



Associate Parliamentary Group on Women, Peace and Security

apg-wps@gaps-uk.org • www.gaps-uk.org/apg.php

# Gaps in our knowledge: Widows in armed conflict

8 July 2009 • 16.00-17.30

Committee Room 10, House of Commons

Chairs: Anne Milton MP and Baroness Uddin

The issue of widowhood is extremely low on the international agenda. This is partly due to a lack of awareness and understanding of the issue and its human rights dimensions and its impact on peace and security. It is also partly due to the lack of reliable data and information about widowhood, which impairs our ability to target effective interventions. Widows form a significant proportion of the population in all conflict affected areas: in Afghanistan there are thought to be over 2 million widows, 70,000 in Kabul alone where nearly all of the 37,000 street children are, according to a UN report, fatherless. The picture is similar in other conflict affected states, and they require assistance in a specific ways.

The meeting aimed to (i) highlight the gaps in our knowledge of the issue; and (ii) to focus on strategies for moving widowhood up the political agenda, as well as practical ideas for what might to be done.

A short documentary on widowhood in Nepal was screened at the beginning of the meeting. The video featured the policy work and mapping project of the Nepalese NGO, Women for Human Rights - Single Women's Group. The Widows Charter, which was drafted by Widows for Peace through Democracy and outlines the rights of widows, was distributed to participants at this meeting.

To view the 5 min audio visual documentary on Widowhood in Nepal, go to

[http://www.video.com.np/view\\_video.php?viewkey=6626e957d15b08ae128a](http://www.video.com.np/view_video.php?viewkey=6626e957d15b08ae128a)

The meeting heard from Vinothini Kanapathipillai, an experienced British Tamil political journalist who has spent years reporting on conflict and politics in Sri Lanka and elsewhere; Nicola Neuss, Whitehall Policy Officer, DFID Afghanistan; and Britta Schmidt, UK Director of Women for Women who began the discussion.

Key themes which emerged from this session were:

- Widowhood is a substantial, yet largely ignored, issue in conflict affected areas
- Some statistics on the issue exist, normally collected for the use of NGOs in their own work. There is a need for various stakeholders - government and civil society - to work together to get a clearer picture of the extent and complexity of the issue
- Widowhood deserves a higher priority on the state and peacebuilding agendas

#### Vinothini Kanapathipillai (Journalist) spoke on widows in Sri Lanka

The number of widows, young and old, has continued to increase throughout the conflict as a result of combatants and civilians being killed, abducted, and high level of disappearances. The issue is compounded in the North-East of the country where the conflict is concentrated. The issues widows face are several fold, the following is not exhaustive:

- Lack of property rights: wealth of the dead husband is normally returned to his family. This often results in displacements from homes and communities for the widowed woman.
- Breakdown of social support systems: Before the conflict social systems still discriminated against widows but during and after the conflict social support systems have broken down further. When women are widowed they have to turn their attention of their own survival and that of their family/dependents. Linked to this is the need to further skills for economic empowerment etc. to allow widows to move forward – many widows have been forced into prostitution.
- Poor security in the displacement camps and villages: in traditional Tamil culture husbands provide protection. Attacks against women in camps has become commonplace. The government tried to set up villages for widows, but this resulted in the entire population of the village being vulnerable rather than a part of a given population.

The issue of data collection is a big problem in Sri Lanka, as it is not entirely clear how substantial the problem is. Data collection is a task to be undertaken during the ceasefire by civil society organisations, such as Centre for Widows Development and Rehabilitation and the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation. Some data was collected by women in communities in 2001/2, which allowed for the provision of psychological help. However, in Sri Lanka, the work of this Tamil

NGOs, including their data collection activities, was seen as being part of the Tiger movement. Their work was undermined by lack of support and funding and they ceased to operate. This gap in knowledge of Sri Lankan society has not been filled. It is worth highlighting that the data collected was done by women in communities, rather than the government.

#### Nicola Neuss (DFID) spoke on DFID's programmes in Afghanistan

DFID have updated their Country Action Plan for Afghanistan (until 2013) with a renewed focus on state building, good governance, and the provision of justice for all. It was noted that there are very few specific programmes on women; instead the Department has tried to mainstream gender issues into all of their programmes. Widows are a particular problem in Afghanistan and widowhood is an issue which is addressed in the Social Protection Strategy. However, a more coherent approach is required.

The issue of the lack of useable data has been at the forefront of DFID's mind since they began operations in-country in 2001. They are looking to improve access to and the collection of disaggregated data through the funding of programmes – specifically the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund. The Department would also like to see benchmarks set within data collection to allow for better monitoring and evaluation. There is also a joint EC-World Bank project working with the Afghan government, looking to increase its own statistical capacity.

HMG are currently supporting the Afghan government with preparations for elections in August 2009 – this assistance is both financial and technical. They are working to educate people of their right to vote in the poll and the registration process is still going on. Around 30% of women are expected to participate in the elections and measures are being taken to be able to assure women's security during the process, for example with women only polling stations.

DFID sponsor microfinance initiatives. The majority of recipients are women as it is believed to have a substantial multiplier effect within communities. Many programmes are agricultural which allows the Department to collect statistics women in the sector.

There is a need to take the issue of usable data higher up the agenda – but it is difficult to address this issue when the security situation remains difficult. DFID will continue to work on this area with a focus on women.

## Discussion

Britta Schmidt (Women for Women International) began the discussion by responding to the speakers

Women for Women have undertaken surveys aimed at improving the effective and targeted assistance in conflict affected countries. Across all Women for Women programmes, women receive a questionnaire to gather information and highlight where assistance is required. This shows that NGOs can, and do, play a key role in solving the problem of a lack of usable data – to an extent, the data already exists.

She concluded on this point, there is a lot of data out there, but for individual use. The key to finding a solution to the lack of disaggregated and usable data is for governments and NGOs work more closely together.

She followed with a question concerning the numbers of widows active in the poppy farming in Afghanistan, and the content of the newly released DFID White Paper.

Nicola Neus (DFID) responded saying that she had no specific information on the issue of widows working in the poppy farming industry, but the Department were keen to work with NGOs to raise the voice of widows. On the DFID White Paper: rather than being a new focus on women in DFID policy going forward, there was a renewed policy focus, and this would play a fundamental role on the Department's work. They will continue to work closely with the Foreign Office on women's issues, and policies will be country specific.

Margaret Owen (Director, Widows for Peace through Democracy) added to the discussion by highlighting that default coping strategies in Sri Lanka is for widows to be married off to protect their standing in society.

Statistics: A point was raised about the statistics office in Afghanistan, how this was constituted, how it was operating in practices and ways the government could provide additional support. Nicola had no specific knowledge on this, but said she would look into this and speak with colleagues based in Kabul.

Data: Margaret supported Women for Women's notion that there is a need for stakeholders to be more proactive in consolidating data into a useable form. However, this would not completely solve the problem as there remains concern that even if data on women in conflict was consolidated, data specifically relating to widowhood may be lost within other categories. It was

expressed that DFID share the data which is available and the FCO regularly coordinate meetings with NGOs working in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

The final point raised at the session related to how data collection programmes as seen in the video from Nepal at the beginning of the meeting could be replicated in other conflict affected areas. Nicola noted that she would share the video with DFID colleagues, and that the model would be taken on board. Other attendees were encouraged to share the video as well.