

**European Parliament Seminar – November 7, 2018**  
**Widows Increase in Numbers, Discrimination & Abuse**  
**Widows of All Ages – Europe Can Impact**  
**Hosted by UK MEP Julie Ward – Representing NW of England**



Photo: Left to Right: Margaret Owen, Pat Holden, Belgian/Congo colleague, Violetta Berisha, Shamin Shawl, Julie Ward, Kadire Tahiraj, Lois A. Herman, Mohinder Watson, Cleo Newton  
EU/EP Widows Seminar Participants



Action on Child  
Early and Forced Marriage



Women for Human Rights  
WOMEN  
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS  
**RONA**  
FOUNDATION  
Caring for Widows & Orphans



European Parliament



women for peace through democracy



WUNRN  
WIDOWS' UNION NETWORK

07.11.18

15.00-17.00

ROOM A5G305

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT,  
BRUSSELS

## SEMINAR:

# WIDOWS OF ALL AGES: DISCRIMINATION AND ABUSE. WHAT CAN THE EU DO?

HOSTED BY UK MEP JULIE WARD

**Ms. Lois A. Herman, (Moderator)**  
Founder/Coordinator WUNRN-  
Women's UN Report Network

**Violeta Berisha, URCG Ambassador,**  
Consultant on Socio Reconstruction  
of War Affected Communities and  
Socio-Economic Development

**Dr Mohinder Watson, Founder of**  
Action on Child, Early and Forced  
Marriage

**Mrs. Shamim Shawl, International**  
Muslim Women's Union

**Ms. Margaret Owen OBE,**  
Founder & Director of Widows  
for Peace Through Democracy

With special recorded video  
contributions from Ms. Roseline  
Orwa, Rona Foundation of Kenya  
and Ms Lily Thapa, Women for  
Human Rights of Nepal

IF YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE, PLEASE  
EMAIL [ADVISOR.WPD@GMAIL.COM](mailto:ADVISOR.WPD@GMAIL.COM) WITH  
YOUR NAME, SURNAME, DATE OF BIRTH,  
NATIONALITY AND PASSPORT NUMBER

## **INTRODUCTION BY UK MEP JULIE WARD**

Since the beginning of my mandate in July 2014 I have been very focused on the issue of women's rights and children's rights, particularly with respect to the poorest and most vulnerable members of society, those suffering multiple discrimination and especially victims of conflict.

I have been a strong voice in the European Parliament, both in committee meetings (FEMM, AFET, DEVE, EMPL) and in plenary debates, drawing attention to the situation for women and children in many parts of the world. I have twice been a member of the FEMM Committee's delegation to UNCSW (2016 & 2018) and participated in a FEMM missions to Bavaria and Rwanda to look at best practice for women and child refugees, and poor rural women. I sit on the European Parliament's delegations for relations with Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo, where I have used my influence to advocate for women and youth, for example demanding that war widows in Kosovo receive compensation, with some success, I might add. I am also a member of the parliament's delegation for relations with ACP (Africa, Caribbean and Pacific) countries where I sit on the Social and Environment Committee of the Joint Parliamentary Assembly. This affords me some influence with elected members in ACP countries. As a member of Women in Parliament's Global Forum, and Parliamentarians for a Global Action, I meet with peers from around the world to push for stronger action on issues such as equal rights, child marriage, and ending impunity.

I have visited refugee camps in Palestine, Rwanda, Turkey, Germany and Northern France, and continue to meet regularly with humanitarian organisations working with refugees and migrants on the ground in Paris, who report an increasing number of destitute and traumatised women and children.

I have also visited bereaved women in Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo, Turkey and Syria, women who have not only lost their husbands, fathers, sons, cousins and uncles as the result of genocidal acts, mass atrocities and ethnic cleansing, but sadly also been the victims of sexual violence in war.

On a visit to Azad Kashmir in January 2017, I visited a centre for half-widows, women whose husbands have been 'disappeared'. This centre was providing not only advice and social support but also a means for the women to undertake economic activity through the practice of traditional crafts. I saw similar projects at the Women's Rights Centre in Denas, Kosovo, and also in Rwanda.

In 2015 I attended a 3-day conference on women and violence in Mitrovica, Kosovo, organised by Violeta Berisha. There I met women from all around the world including WILPF members from the DRC.

I have spoken many times at side events at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva on specific aspects pertaining to the situation of women and youth victims of violence in Kashmir.

When I was approached by Margaret Owen, founder of the international NGO, Widows for Peace Through Democracy, with the idea of hosting a conference in the European Parliament, on the plight of 'Widows' globally, I was pleased to offer my support.

The conference was co-organised by WUNRN-Women's UN Report Network - and took place on November 7th, 2018 attended by women activists and campaigners from all over the world, some virtually by way of video presentations, but all with a wealth of knowledge to share. Many of those attending had personal and painful stories to tell, but the shared solidarity of sisterhood in the room helped to give us all strength to support each other. We agreed that we must do more, that this must be the starting point of a stronger movement to end the terrible discrimination that widows of all ages still experience in the 21st century.

For myself, I pledge my efforts to the cause wherever I might be, using whatever platforms are available in both a parliamentary and civil society context. Together, we can be a powerful voice demanding justice, resources, rights, dignity and a better legal framework to end the suffering of widowhood.

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## **WHY WIDOWHOOD IS NOW A DEVELOPMENT AS WELL AS A HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER ISSUE**

**By Margaret Owen, Founder & Director Widows for Peace Through Democracy**

We must lift the blanket of invisibility on this urgent cross-cutting issue that affects all of society and its future and important issues as:

- Unprecedented increase in numbers of widows of all ages, although there is a gap in reliable data, the number is estimated at 300 million. Their numbers increase daily, and are of a particularly now, as any of the refugees and migrants that have fled war are now widows.
- They range from young girls, to young mothers, through to elderly grandmothers. There are also many "half-widows", wives of the forcibly disappeared or missing. These increases are due to the proliferation of armed conflict, revolutions, HIV and AIDS, HTPs (early marriage of girls to far older men), and natural disasters.
- The widespread and systematic stigma, discrimination, abuse, violence and human rights violations experienced by widows in many developing countries, and exacerbated in conflict and post-conflict environments
- The dominance of patriarchal and discriminatory, misogynist interpretations of religious, customary and traditional codes over modern and international laws enacted for gender equality and the empowerment of women, as evidenced in the veto on widows' rights

to inheritance, ownership of land and property. And on their lack of protection from brutal life-threatening HTPs in the context of mourning and burial rites.

- The many forms of abuse and exploitation include” widow-inheritance”, “modern-day slavery” within the husband’s extended family as domestic, agricultural or sexual slaves; accusations of “witchcraft” that may culminate in stoning to death; physical, psychological, verbal, sexual and economic abuse.
  - “Chasing-off” and “property-grabbing” forces abandoned widows to adopt high-risk survival strategies such as begging and prostitution, and leaves them and their daughters vulnerable to traffickers.
  - The extreme poverty, powerlessness and marginalisation imposed upon widows, impacting irrevocably and negatively on the life-chances their children.
  - There is much weighty evidence that low status and poverty of widows is a key driver of taking girls out of school for early marriage, and sending boys into the madrasas, crime and even terrorism.
  - Very few developing countries can afford to operate non-contributory universal pension systems, and where they do exist, problems of documentation, bias, illiteracy, bureaucracy and eligibility, as well as the often derisory value of any pension, results in widows have no reliable social support systems.
  - There is a wealth of best practice among NGOs which must be shared, to improve the access of widows, to fill the gap in data, eliminate HTPs, and ensure widows’ participation in all levels of decision making, including national Parliaments. It is imperative that governments in the international community support widows to band together to collectively articulate their needs and describe their roles.
  - Widowhood must be recognised as a root cause of extending and expanding poverty across the generations, thus it must be referenced adequately in all policies to achieve the SDGs, in the 2030 Agenda, and in the elimination of VAWG in the context of UNSCR 1325. It is essential that widows’ voices are heard at all peace tables, since this category of women has been most effected by conflict, and peace depends on getting justice for all. There can be no peace without addressing the needs of widows for restorative justice and support for their crucial roles, for their families and for society generally.
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**WUNRN FOLLOW UP TO EU-EP WIDOWS SEMINAR – NOV. 7, 2018 - BRUSSELS**  
**WIDOWS OF ALL AGES – DISCRIMINATION & ABUSE – WHAT CAN EUROPE DO?**

**Lois A. Herman, Founder/Coordinator WUNRN-Women's UN Report Network**

<http://www.wunrn.com> – Seminar Moderator

\*Mapping of Widows – How many and where? Potentially one + European State a prototype for demographics of widows.

\*Include Widows as a subset in the EU Ageing Population Studies and Programs.

\*Promote a Study specifically on Widows in the EU by the FEMM Committee on Women's Rights & Gender Equality.

\*Consider social and economic benefits of widows vs. needs. Review health issues, pensions, occurrence of poverty.

\*Review family dynamics in the EU and the role of widows as caregivers and care recipients in families.

\*Study WIDOW Statistics, conditions in EEAS countries.

\*Determine prominent causal factors of widowhood (all ages).

\*Ascertain widows' presence, rights, needs, among migrant populations in Europe.

\*Encourage Eurostat to do gender disaggregation of "Widowed Persons" Data.

\*Become involved in advocacy for the UN CEDAW Committee to make a General Recommendation on Widows/Widowhood.

\*Promote EU introduction of a Widows Resolution at the UN Human Rights Council, potentially including the UN

Human Rights Council Advisory Committee to do a Study on Widows.

\*Make an EU-European Parliament Fact Sheet on Widows.

\*Review as with WAVE-Women Against Violence Europe, abuse and violence against widows, discrimination, victimization.

\*Consider minimal media coverage of widows in Europe, and widows' portrayal, stereotypes.

\*Survey Widow-Specific Services and Support Programs in the EU. Partnering with a gender focused NGO could provide insights and access.

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## **MILLIONS OF CHILD WIDOWS INVISIBLE, FORGOTTEN AND VULNERABLE- WHAT CAN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT DO?**

**Mohinder Watson, PhD, MPH. Founder, Action on Child, Early & Forced Marriage, and UN NGO Geneva Representative, International Council of Women**

The following points are taken directly from *Action on Child Early and Forced Marriage's report* ©'Millions of child widows – invisible, forgotten and vulnerable' published in July 2018 (Report available in English and French at: [www.actiononchildearlyandforcedmarriage.org](http://www.actiononchildearlyandforcedmarriage.org)).

There are no UN statistics, but NGO *Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage* estimates over 1.3 million child widows exist, although the true figure is probably much higher;

Child widows experience an accelerated life journey passing rapidly from being a child, to a wife, mother and widow, - all before she is even age 18;

The important link between child marriage and child widows has been overlooked by the international community: If girls did not marry before 18, there would be fewer child widows;

The slow decline in child marriage means millions of girls still marry before 18. Any decrease is offset by increases in child marriage during conflict and population increase;

These are still children, NOT adults, but once married they lose protection under their child status. Psychologically they are too immature to cope with bereavement and adult responsibilities;

They are denied inheritance and land rights, may lose custody of their children and are discriminated against and marginalised due to their widow status. They may be prevented from re-marrying or forced to marry their brother in law and forced to observe harmful rituals;

They are vulnerable to physical, emotional and sexual violence including under-age and forced sex, trafficking and prostitution. The psychological trauma and stress they suffer drives some to suicide;

As children they are less able to express and defend themselves and lack voice in an adult world;

They are abused, stereotyped, blamed for killing their husbands, considered a source of shame, a curse on the family, labelled a sorceress or man eater and perceived as promiscuous;

Despite their suffering, they have low visibility in the Convention the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) or the Beijing Platform for Action.

We can and must do more to protect them! That includes the European Parliament which can help because as important donors of foreign aid, EU members can support policies and practices to:

- Recognize some widows are still only children, hence vulnerable and need protection;
- Eliminate child marriage - child widows are a consequence of child marriage, so treat the two problems together;
- Ensure compulsory marriage and birth registration;
- Educate girls (ensure compulsory primary and secondary education to keep girls in school);
- Gather data to inform policy making, disaggregated by sex, age and marital status;
- Strengthen and enforce inheritance, land and property laws to protect widows' rights and ensure access to justice and social protection;
- Stop harmful traditional practices like child marriage, polygamy, dehumanising mourning rituals where women are inherited like property, undergo rituals like widow cleansing and gang rape;
- Fund projects which empower child widows by returning to school or learning vocational skills;
- Engage in and support peace processes to prevent/end conflict;
- Support policies to eliminate Violence against women and girls.

The final question we have to ask ourselves is, who will protect these girls if we don't?

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#### **KEY SEMINAR POINTS IN VIDEO PRESENTATION BY ROSELINE ORWA, FOUNDER OF RONA FOUNDATION IN KENYA – STOP WIDOW ABUSE IN KENYA**

- Creating laws that work to outlaw harmful cultural practices and burial ceremonies meted on women only when they lose their husbands.
  - Implementing economic programmes that focuses to empower rural widows.
  - Recognizing widows as a special category of women.
  - Allocating funding & resources to improve rural widows' livelihoods.
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**Violeta Berisha of Kosovo - URCG Ambassador and Consultant on Socio Reconstruction of War Affected Communities and Socio-Economic Development.**

**+Personal Kosovo Testimony from Kadire Tahiraj, QPDG**

The Kosovo delegation expressed their gratitude to MEP Julie Ward for supporting women from Europe, Asia and Africa in advancing human rights. The Brussels seminar was a valuable opportunity to bring together various marginalised women's groups.

This is vital as although gender equality is now being promoted around the world, the differences and discrepancies in how well this is done are still enormous. It is common for there to be large differences and anomalies in respecting women's rights in the developing countries but even in countries where socioeconomic development is at a high level, there is still more work to be done to achieve better results in the status of women and the advancement of women's position in society.

This seminar was important and much appreciated as it has paved the way for further cooperation between the women present from Europe, Asia and Africa. The Kosovo delegation enjoyed meeting with NGO leaders who were committed to creating a leadership network among women. UK MEP Julie Ward, who has supported women from many different countries, has demonstrated great leadership and sensitivity to the problems women face in various countries around the world. She is a true friend as well as an advocate for women in need, especially those who are victims of violence.

At this EP Seminar on Widows, it was agreed that we would compile a list of ways in which the European Parliament could help support the different groups of marginalised widows present at the meeting as well as policies and strategies to protect victims and marginalized women. It is envisaged that the next meeting with NGO leaders present at the Seminar, MEP Julie Ward and her staff would be hosted by the Kosovo delegation in early 2019. Thus the women from Kosovo look forward to hosting the first international workshop to draft policies for advancing and improving the status of women in society!

The Kosovo delegation requests support from the European Parliament in the following ways:

1. The European Parliament should help sponsor the first policy and strategy development workshop for marginalised women which will be launched in the spring in Kosovo.
2. Provide help from selected EU experts and their assistants,
3. Provide funding for a workshop to develop strategy and policies to protect marginalised women
4. That the EP accept the problem of widows as a matter of priority
5. Support ongoing opportunities to provide socio-economic support to empower these marginalized women's groups

6. Include women abused in war zones

7. If widows are the result of violence against their husbands, punishment for the perpetrators should be sought, regardless of whether it is in times of war or in peace.

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**WIDOWS SEMINAR VIDEO PRESENTATION BY LILY THAPA, FOUNDER/STRATEGIC ADVISOR,  
WOMEN FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, SINGLE WOMEN GROUP (WHR) - NEPAL – UN ECOSOC NGO**

Need to generate new pathways of working with widows to empower them economically.

Need to assist these women regain their violated rights and also support them in accessing resources and provide them a valuable social capital.

Social security policies for widows to be established through government on the needs based and rights based approach to put the widows as one of the main beneficiaries in national action plan of the country.

Need to have disaggregated data by marital status and also to remove structural barriers to widow's economic empowerment and to ensure their contribution in economic activity.

Need to establish a regional mechanism to ensure empowerment of widows and gender equality in all our countries with the realization of SDGs.

Need to ensure equal access to and full participation of widows in power structures and decision-making.

Address the issues and impacts of harmful traditional practices against widows.

There are many issues to be addressed but I have just highlighted a few.

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## **KASHMIR AND ITS WIDOWS AND HALF-WIDOWS**

**By Shamin Shawl, International Women's Union**

I am grateful to Julie Ward UK MEP for this opportunity to share the traumatic experiences of Kashmiri women. I am representing those who are suffering under Indian occupation since India and Pakistan became independent. I will not talk about the historical injustice or the broken promises that made my land the biggest military concentration ever seen, inflicting untold and unreported misery on my people, especially the women. I will not talk about the failure of the UN and India and Pakistan to implement the UN resolutions. I am not here to tell you what has happened to us over the past 71 years.

I am here to tell you what happened in the presence of 700,000 Indian troops in Kashmir and what is happening now. In this human tragedy, we have lost 100,000 people in the recent uprising. 6<sup>th</sup> November 1947 marked the world's biggest organised genocide in South Asia.

In Kashmir we have thousands of widows, half widows, orphans, missing persons, political prisoners, imprisoned women leaders and teenagers in interrogation centres.

Decades of conflict have resulted in "HALF WIDOWS"- the women whose husbands have disappeared, taken by Indian forces but never returned. Some were taken in in bright daylight and some in the night.

Kashmir looks idyllic but the wounds of decades of conflict sweeping across the region open up when its hundreds of widows and half widows describe the pain of losing their husbands.

We have unnamed and unmarked graves according to the international tribunal for peace and justice. Women have been molested and raped and brutally targeted by Indian forces. There are whole villages called half widows villages, orphan villages and villages of raped women.

It is difficult for widows and half widows to survive without husbands, their source of income disappears, their social status and mental health suffers. Most are not educated, mentally unfit, and live in stressful conditions, remembering their loved ones whilst burdened with the responsibility to look after elderly parents. These are the stories of mothers and sisters who are widows and half widows. Women continue to suffer. She is a mother grieving for her missing or dead sons, a widow or a half widow fighting for her life and to raise her children as a refugee to find shelter when displaced from her land. After the disappearance, the responsibility of earning bread for the family is transferred to the women. The families are pushed into the life of poverty due the disappearance of the breadwinner. Most widows do not re-marry.

Like any other armed conflict situation, the violent situation in Kashmir since 1989 has affected Kashmiri women and they continue to suffer. Among the half widows, 98% have

monthly income less than 3000 thousand and 65% of half widows live in houses with minimal amenities. Most of the half-widows are suffering from depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and emotional instability.

The Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons estimates 8,000 to 10,000 persons have become victims of disappearances. Shah Manzoor ul Alam, a researcher from Kashmir, reported more than 30,000 - 40,000 orphans and widows.

Suicides have increased in the valley, especially among women and in the rural areas.

The Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Societies (JKCCS) estimates the number of half widows at around 1500.

The fear instilled by the disappearances also prevents many people from coming to help victims as they think they might become the next targets of the forces.

## **PROPOSED SOLUTIONS**

The International Community should pay more attention to the miseries of the half widows of Kashmir. The UN, EU, and other international bodies should take following steps:

Create trauma and counselling centres for widows and half-widows

SEND special teams of experts to find the disappeared men and also investigate the thousands of unmarked graves.

EU and UN should provide funding to help these people economically.

EU and UN should bring the issue to the attention of International bodies working for women's welfare such as the Commission on the Status of Women so that the voices of these widows and half-widows can be heard globally.

EU and UN should establish a women's advocacy group on Kashmir mandated to identify the needs of widows and half-widows.

UN should create opportunities for widows and half-widows to interact with the international community.

The EU, UN, and other international agencies should pressurise India to withdraw its troops from IOK and send in Peace Keeping Forces.

EU should encourage the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to send a fact-finding mission into occupied Jammu and Kashmir.

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