in education and employment is sustained by the plight of widows; and how widespread property theft and disregard of inheritance rights blights the lives of millions.”

The World Widows Report is the first comprehensive compilation of current knowledge about the plight of widows, country by country and worldwide. Its contribution to knowledge of the subject was widely welcomed, including by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson, the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi and the Director of Chatham House Dr. Robin Niblett. Available in both the House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries, it provides governments, NGOs and international organisations with an evidentiary basis for effective action and creates a baseline for further research.

Research also drives and informs media reporting, a key factor in increasing awareness and changing attitudes. Publication of the World Widows Report received widespread coverage in outlets from Reuters to the *India Times* and the scale of worldwide discrimination against widows it revealed was the basis of a major feature by Cynthia Gorney in the

February 2017 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*, with photographs by Amy Toensing, some of which are reproduced in this book.

The Loomba Foundation is working with leading academic institutions to extend research and study in this area.

#### Global estimates of widows in extreme poverty

Regions	All 2015	Extreme poverty 2015
Sub-Saharan Africa	22,153,905	9,371,102
East Asia & Pacific	82,298,356	4,526,410
Middle East & North Africa	14,969,643	703,573
Central Asia	3,614,152	672,232
South Asia	57,844,083	19,319,924
North America	14,280,312	741,827
Central & South America & Caribbean	17,922,341	878,195
Europe & Russia	45,398,264	2,048,082
<b>Total</b>	<b>258,481,056</b>	<b>38,261,345</b>

Source: *World Widows Report, 1st Edition (2016)*

*OPPOSITE:* Luwero District, Uganda, 11 June 2016. Solome Sekimuli (left), 54, on her front porch with her son Dan (right) and other members of her family. Solome lost her husband Ben from diabetes the week before and her in-laws immediately tried to push her out of her home, arriving on the day of the funeral with farming tools as weapons and ordering attendees to leave. They then physically threatened the remaining family. One said, “They tried to kill me with a hoe.” The family didn’t fight back because of family hierarchy rules. The two primary perpetrators are elder uncles on the paternal side. Solome had been married since she was 17 and her husband was 19. They were best friends, fell in love and remained so, in the same youthful way. For the entire time they were married she never considered leaving.

*Photograph and story © Amy Toensing (see page 42).*

## World Widows Report: key findings

- The global affected population numbers 258m widows with 585m children.
- Of these, 38m widows live in extreme poverty where basic needs are unmet.
- Since 2010 there has been a significant exacerbation in conflict areas in the Middle East and North Africa, notably the Syrian civil war.
- Worst affected by conflict are widows in Afghanistan, Iraq, South Sudan, Central African Republic and Syria; by the Boko Haram insurgency, those in northeast Nigeria, southeast Niger, west Chad and north Cameroon.
- In Sub-Saharan Africa the worst conditions are faced by evicted and abandoned widows with dependants and by those caught up in the Ebola crisis areas, which was further exacerbated by traditional ‘cleansing’ rituals.
- Widows with only female children and child widows aged between 10 and 17 face severe discrimination in many developing countries.
- Social norms around sexual behaviour remain counterproductive, with extreme poverty as a driver of ‘exchange sex’ and ‘survival sex’ relationships and poor quality healthcare.
- Widows in western and developed countries have been affected by cutbacks in social welfare and increased insecurity.
- Customary ‘cleansing’ rituals, where widows are required to drink the water with which their dead husband’s body has been washed and to have sex with a relative, continue to spread disease and violate the dignity of widows in some Sub-Saharan countries.
- Widows are regularly accused of killing their husbands either deliberately or through neglect – 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 remains widespread in Angola, Bangladesh, Botswana, Republic of Congo, DR Congo, India, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.



# Widowhood

## by Amy Toensing

In many regions of the world widowhood marks a 'social death' for a woman – casting her and her children out to the margins of society. In these cultures a woman is usually defined by her relationship to a man: first she is a daughter, then a wife. When her husband dies she becomes an outcast. Commonly uneducated and without the ability to support herself she is often targeted with abuse. Even when these women stand to inherit land or money they don't know their rights and her in-laws chase her off and keep any assets. Sometimes she becomes an object of 'inheritance' herself.

In India, stigmas around widows are deeply rooted in Hinduism. Some believe if a woman is pure and faithful enough she will keep her husband from death itself – implicitly blaming a woman for her husband's death. At the most extreme, widows threw themselves on their husband's funeral pyre. This practice, known as Sati, was outlawed in the early 1800's, but the expectation for widows to live the remainder of their lives in mourning has continued in some communities.

Today, thousands of India's 40 million widows seek refuge in India's holy cities like Vrindavan and Varanasi where they live out a life sentence: shaving their heads, wearing white, and never remarrying. However, younger generations are rejecting these expectations and one can see a shift taking place. One ashram recently threw a party for India's Holi festival and the *Times of India* reported, "They sang and danced, laughed and shed tears. They threw flowers at each other and played with gulal. The widows of Vrindavan celebrated Holi with a riot of colours – defying tradition that bids them to stay away from festivities of all kinds."

The Srebrenica Massacre in 1995 left thousands of widows in its wake when Serb forces killed over 7000 Bosnian men and boys in the span of one week. Entire villages became husbandless, changing the structure of family and communities. Widows have become the heads of their households, local leaders and activists fighting for the rights of the victims of the genocide.

In Uganda, and many other regions in Africa, a woman does not traditionally have inheritance rights so, when her husband dies his family often comes to claim everything: the land, her home – and sometimes her children. International Justice Mission (IJM) decided to tackle the problem in one district outside Kampala where three in five widows experience what is known as 'property grabbing'. Uganda has an extremely equitable and progressive constitution that protects a woman's right to inherit and IJM recognised that education was the problem. Since 2007 they have infiltrated the district, training everyone in the legal system: from village policemen, to local leaders to judges.

The situation is starting to change. In 2010, following the Loomba Foundation's five-year campaign, the United Nations recognised the condition of widows as a global issue and declared 23 June International Widows Day with a statement from Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon:

"No woman should lose her status, livelihood or property when her husband dies, yet millions of widows in our world face persistent abuse, discrimination, disinheritance and destitution."

*OPPOSITE:* Vindravan, 23 March 2016. Shankari Basi sleeps in her bed in at Tarash Mandir, a home for widows. She was born in 1933, married at 13 years old, widowed at 30 years old, and arrived to Tarash Mandir in 2011.

*Photograph and story © Amy Toensing.*

Amy Toensing's photography collection, 'Widowhood', will be exhibited at Visa pour l'Image, the International Festival of Photojournalism, in Perpignan, France, in September 2017. The project was partially supported by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting and by National Geographic Magazine.

More information:  
[www.visapourlimage.com](http://www.visapourlimage.com)  
[www.amytoensing.com](http://www.amytoensing.com)



# Chapter 6

## Events & fundraising

### Changing the world

*An individual can make a difference, but to change cultures we must persuade everyone.*

**OPPOSITE:** Rinku Loomba, Chief Executive of the Loomba Group of Companies and trustee of the Foundation, with his wife, Samantha Loomba.

**BELOW:** The Princess Royal arrives at the British-Indian Diwali of the Century Banquet.



The Loomba Foundation was established to care for widows and their children. Its aim is to eradicate the discrimination against widows that has such devastating consequences for individuals, communities and the world.

The problem is massive in India, where the Foundation focused its initial activities, but with 258 million widows with 585 million children, globally the issue affects the best part of a billion people. It is impossible to address an issue such as this without building support – from donors, partners, governments, international organisations and the public.

Events have therefore been at the heart of the Foundation's work from the outset. This has produced large numbers of dedicated supporters in all categories, as well as some heart-warming stories of the lengths people have gone to, in support of this important cause.

The Foundation has raised more than £5 million in direct support for its programmes, including £1.8 million to date from the Loomba Group of Companies, whose Chief Executive, Rinku Loomba, continues to play a central role as trustee, donor and supporter of the Foundation's numerous events.

### Fundraising events

The Loomba Foundation has organised many glittering functions in the UK, India, USA and elsewhere. Its Diwali Dinners (*see panel*) were an established highlight of the London social calendar for more than a decade.

UK events were however by no means restricted to that time of year. On 18 July 2001, the Loomba Foundation hosted the British-Indian Golden Jubilee Banquet to celebrate 50 years since India had become a Republic, at Grosvenor House in London. The Guest of Honour was the Duke of Kent and other guests included Mrs. Cherie Blair, Conservative Party leader William Hague and Liberal Democrat Leader Paddy Ashdown.

Patrons play a crucial role in galvanising support for the cause, and the Foundation has held regular luncheons and dinners at the House of Lords to welcome new Patrons and supporters, including the Countess Mountbatten of Burma, Joanna Lumley, Baroness Jay of Paddington, the BBC's veteran India correspondent Sir Mark Tully, who made a moving documentary about widows, and many others.

## The London Diwali Dinners

The first of the Loomba Foundation's London Diwali Dinners was the British-Indian Diwali of the Century Banquet which took place at the Banqueting House in Whitehall, London, on 4 November 1999 with the Princess Royal as Guest of Honour. The event raised £70,000.

Following this, annual Diwali Dinners were held in London in 2000 (Guest of Honour: London Mayor Ken Livingstone); 2001 (in partnership with London First, Guest of Honour: Liberal Democrat Leader Charles Kennedy); 2002 (Savoy Hotel, co-hosted by London First and the Mayor of London, Guest of Honour: Baroness Boothroyd); 2003 (Savoy Hotel, co-hosted by London First and the Mayor of London); 2004 (Dorchester Hotel, co-hosted by London First and the Mayor of London, Guest of Honour: Mrs. Cherie Blair); 2005 (the Dorchester, co-hosted for the fifth year running by London First and the Mayor of London); 2006 (Mansion House, City of London, co-hosted by the Lord Mayor of London, the Mayor of London and London First, guests included the Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon and UK Cabinet Ministers); 2007 (Mansion House, Guest of Honour: Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair); 2008 (Banqueting House, Whitehall, Guest of Honour: London Mayor Boris Johnson); 2009 (The Guildhall, Chief Guest: Indian High Commissioner Nalin Surie, Guest of Honour: UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband); 2010 (British-Indian Diamond Jubilee and Diwali Banquet, Guildhall, Guests of Honour: UK Attorney General Dominic Grieve and Indian High Commissioner Nalin Surie); 2011 (Savoy Hotel, Guest of Honour: UK Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg); 2012 (Dorchester Hotel, Chief Guest: Mrs. Lakshmi Puri, Executive Deputy Director, UN Women, Charity Auction conducted by Lord Jeffrey Archer); 2013 (Guildhall, Chief Guest: Acting Indian High Commissioner Dr. Virander Paul); 2016 (Dorchester Hotel, Guest of Honour: Hinduja Foundation Co-Chairman Gopichand P. Hinduja).



To mark the milestone that the Foundation had raised sufficient funds to support the education of 1,000 children of impoverished widows in India for at least five years, Mrs. Cherie Blair hosted a reception at 10 Downing Street on 9 December 2002. Mrs. Blair, already a Patron, agreed to become the Foundation's President two years later and on 8 September 2004 she inaugurated Loomba House in West London in the presence of Indian High Commissioner Kamlesh Sharma and other prominent supporters.

In Scotland, the Foundation was formally launched on 26 June 2002 at the Scotch Whisky Heritage Centre in Edinburgh. The event was sponsored by Cairn Energy PLC and the Guest of Honour was Sir David Steel, Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament.

London Mayor Ken Livingstone hosted a dinner at City Hall on 12 May 2003 to help raise funds for two Loomba scholars whose school education in Delhi had already been supported by the Foundation, to take up university places in the UK. During the dinner, the University of Westminster and London Metropolitan University agreed to waive tuition fees for the three-year degree courses, and Air India and British Airways offered to provide the students with free travel from India.

US Ambassador Robert H. Tuttle jointly hosted an event with the Loomba Foundation at the United States Embassy in London's Grosvenor Square on 14 April 2008 to celebrate the ancient Vaisakhi festival, which marks the harvest season and the New Year of Sikhs in the State of Punjab.

Leading Non-Resident Indians in Europe came together at a

Conference for Overseas Indians organised by India's Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs in The Hague, Netherlands, on 19 September 2009, attended by the Minister, Mr. Vayalar Ravi. Foundation Chairman Raj Loomba was invited to attend and speak on 'Empowerment of Indian women and the role of the Diaspora'.

## India

Ever since the Foundation's launch in India at the residence of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, fundraising and advocacy events in India have been no less important than those in the UK.

On 22 November 2001, British High Commissioner Sir Rob Young and Lady Young hosted a reception in aid of the Foundation at their residence.

A charity banquet in aid of the Loomba Foundation's education programme took place at the Ashoka Hotel in New Delhi on 27 November 2004, attended by India's Home Affairs Minister Shivraj Patil, the Chief Minister of Delhi Sheila Dikshit, UK guests including Mrs. Cherie Blair, Sir Richard Branson, Lord Dholakia, Baroness Boothroyd, Baroness Williams and Baroness Jay along with numerous Indian cabinet ministers and dignitaries. The event raised more than £500,000 – sufficient to fund the education of 1,500 children of poor widows in India, and provide support for their mothers, for five years.

The NRI Institute of India hosted a dinner in aid of the Loomba Foundation at the Habitat Centre in Delhi on 19 August 2008

*OPPOSITE:* Children perform at the Loomba Foundation Diwali celebrations in London.

*BELOW FROM LEFT:* London Mayor Ken Livingstone, London First chief Baroness Jo Valentine and Raj Loomba light the ceremonial lamp at a Diwali Dinner. Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg addresses dinner guests at the Banqueting House. London Mayor Boris Johnson with dignitaries at the Diwali Dinner.







with Mr. K. Mohandas, Secretary at the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, as the Guest of Honour.

'Corporate Social Responsibility: Educating Children of Poor Widows in India' was the subject of a seminar chaired by Loomba Foundation Trustee Lalit Mansingh at the British Council in New Delhi on 20 November 2008.

On 19 February 2009, British High Commissioner Sir Richard Stagg hosted the launch of the Loomba Foundation 500 Club in New Delhi, which was attended by more than 200 people.

The Gateway Conference in Delhi, organised by Birmingham barrister Ecky Tiwana on 28 October 2009, chose the Loomba Foundation as its supported charity and more than 50 delegates pledged donations to support the Loomba education programme.

On 13 November 2009, British High Commissioner Sir Richard Stagg and Lady Arabella Stagg, jointly with the Loomba Foundation, hosted a dinner at the High Commissioner's residence in honour of Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson, who was visiting at the invitation of the Indian Government. The next day, Sir Paul attended an event to mark Children's Day at which balloons were released at the India Gate in Delhi.

A charity gala dinner to celebrate the festival of Lohri was held at the Park Hotel in New Delhi on 13 January 2010 with 200 guests, including Loomba Foundation President Mrs. Cherie Blair and Bollywood Actress Preity Zinta.



The Foundation hosted a Widows Voice charity dinner at the Willingdon Club in Mumbai on 8 December 2010 and two days later, more than 200 guests attended a charity dinner hosted by the Foundation in New Delhi.

India's Law and Justice Minister Dr. Ashwani Kumar was Chief Guest at a charity dinner organised by the Loomba Foundation and the Giving Back Foundation at the Trident BKS Hotel in Mumbai on 20 March 2013. The dinner raised Rs. 6.5 million, including a donation of Rs. 5 million from Viny Raj Modi to support nine students through a four-year engineering degree course at Gyan Ganga Institute of Technology and Management in Bhopal.

At the Inaugural Forbes India Philanthropy Awards at Bangalore's Leela Palace on 20 November 2012, Lord Loomba received the Distinguished Non-Resident Philanthropist Award in recognition of the Foundation's work for widows and their children.

On 5 February 2016, Lord Loomba spoke at the Institute of Directors' 10th International Conference on Corporate Social Responsibility at the Hotel Taj Lands End in Mumbai. Under a law introduced in 2013, larger Indian corporations are required to spend 2% of net profit on social responsibility activities and Lord Loomba outlined the beneficial human, social and economic benefits of supporting economic empowerment of widows and educating their children.

The *One Globe: Uniting Knowledge Communities* Conference is an annual two-day event in New Delhi to promote thought leadership on a range of topics in the digital economy and wider society. At the fifth Conference, on 6 February 2016, Lord Loomba received the One Globe Award for Social Impact from Urban Development Minister Babul Supriyo, in recognition of the Foundation's efforts to care for widows and their children.

Gurdas Maan, the famous Punjabi singer-songwriter, headlined a Loomba Foundation charity concert at the Siri Fort Auditorium in Delhi on 5 November 2016. The Chief Guest was Haryana's Education Minister Ram Bilas Sharma. Attended by 1,500 people, the event raised more than £100,000 for the empowerment of 1,000 widows and female inmates of all 19 district jails in Haryana (see page 23).

Lord Loomba was the Guest of Honour at the 2016 Pride

*OPPOSITE:* Susan and Graham Tobbel, shown here at a fundraising function with Lord Loomba, supported the empowerment programme in Punjab with a donation of £50,000, which was matched by Punjab Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal.

*BELOW LEFT:* Lord Loomba presents a copy of *Invisible Forgotten Sufferers* to the President of India, Pratibha Patil.



of India Awards, organised annually by WCRC in Mumbai, featuring a fashion show on the theme 'Empowering the girl child today, to build women leaders of tomorrow'.

### North America

The Loomba Foundation – and its International Widows Day initiative – were launched in New York by Lord Loomba at a gala dinner on 21 October 2005 during the UN's 60th anniversary celebrations. The first Loomba Foundation Diwali Dinner in New York took place the following year, on 20 October 2006 at the United Nations, with guests including Yoko Ono, Indian Cabinet Minister Renuka Chowdhury, UN Assistant Secretary-General Rachel Mayanja and UN Under Secretary-General Shashi Tahroor. The Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh, congratulated Lord Loomba on hosting the first ever Diwali celebration at the United Nations and the Foundation received a donation of \$100,000 from Yoko Ono during the evening to its education programme in India.

At its second New York Diwali Dinner on 29 November 2007, the Foundation presented a humanitarian award to Craig Barrett, the chairman of Intel, for his leadership and commitment to global education of disadvantaged children. "We are big believers at Intel that all poor children, everywhere, deserve the chance to change the world, and that possibility begins with a strong education", Mr. Barrett commented.

The next day, 30 November, Raj Loomba and Mrs. Cherie

Blair presented a second Humanitarian Award to US First Lady Laura Bush at the White House in Washington, D.C. Mrs. Bush, who is actively involved in issues of national and global concern with a particular emphasis on education, healthcare and human rights, praised the Loomba Foundation's outstanding work in helping widows and their children.

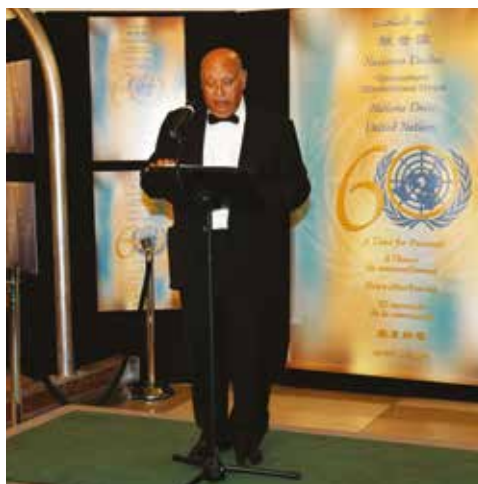
The Loomba Foundation hosted further Diwali Dinners in New York in 2008, 2009 and 2010, presenting humanitarian awards to Rwandan President Dr. Paul Kagame, Mr. Raj Nooyi, the President of AmSoft Systems and Vice-Chair at Plan International USA, and the singer and entertainer Cilla Black, who spoke movingly about the common experience of widows. "Widowhood is such a solitary experience that to be among you seems almost like a global support group," she said. "It is wonderful to know such a movement exists for the millions of women who lose literally everything, including their rights and self-worth, once their husbands die."

Foundation Chairman Raj Loomba spoke at the inaugural dinner of the Las Vegas Indian Chamber of Commerce on 28 August 2009, addressing an audience of 400 including the Mayor of Las Vegas and the actor Anil Kapoor on the topics of empowering poor widows and educating their children.

On 4 October 2010, at a reception in Toronto co-hosted by Dr. Ruby Dhalla MP and TD Bank Deputy Chair Mr. Frank McKenna, Loomba Foundation President Cherie Blair launched the Loomba Foundation's fundraising and advocacy programme in Canada.

*OPPOSITE:* First Lady Laura Bush receives her Loomba Foundation Humanitarian Award at the White House from the Foundations's Chairman, President and Trustees, from left to right: Dr. Narendra Loomba, Veena Loomba, Raj Loomba, Mrs. Bush, Mrs. Blair and Roma Loomba.

*BELOW LEFT TO RIGHT:* Raj Loomba launches the Foundation in New York. Craig Barrett receives his award from Cherie Blair. Honoree Raj Nooyi and his wife, Pepsico CEO Indra Nooyi, with Lord and Lady Loomba.



# *Magic Moments* by Roma Loomba

The photographs below were taken by Roma Loomba (right) in India, Europe and Alaska. Law graduate Roma has served as a trustee of the Loomba Foundation since its inception. She has been committed to the charity and its cause over the last 20 years and has raised funds through her photography. Roma has exhibited twice at The Nehru Centre in central London.

**BELOW, FROM LEFT:**

'Glacier' (Alaska), 'Lake Geneva' (Switzerland), 'Taj Mahal' (India).  
The pictures were part of the Magic Moments collection shown at the Nehru Centre in March 2011.



## Charity fundraising

Many individuals and organisations have supported the work of the Loomba Foundation in their own way and of their own accord. Sir Richard Branson has made significant personal donations to help educate the children of poor widows in India, and as the Chairman of Virgin Atlantic Airways he gave further support through the 'Change for Children' Appeal on Virgin flights, raising significant sums between July and September 2000, and again from September to December 2005. Sir Richard also made an appeal in support of the Foundation on BBC Radio 4.

Often the most heart-warming of contributions are those that involve great personal effort, as demonstrated by Dr. Mike Krimholtz, who supported the work of the Loomba Foundation by participating in the Polar Race. He walked 350 miles from Resolute Bay in Canada to the Magnetic North Pole, raising more than £2,000.

A performance by children and staff from the Reigate St Mary's Preparatory and Choir School of *Ragamuffin Man*, written and directed by John Fielder, was held at London's Theatre Royal in Drury Lane on 20 March 2005 to raise funds for widows and orphans created by the Indian Ocean Tsunami that had occurred three months previously. The play is about Dr. Thomas Barnardo and his work supporting destitute children in Victorian Britain.

At a reception at Viva Glam 5 in London's Covent Garden on 18 September 2005, the Canadian supermodel Linda Evangelista

presented a cheque for £100,000 from MAC Cosmetics to support the Loomba Foundation's education programme to the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone.

The Loomba Foundation was the beneficiary of two charity polo matches – the Jaipur Trophy match in honour of the Rajmata of Jaipur, and the Ajit Singh Medtia Trophy match – on 27 June 2009. Organised jointly by the Indian Polo Association and the Hurlingham Polo Association – the governing body of the sport – the event was attended by more than 200 guests.

Over 16 days in June 2011, Chris Parsons, a partner in the London law firm Herbert Smith Freehills and chairman of its India practice, cycled 2,000 kilometres from London to Gibraltar to raise funds for the Loomba Foundation. He raised a phenomenal £120,000: enough to educate 240 children of impoverished widows for five years.

Four years later, Chris Parsons undertook an even more ambitious project: his Walk for Widows. Setting off from the Gateway of India in Mumbai on 10 January 2015, Chris walked 30 marathons in 30 days, ending up in Bangalore on 8 February. With this inspiring and dedicated effort, Chris raised more than \$300,000, every penny of which has been committed to the Foundation's programme for economic empowerment of 5,000 widows in the city of Varanasi. The Loomba Foundation has produced a commemorative book that tells the story of this remarkable effort: *One man walking – a walk for widows in aid of the Loomba Foundation*.

## Exhibitions

### A Celebration of Colour

10–14 March 2003,

Nehru Centre, London

#### **Painting and prints by Jan Puffett**

Lord David Puttnam opened this exhibition, where many colourful paintings were sold to raise funds. The artist generously donated 600 prints, worth £15,000, to support the education programme in India.

### Widow City

21 October 2010,

Stone Rose Lounge, New York

#### **Photographs by Radhika Chalasani**

Showcasing a series of documentary photographs at the Shades of Autumn charity social. A raffle was held to raise money for the work of the Loomba Foundation.

### Magic Moments

22–25 March 2011,

Nehru Centre, London

#### **Photographs by Roma Loomba**

The exhibition was opened by Mrs. Cherie Blair. This was followed up with another successful exhibition.

### A Hidden Calamity

23 June–15 July 2011,

UN Headquarters, New York

23 June 2012,

10 Downing Street, London

#### **Paintings by Reeta Sarkar**

A series of 17 oils and acrylics about the plight of widows. The New York exhibition was opened by Yoko Ono.



# One man walking by Chris Parsons

Chris Parsons is, usually, a partner at the international law firm Herbert Smith Freehills and chairman of its India Practice. In January 2015, however, after two years' hard training, he became something else: a dedicated walker for widows. For some years, Chris had been conscious of the desperate plight of widows in India and in many other countries and resolved to do what he could to help. In 2011, he celebrated turning 50 by cycling from London to Gibraltar – 2,500 kilometres – for The Loomba Foundation, raising £220,000.

But it didn't end there. Inspired by the example of a friend who walked 630 miles to raise money for the Motor Neurone Disease Association, and this time using the excuse of reaching the 30th anniversary of working at his firm, Chris decided he would walk thirty marathons in thirty days – 1,260 kilometres – to raise money so that The Loomba Foundation can empower more disadvantaged widows to become self-sufficient, valued members of society, able to support themselves and their dependents.

So it was that Chris set off on 10 January from the Gateway of India in Mumbai, walking 42 kilometres every day for 30 days and encountering numerous hazards, adventures and kindnesses along the way. Backed by a support team to monitor the route, manage accommodation and meals, help maintain his daily blog and a physiotherapist to give him intensive treatment every day, Chris arrived thirty days later in Bangalore, where he was fêted by the Speaker of the Karnataka Legislative Assembly.

Individual efforts such as these have an important part to play if we want to change attitudes towards widows, Lord Loomba pointed out: "To change the culture, we must speak not only to the head, but to the heart."

"This," he added, "is why Chris's story is important. He did what he could and in so doing he inspired others – one man walking around beautiful, incredible India for a purpose."

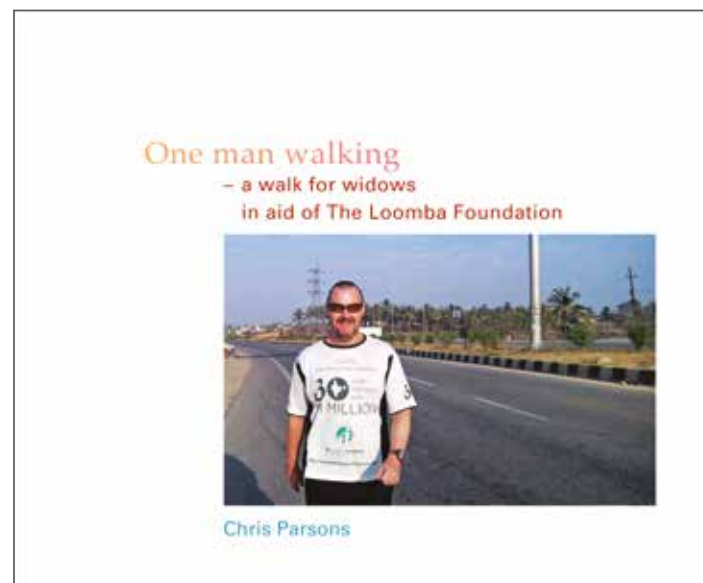
Chris Parsons raised more than \$300,000 with his walk – money that went directly towards the Loomba Foundation's programme to empower 5,000 widows with skills training, equipment and advice in the city of Varanasi, with the support of its Member of Parliament, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The Loomba Foundation produced a book, *One man walking – a walk for widows in aid of The Loomba Foundation* to commemorate this fabulous effort by a dedicated supporter (below).

**OPPOSITE, TOP ROW FROM LEFT:** Setting off from Mumbai. A village Abbadi match at Diveagar. On the ferry from Bhagamandala to Bangkot. Lunchtime break at the Mayfair Spa: "Quite a change from my usual sleeping position on a dusty pavement or in a car park".

**MIDDLE ROW:** Day 10 – "Yet another session with Sachin, my physio". "Atul managed to capture me having my first 'chai of the day' under a perfect sign".

**BOTTOM ROW:** Crossing the line, 30 days and 30 marathons later. Welcomed with flowers after a magnificent achievement. Chris Parsons and Lord Loomba with Speaker Kagodu Thimmappa of the Karnataka Legislative Assembly.





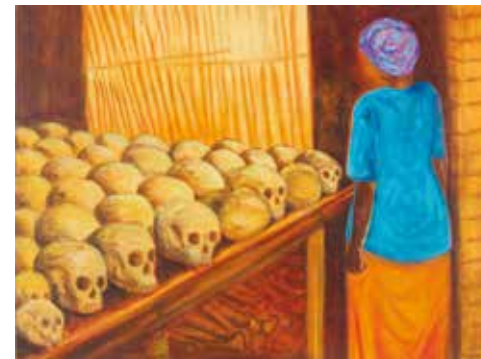
Africa



South Asia



Conflict



# A Hidden Calamity

## by Reeta Sarkar

This evocative collection of paintings by British Indian artist Reeta Sarkar – a selection shown opposite – reminds us that global humanitarian issues are about people. The plight of widows is shocking in many countries and is graphically depicted in the faces, and the circumstances, shown in these paintings.

In many countries, widows are rejected by their families and community, deprived of possessions and left unable to care for their children. Yet unlike wars and natural disasters, the world is all too often unaware of their plight and they have no-one to turn to. Widows are truly the poorest of the poor, abused, invisible and unheard.

Reeta has chosen three themes – South Asia, Africa and Conflict – to highlight this hidden calamity that directly impacts more than half a billion people. Each of these themes highlights an important aspect of the global problem of widowhood.

This collection was first shown at the United Nations in New York from 20 June to 12 July 2011. It formed part of an exhibition – also featuring works by Yoko Ono – to mark the first UN-recognised International Widows Day to raise awareness and bring justice to the millions who suffer just as those depicted in these paintings.

As an artist, Reeta is motivated by her extensive involvement in campaigns against poverty and discrimination, and informed by her experience as a single mother and Amatsu practitioner.

It is the tragedy and desolation of widowhood that shines through in Reeta's canvases – white-clad figures in Vrindhaban and Varanasi, huddling children in Rwanda, a group of genocide widows in Darfur, colourful yet faceless, symbolising the invisibility that so often is the widows' fate.

“Many widows are forced to endure degrading and unjust treatment at the hands of relatives as well as strangers,” Reeta notes, adding that the number of people who urgently need the world to take an interest in their plight is more than half a billion. “This is far more than any of the single calamities – earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons – that dominate the airwaves; yet nobody really knows about it. It's a hidden calamity that saps the strength of communities and causes deprivation for several generations.”

The strength of Reeta's work is that she brings the reality to life in a way that statistics and even photographs often do not. Every widow is an individual; her children inhabit a world that is not the same as the one that others live in, even in their own community. This collection manages to combine the big picture – the differing but equally pressing conditions of widowhood in South Asia and in Africa, and the devastating impact of conflict – with the human scale; bringing us, the viewers wherever we are, closer to the people who so desperately need us to take an interest in their fate.

The Loomba Foundation published a catalogue of the exhibition, *A Hidden Calamity – the plight of widows*.



*OPPOSITE FROM TOP , LEFT TO RIGHT:*

AFRICA – Young widow by her bakery in Nairobi, supported by the Loomba Foundation (oil on canvas, 18" x 24"). A widow caring for her child (oil on canvas, 30" x 40"). Sons of a genocide widow, Rwanda (oil on canvas, 29" x 36.25").

SOUTH ASIA – Widows lining up for food in Vrindhaban (oil on canvas, 30" x 40"). A widow bathing in Varanasi (oil on canvas, 39.5" x 39.5"). Widows bathing in the Ganges (oil on canvas, 47" x 47"). Lonely widow in Vrindhaban (acrylic on canvas, 32" x 37").

CONFLICT – The 'Island of Tears' Widows' Memorial, Belarus, (oil on canvas, 39.75" x 27.75"). Murambi-Kigali Memorial Centre, Rwanda (acrylic on canvas, 30.25" x 40.25"). Genocide victims in Darfur (oil on canvas, 35.5" x 51.5"), all 2011.

More information:  
[www.reetasarkar.com](http://www.reetasarkar.com)



# Chapter 7

## The Future

### Leave no-one behind

*Injustice against widows sets in train a cycle of deprivation that feeds gender discrimination and can last for generations.*

In 2017, widows still face discrimination in many parts of the world, with almost 40 million in extreme poverty and their children often exploited and unable to receive an education. While some customs and practices are most degrading and extreme in some regions, widowhood hangs like a dark cloud over women almost everywhere for as long as society views the status of women in terms of their men. The economic risk to families of widowhood causes parents and grandparents to favour boys over girls for education and employment, and so a cycle of deprivation is set in train that affects all humanity. This is why widowhood is not a special interest issue, but a universal one that must be treated with the highest priority if the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015 are to be achieved.

The injustice affects individuals and their families, so the Loomba Foundation will continue its education and empowerment programmes that have already transformed the lives of more than 200,000 people. And we will continue the fundraising efforts to help us do so, which have seen us raise more than £5 million – all spent directly on our programmes. Our partnership with the Rotary Literacy Mission in India to empower 30,000 widows in India over the next five years is evidence of that.

But we know that even if we double the number of beneficiaries, or increase them by a multiple of ten, we will still only scratch the surface of the problem, and so we will continue working with governments, international organisations and partners around the world, raising awareness through International Widows Day and carrying out further research to underpin policy and, ultimately, to change cultures so that girls and women can fulfill their potential, and widows can take their rightful place as valued and treasured members of all our communities.

*OPPOSITE:* Chuyia (Sarala Kariyawasam) is an eight-year-old girl whose husband suddenly dies. In keeping with tradition, she is dressed in white, her head shaven, and left in an ashram, to spend the rest of her life in renunciation.  
– Scene from the award-winning film *Water* by Deepa Mehta.



# The Loomba Family

Over 20 years, the Loomba Foundation has grown into a global NGO whose expertise in its area of discrimination against widows is valued by the United Nations and many governments, underpinning the empowerment and education programmes for disadvantaged widows that have transformed thousands of lives in many countries.

It was established however as a family foundation and much of its success is owed to the dedicated, unwavering support of Lord and Lady Loomba and their children, who have served as trustees since the charity was founded.

## Supporting the Foundation

Reeta's collection of 17 paintings, 'A Hidden Calamity', powerfully conveyed the suffering of widows in three continents and was exhibited in New York and London to accompany International Widows day events (see page 56).

Roma played a key role in the charity's launch in India with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. She is a talented

photographer and her 'Magic Moments' exhibition at London's Nehru Centre was held in aid of the Foundation (see page 52).

Rinku Loomba has been the chief executive of the Loomba Group of companies since 1999 and plays a key role in providing strategic and ongoing financial support for the Foundation's core operations.

## Education

The ethos of education instilled by Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba remains at the core of the family's values. Lord and Lady Loomba speak with pride of their three granddaughters: Rinku and Samantha's daughters Arisa, who is studying history at Warwick University, and Devina, doing her GCSEs; and Reeta's daughter Raashi, who is due to start her university education in pharmaceuticals in October 2017.

*OPPOSITE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:* Roma Loomba, Lord and Lady Loomba, Samantha Loomba, Reeta Sarkar and Rinku Loomba.

*BELOW FROM LEFT:* Arisa Loomba, Devina Loomba, Raashi Sarkar.



## Trustees

Lord Raj Loomba CBE  
(Founder and Chairman Trustee)  
– worldwide

### UK

Dr. Barry Humphreys CBE  
Shamin Lalji  
Veena, Lady Loomba  
The Hon. Reeta Sarkar  
The Hon. Roma Loomba  
The Hon. Rinku Loomba

### India

S.S. Dhindsa  
Lion Aruna Oswal  
Balbir Singh Kakar  
Veena, Lady Loomba  
Harjiv Singh

### USA

Jack Klinck  
Dr. Peter Rajsingh  
Dr. Narendra P. Loomba  
Harjiv Singh

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Mrs. Cherie Blair CBE, QC

*Patron-in-Chief*  
Sir Richard Branson

*Patrons*  
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Rt. Hon. Lord Menzies Campbell  
Stephen Pound MP  
Sir Tony Baldry  
Kamla Singhvi

Padmashri Vikram Sahney  
Ian Gomes  
Lord Rana MBE, JP  
Rt Hon Patricia Hewitt

Subodh Narain Agrawal  
Ken Livingstone  
Graham Tobbell  
Susan Tobbell  
Ashish Chauhan

## Honorees

Laura Bush  
H. E. Paul Kagame, President of Rwanda  
Cherie Blair CBE, QC  
Yoko Ono  
Craig Barrett  
Rachel Mayanja  
Renuka Chowdhry  
Raj Nooyi

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Alpesh Patel (Co-Chair)  
Dr Kartar Lalvani OBE  
Meera Syal CBE  
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