



Two Day Consultative Workshop

on

"Global Networking & Mainstreaming of Widows' Issues"



SANWED Secretariat

Background

WHR as the Secretariat of SANWED (South Asian Network for Widows Empowerment in Development) organized a **Two Day Consultative Workshop** on "Global Networking & Mainstreaming of Widows' Issues" on **December 9 & 10, 2011**. The two day workshop was held at Chhahari, WHR on the first day and at Club Himalaya, Nagarkot on the second day with the support of the European Union.

Objective

Mainstreaming South Asian rural widows issues for the Commission on the Status of Woman (CSW) round table meeting in New York in March 2012. And to take steps in order to lobby for a Widow's Desk at the UN and appoint a Special Rapporteur for South Asian widows' issues.

- To discuss the roles and responsibilities of CSOs, Government agencies, UN agencies in mainstreaming widows issues
- The role of SAARC in the implementation of Article 32 of the Colombo Declaration and further endorsement of the Widows Charter
- Incorporating widows' issues into the major human rights instruments like the BPFA, UNSCRs 1325/1820, and CEDAW where widows issues have not been highlighted
- The way forward in terms of legal registration of SANWED as a South Asian Network



Participants

SANWED core committee members from South Asian countries which includes representatives from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India participated in the two day conference along with representatives from the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare, Constituent Assembly members, representative from Widows for Peace through Democracy (WPD), UK; UN Women Nepal and South Asia Sub-regional Office, representatives from the European Union, WHR staff, five Development regional presidents and WHR board members. Representatives from Pakistan, Bhutan, Afghanistan and an additional organization from Sri Lanka representing the Tamil widows were unable to attend at the last moment due to unavoidable circumstances.

Proceeding

The workshop was conducted over a course of 2 days in Kathmandu and Nagarkot. The international participants including Nepal presented widows' issues and situation from the context of their country. Discussions were conducted on: priority issues affecting widows in the region; formal registration steps to be taken for SANWED as a SAARC regional body; SANWED charter and the declaration were finalized.

Day 1 (Session I)

1. Inauguration :

The inaugural session was started by welcoming the key personnel on the Dias and the respective guest. The following were on the Dias:

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Chandrika Bhattarai – Chairperson, WHR | 7. Lluís Navarro, Head of Cooperation, Delegation of the European Union to Nepal |
| 2. Arvind Shah- Hon. State Minister of Women, Children and Social Welfare | 8. Ferdous Ara Begum, Gender Issues Specialist, former member of UN CEDAW, Bangladesh |
| 3. Mahendra Shrestha – Chair person of ICAMC, Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare | 9. Margaret Owen, International Focal person for SANWED (Widows for Peace through Democracy UK) |
| 4. Ananda Raj Pokharel, Secretary, Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare | 10. Lily Thapa, Founder President WHR and General secretary SANWED |
| 5. H.E. Mr. Alf Arne Ramslien, The Royal Norwegian Ambassador in Nepal | 11. Babita Basnet, President, Sancharika Samuha |
| 6. Anne F. Stenhammer, Regional Programme Director, UN Women South Asia | |

Note: Representatives from SAARC were unable to attend at the last moment citing their unavailability of time

SESSION 1 – INAUGURAL SESSION

The inaugural session facilitated by Tracy Ghale, Program Manager WHR started off on an auspicious note with the lighting of candles as a symbol of hope and a new beginning by the representatives from South Asia, the UK, and five regional presidents of WHR. Guests were given a traditional welcome by the presidents with 'khada' (symbolizes purity of intention and the beginning of new relationships) and flower bouquets.

Lily Thapa, General Secretary, SANWED warmly welcomed everyone present and highlighted the objectives of the two day workshop. She highlighted the current status of widows and their issues in Nepal and outlined the further steps that have to be taken.

Mahendra Shrestha, Chair person of ICAMC, Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare highlighted the positive aspects of the workshop by identifying widows as key actors in national development and why it is absolutely essential to have equal rights for widows. Widows should be empowered socially, legally, politically and action needs to be taken to tackle violence against widows. Capacity building of widows should be another important agenda for the government. Mr. Shrestha went on to say that there has to be close coordination and cooperation between the government and civil society in order to achieve progress on the issue.

Finally, he expressed his optimism over the workshop's positive and concrete outcomes that would outline the roles and responsibilities of the government; civil society; UN agencies towards widows' empowerment.

H.E. Mr. Alf Arne Ramslien, The Royal Norwegian Ambassador to Nepal began on a congratulatory note for WHR and SANWED for organizing the workshop and mentioned the happy coincidence of the International Human Rights Day which was on December 10 i.e. Day 2 of the workshop. According to him, women are the backbone of society and have demonstrated special roles during the conflict period including creating an alliance with men to bring about significant changes in the development arena.

He expressed his support on behalf of the Royal Norwegian Embassy for women and their vision and mission to become change agents. In Kabul, Afghanistan there are 30,000 women who have been widowed with small children depending on them and that it has become a challenge for the government, INGOs and donor agencies to improve their situation. He salutes journalists who are important actors for the advocacy of human rights adding that lawyers, human rights defenders are also key actors but are in need of further support. He reiterated his support and commitment on behalf of the EU and Norway towards partners working for the rights of women/widows.

Anne F Stenhammer, Regional Programme Director, UN Women South Asia stated her deep concern and incentive towards issues concerning women's human rights from the grassroots to the South Asian and international stages especially at the UN where she stated that the continued lobbying by civil society on widows' issues is the key for assimilation in the UN agenda and hence the priority theme involving rural widows next year at the CSW. She expressed her gratitude and honour to be part of the historical launch of the (NAP) National Action Plan on UNSCRs 1325/1820 in New York where Nepal is the first South Asian country to implement UNSCRs 1325/1820 and that the integration of widows issues in the NAP was a significant step for Nepal as a developing country in transition. She urged the MoPR (Ministry of Peace & Reconciliation) to develop a special monitoring scheme for the implementation of the National Action Plan on UNSCRs 1325/1820 at the local levels. She further stated that there are 35 million widows in India, 80,000 widows in Nepal, 50,000 widows in Sri Lanka and they encompass all ages and class categories. She quoted Michelle Bachelet, UN Women Executive Director, "Gender equality must become a lived reality".

While acknowledging Article 32 of the Colombo Declaration and the essential step towards regional cooperation for widows' empowerment, she pointed out international conventions like the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women) which has not included articles on the discrimination of women on the basis of marital status. And this is sadly a harsh reality in many South Asian countries where there is an immediate need for all state parties to strive for the elimination of all forms of violence against women and especially towards widows. Widows in South Asia face obstacles that need to be tackled and expressed a concrete outcome from the workshop.



"All women are not equal and their needs are not the always the same. We must identify their needs."



Luis Navarro, Head of Cooperation, Delegation of the European Union to Nepal was highly optimistic about the ongoing and future cooperation between the European Union and WHR. He stated that his visit to the local Single Women Groups at the local level was an eye opener for him in terms of the problems faced by widows ranging from social and cultural stigma, domestic violence, dependence of children and restricted mobility.

He was impressed with the bottom up approach that WHR has accomplished so far by organizing widows, providing income generating activities, improving their confidence and capacity to become agents of change across the country. He had positive comments on Chhahari in different communities at the local levels and the type of support it provided for local widows. Lobbying and advocacy can be difficult at times but Mr. Navarro was encouraged by WHR's continuous and arduous campaign on behalf of widows and that the EU could be a partner in this journey. He committed his continued future support on behalf of the Delegation.



Ferdous Ara Begum (MPA Harvard), Gender Issues Specialist, former member of UN CEDAW Committee, Bangladesh gave an account on country specific issues of widowhood and armed conflict. Ms Begum elaborated on how patriarchal society determined the quality of widows' lives and inherent discriminative law victimized widows. She highlighted the plight of young, rural and illiterate widows across the region that are vulnerable to all forms of violence and are ignored by their respective governments. They live in extreme poverty and are often forced into the sex trade to support themselves and their children.

She presented examples from Africa where widows are accused of black magic, witchcraft and persecuted by their communities often leading to mental, physical torture. Ms Begum reported on atrocities involving widows where the right to property and inheritance is fraught with conflict and coercion where widows are forced to marry the deceased husband's brother in order to keep what was rightfully hers in the first place.

Ananda Raj Pokhrel, Secretary, Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare mentioned the historical and strategic importance of the National Action Plan on UNSCRs 1325 and 1820 which needs to be implemented at the local levels. He stated that the issues of single women (widows) should be incorporated into each associated work with the ministry. He further mentioned that injustice towards single women (widows) should be treated with zero tolerance.



Margaret Owen, International Focal person for SANWED (Widows for Peace through Democracy, UK) started off by mentioning the establishment of SANWED six years ago was with the idea of addressing the issues of widows. She stressed the fact that it was not an issue of just women, but an issue affecting society as a whole where there was an alarming increase in the number of young widows across South Asia due to conflict, disease and poverty.

Ms Owen was steadfast in her belief that in order to respond effectively to the issues of widows, we all must be organized with focus in the grassroots widows which WHR has made possible with its network of 625 single women groups across 68 districts so far. The government also has to extend its support to WHR to acquire the required data. She appreciated the unique work done by WHR and thanked UN Women for their association in this issue.

Arvind Shah, Honorable State Minister of Women, Children and Social Welfare (Chief Guest) mentioned that widows' issues should be incorporated into fundamental rights of the constitution and widows are lagging behind in national development and the government should provide widows with special schemes.

He stated that discriminations still exist against widows and there should be stringent and specific action taken not only from the government but NGOs/INGOs as well.

Nirmala Dhungana, General Secretary, WHR delivered the vote of thanks.



Session II

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

This session was facilitated by Prof. Radha Devi Sharma, Advisor, WHR. The session commenced with country specific presentations on widows issues:



Sushila Badala/ Shilpa Kashelkar, Single Women National Forum, India presented the advantages of collectively organizing the single women to bring change; she described their struggles and achievements. To bring about social change and ensure justice for single women, the single women of Rajasthan organized themselves in a united struggle in 1999 from just 450 members to over 83,000 at present. Single Women National Forum is present in 9 states of India, lobbying and advocating against ill social and government practices against single women.



Major General Dr Dudley Perera from Ranaviru Family Counseling Support Service (RFCSS), Sri Lanka presented vision and mission of his organization and the significant work done in favor of war widows of his country. Over 80% are rural widows between the ages of 18-38 and are mostly housewives with dependants. He mentioned government supportive roles such as: funeral expenses; initial grant; 75% of the pension is provided to the widow and 25% goes to the parents and scholarship for children. The RFCSS mainly focuses on capacitating the war widows by teaching them new income generating skills and giving them a new lease of life.



Kohinoor Yeasmin and Masuma Parvin, TARANGO, Bangladesh highlighted the situation of women in Bangladesh and how TARANGO encourages women to become self-sufficient, resourceful, skilled and production oriented. In Bangladesh out of 1.5 million widows only 60% are receiving economic benefits from government while 40% are not included in the government programs. They organize the most disadvantaged women and facilitate their potential into leadership and entrepreneurship.

Srijana Lohani, Senior Program Manager of WHR and National Chapter Coordinator of SANWED started off with SANWED's milestones. After the first regional meeting which was held in 2005, SANWED has gone from strength to strength by forging and maintaining strong regional membership and global networks. She highlighted the achievements of WHR as a National Chapter which included changes in significant discriminative social and government laws against widows. In fact, Nepal is the second country in the South Asian Region after India to have proper statistics on widows. She emphasized the need for SANWED as a regional body in a region where there is a common thread that binds widows and their issues and where they continue to be ignored and are still the poorest of the poor.



She raised a critical question:

"Can there be empowerment of women without addressing widows' issues?"



ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION



Shiva Bhandari, Program Manager, EU spoke on the roles of donor/bilateral and partner organizations and according to him donors are there to provide support to the widows issues in every level from national to international.

The role of the donors is to enhance the effectiveness of civil societies, bringing the community in a network; monitoring the activities that civil societies play in the community. He mentioned that the European Union is guided by its own international guidelines and that the commitment is based on these very same guidelines, one of which includes the use of two channels i.e. through the government and the other through civil societies organizations.

According to him donor organizations should internalize the importance of the widows' issue thus making engagement between partners more fruitful and effective. He acknowledged the importance of awareness amongst donor agencies as the key to incorporation and mainstreaming of the issue into donors' agenda. Mr. Bhandari further added the EU is an organization open to learning from every project and partner which includes experience and knowledge gained with WHR. He ended on an optimistic note by reiterating the long term partnership that the EU has had with WHR and was positive about future collaborations.

SAARC Secretariat Unfortunately, as mentioned earlier, the SAARC Secretariat was not available for participation to discuss the role of SAARC in the implementation of Article 32 of the Colombo Declaration and further endorsement of the Widows Charter.

Margaret Owen spoke on how to incorporate widows' issues in International Human rights tools (CEDAW, UN 1325/1820, BPPA). She stressed that these international laws require the Government to use all available means to modify evil and bad social attitude and change stereotype attitude towards women, particularly widows. However, she regretted the government not being able to implement any of those.

OPEN FLOOR DISCUSSIONS

Open floor discussions yielded a number of points on what could be the vital issues that are going to be taken to UN on behalf of South Asian Widows.

- The lack of access to property rights across the region
- There should be inclusion of widows in the gender budgeting of the UN
- The lack of access to health and education especially for rural widows
- The need to lobby the government for free education, at least for pre-school children of the widows
- Economic empowerment should be conducted simultaneously with legal, social and psychological empowerment for a holistic approach

The session was concluded by Prof Radha Devi Sharma. The international participants headed out to Nagarkot for Day 2 of the workshop.



The workshop was extensively covered by the media in electronic and print media.



Day 2 - Club Himalaya, Nagarkot

OPEN FLOOR DISCUSSION

Lily Thapa facilitated the first session by briefing those present on the days agenda:

1. To discuss the common issues affecting widows in South Asia based on the country papers
2. Discussion and finalizing of the Action Plan
3. Steps towards registering SANWED as a SAARC regional body
4. Discussion and finalization of the Declaration to be presented at the 56th session of the CSW in New York, March 2012



The discussions brought up common issues affecting widows across the region:

- High drop out rate in secondary schools in Bangladesh as it is free up to the primary level only.
- Strict code of conduct for widows for the first three months of mourning period in Sri Lanka.
- Bangladesh as other South Asia countries has a preference for the male child but unlike other countries for e.g. some parts of India, there is a low rate of sex selective abortion
- There is a system of early marriage in Bangladesh. In case of the death of the husband, the widow is entitled to only one eighth of the conjugal property. Additionally, the government provides 225 Taka to widows which is less than 3 USD.
- Sri Lanka has a system of transfer of property from father to son but does not have 'son preference'.
- In Sri Lanka, the widow of a deceased soldier is entitled to 75 % of the pension of her deceased husband where the rest of the 25 % is handed over to the parents. However, in other cases, the decision rests with the in-laws whether a widow is entitled to her deceased husband's property.
- Dowry giving and taking is rampant in many parts of India turning women into objects to be traded and hence making them vulnerable to violence and abuse.
- Bangladesh reported pressure on young widows to get remarried from their families and communities especially in the Muslim community. On the other hand elderly widows are neglected and treated as outcasts.

DELIBERATION ON THE REGISTRATION OF SANWED

Prof. Purna Man Shakya and Advocate Neeru Shrestha briefed the participants on the process for registration of SANWED as a SAARC regional body. This included the advantages of the registration for SANWED and its members; formation of the National Chapters; Organ ogram of the regional body and a tentative time line for the entire process. Klaar Mellen, volunteer and legal expert discussed the legal procedures for the draft Charter of SANWED.

Towards the end of the session, Margaret Owen, Anju Pandey, Tracy Ghale and Klaar Mellen presented the SANWED Declaration for discussions and reviews.



The major outcomes of the two day workshop are :

1. Identified common issues affecting widows in South Asia
2. SANWED core members will meet in January, 2012 in India to develop a strategic plan for SANWED
3. Each SANWED member country committed to form National Chapters in their respective country and collect baseline information on widows by March 2012
4. Consensus achieved on registering SANWED in Nepal and 6 nominations sent to SANWED secretariat by March 2012 for the formation of the regional body.
5. SANWED will compile and publish status of South Asian widows by June 2012
6. Next regional meeting and official launch program will be held in Pakistan in 2012
7. Charter of Regional bodies will be finalized and sent to all member countries
8. SANWED Declaration approved

Declaration

Declaration on the Needs, Roles and Rights of Rural Widows in South Asia:
Two Day Consultative Workshop on "Global Networking and Mainstreaming Widows' Issues"
10th December, 2011
Kathmandu, Nepal

WE, the members of SANWED (South Asian Network for Widows' Empowerment in Development) representing widows of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka agree and adopt the following declaration during the two days consultative workshop on "Global Networking and Mainstreaming Widows' Issues" on 9th- 10th December, 2011 in Kathmandu, Nepal.

OUR goal is to see a world in which all widows irrespective of age, ethnicity, religion or political allegiance, enjoy their full human rights, live with dignity without any form of discrimination;

WE ASSERT that while widows across the region experience bereavement as a 'social death', widows must not be seen exclusively as poor, vulnerable and needy, for they play key roles in society, peace building and should be recognised as effective agents of change;

WE SOLEMNLY AFFIRM our strong solidarity and integrity; expressing our unity in pursuance of our common goals for the empowerment of widows;

WE COMMIT to work together to eliminate the many forms of discrimination, abuse and violence facing widows and wives of the missing (half-widows) to protect their human rights; reduce their poverty and accord them due recognition of and support for their pivotal roles in their families, communities and societies;

WE STATE that the goal of SANWED is to see widowhood mainstreamed in national policies and programmes through consultation with the national federations of widows in each member country; that gives widows a collective voice to articulate their needs, describe their roles and be accorded equal participation in national decision making processes; WE RECOGNISE that the key global frameworks for equality, development and peace such as the CEDAW, BPFA, MDGs, UNSCRs 1325 and 1820 and National Action Plans to implement these are effective instruments for widows' empowerment; WE RECOGNISE that widows' human rights, their equality and access to justice are core components of democracy, good governance, development and peace in the region;

WE NOTE the urgency, in this region, to address the particular plight of widows and half-widows in conflict and post conflict situations and their potential roles in peace building processes as set out in UNSCR 1325;

WE NOTE the serious gaps in national data collection systems as a barrier to governments' addressing the issues of widowhood; (SANWED chapters will map and profile widows and their issues to inform and influence national policies and programmes) ¹

WE WORK in coordination with WPD (Widows for Peace through Democracy), UK the international organisation for widows which is SANWED's focal point;

WE REAFFIRM the Widows' Charter that was adopted by SANWED in 2005;

WE COMMIT to legally register SANWED as a regional network with the SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu, Nepal;
WE DEMAND that,

- ◆ **The UN appoints a Special Representative for Widows.**
- ◆ **The UN commissions a Report on the situation of widows in conflict and post-conflict environments**
- ◆ **UN Women establishes a special unit focusing on widows' issues, *inter alia* coordinating the gathering of data, and that the South Asia Regional Office provides financial and technical support to SANWED and its national chapters.**

- ◆ The UN adopts the Widows' Charter and that SAARC supports and facilitates its implementation and enforcement in the region.
- ◆ Governments in the region support the proposed UN Resolution on Widowhood¹.
- ◆ CEDAW agrees a General Recommendation on Widowhood and questions all governments in the region, in their reporting process, and on how they are addressing widowhood issues.
- ◆ CEDAW will also respond to SANWED reports requesting it to initiate the Enquiry process on widowhood under Article 8 of its Optional Protocol
- ◆ South Asian countries effectively implement Article 32 of the Colombo Declaration.

Noting that the priority theme of the 56th session of the United Nations CSW (Commission on the Status of Women) to be held in New York from the February 27th to the 9th March 2012 is *"The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"*.

SANWED, in collaboration with WPD and widows' NGOs in other regions, is hosting a Roundtable on "Rural Widows' Needs and Roles: poverty, violence, inheritance and land rights, food security, access to services and justice and the situation of rural widows in conflict and post conflict scenarios".

Event Description:

Rural widows are among the poorest of all widows, and the most neglected of all women. A panel representing widows' NGOs from South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East will identify particular issues of rural widowhood and demand actions to be taken by the international community and governments to alleviate rural widows' stigma, poverty, hunger, homelessness; vulnerability to violence, trafficking, economic and sexual exploitation; property and land grabbing, forced migration to urban centres; and lack of data on their numbers, ages and situation. It will also address the plight of conflict-afflicted rural widows in IP and IDP refugee camps and women bereaved through natural disasters.

CRITICAL ISSUES:

The lives of rural widows are most likely to be determined by discriminatory interpretations of customary and religious laws which deny them, in spite of modern laws on gender equality, rights to inheritance, land, and access to resources and services that can protect them from extreme poverty, evictions, property-grabbing, violence, and the perpetration of harmful traditional practices. Rural widows are least able to access justice through modern laws that on paper give them equality and protection from abuse. Rural widows in many developing countries are often illiterate, disproportionately disadvantaged, and often abandoned by their dead husband's family, and deprived of any share in any land or assets he may have left. Or, treated as mere chattels, they become the unpaid servants working long hours in domestic or agricultural work. Even in those countries where widows are legally entitled to some pension, rural widows are least likely to be able to obtain such support for obvious social cultural, administrative and geographical reasons. In many cases begging, sex work, withdrawing children from school and dependence on their children's labour, giving or selling the girl child to early marriage, or prostitution, and forced migration to the towns in the search for income are the only possible survival strategies. However, where rural widows do remain in their either marital or natal villages and can access land for subsistence farming, they are often excluded from agricultural extension training, micro-credit, micro-finance and other services that could reduce their poverty and provide them with food security. In rural areas. women widowed in the context of HIV and AIDS, and especially older widows are often subject to physical and psychological abuse and can be accused of being witches. The custom of child-marriage is more prevalent in the villages and the extreme suffering of child widows in the rural areas must be addressed.

It is regrettable that the CSW Issues Paper for the Panel discussion on the "empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges" held at the UN on the 24th February, 2011, omitted to make any reference to the special situation of rural widows when it listed specific groups of the most vulnerable rural women.

SANWED Secretariat,
Women for Human Rights, single women group (WHR)
Contact Address: Shree Hari Marg– 145, Baluwatar, Kathmandu, Nepal
P.O.Box : 8973 NPC 427, Phone No.: +977-01- 4446020 Fax :977-01-4413868
E-Mail: csw@mail.com.np, Website: www.whr.org.np