



COLLECTIVE CARE, COLLECTIVE VOICE: PSYCHOSOCIAL COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACHES TO GENDER-EQUITABLE JUSTICE FOR WIDOWS

A conversation about proven approaches to well-being for widows and their families to access justice across the life course

Monday 9 March

11.15 - 12.45 EST

**Bahai International Community
Offices, 866 UN Plaza**

**Sponsored by Widows Rights
International with partners:**

Human Rights Commission DRC,
NGOCSW Geneva, Graduate
Women Int; Soroptimist Int, Latter-
day Saints Charities, Bloomwell
Collective, NAWO, ADVANCE

Across regions, widows demonstrate extraordinary strength, resilience, and leadership. However, many widows lack access to clear information about their legal rights and face barriers to exercising existing legal protections. Harmful cultural practices, discriminatory inheritance laws, weak enforcement of legal frameworks, and persistent stigma continue to undermine widows' security and agency, even where protections formally exist. Strengthening rights awareness, empowering widows to use available legal instruments, and reinforcing the responsibilities of families, community leaders, and institutions are therefore essential to advancing justice and accountability for widows. This interactive session aims to provide a space for meaningful conversations interrogating ways to ensure the situation for widows is improved and highlighting how widows, when empowered, can become active agents of change.

Collective Care, Collective Voice: Psychosocial Community-based Approaches to Gender-equitable Justice for Widows

AGENDA

11:30	Welcome by Zarin Hainsworth Introduction by Chair Baroness Hodgson
11:40	Farhana Ibrahim, Co-Founder of Bloomwell Collective, UK
11:45	Amarsanaa Darisuren, Centre for Human Rights and Development, Mongolia
11:50	Saba Haddad, UN Representative of Bahá'í International Community, Geneva
11:55	Heather Ibrahim Leathers, Founder of Global Fund for Widows, US
12:00	Yasmin Wilkinson Smith, NAWO Young Women's Alliance, UK
12:05	Group discussion and reflections on key learning
12:15	Groups share comments and suggested actions
12:30	Last comments from the panel
12:40	Concluding remarks from the Chair
12:45	Light lunch

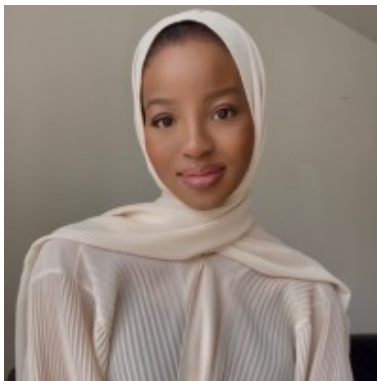
BIOGRAPHIES

Baroness Hodgson CBE



Baroness Fiona Hodgson of Abinger was raised to peerage in 2013 as a Conservative Peer. She is Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Women, Peace and Security, and previously was a member of the Lords Select Committee on Sexual Violence in Conflict and the National Security Strategy. She is the Patron of the Conservative Friends of International Development, and a member of the Conservative Human Rights Commission. She is a founder member of the Afghan Women's support Forum in the UK and a member of the steering board on Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative in Conflict and Post Conflict Countries.

Farhana Ibrahim



Farhana Ibrahim is a purpose-driven mental health advocate and co-founder of BloomWell Collective, a London-based initiative focused on creating culturally-rooted, everyday mental wellbeing support for women navigating complex life transitions. She holds an MSc in Child & Adolescent Mental Health, developing deep expertise in longitudinal childhood trauma and its long-term impact on mental health and wellbeing across the life course. At BloomWell, Farhana leads communications and partnerships while shaping holistic, peer-led wellbeing circles and accessible tools that meet women experiencing emotional distress, burnout and caregiving strain where they are.

With over nine years' experience across United Nations agencies Farhana brings international development insight alongside clinical and community care knowledge. She is also recognised as an ambassador for both The King's Trust and The Queen's Commonwealth Trust, where she champions gender equity, youth empowerment, and community mental wellbeing advancing conversations around emotional health in spaces traditionally marginalised or overlooked.

Ms Amarsanaa DARISUREN



Ms. Amarsanaa Darisuren is an independent expert with three decades professional experience in advancing gender equality and women's human rights at national, regional and international levels. Having started with national NGOs in Mongolia - Centre for Human Rights and Development and Women's Information and Research Centre, she worked with the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, a regional NGO in Chiangmai, Thailand; as a Human Rights Specialist at the UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok, Thailand; and most recently as a Senior Advisor on Gender Issues at the Secretariat of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in Vienna, Austria. She has a MA degree in Theory and Practice of Human Rights from the University of Essex, UK.

Having worked on a broad range of gender issues, she has focused on mainstreaming gender equality in sustainable development, in law and policy reform and in developing practical strategies for elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, combatting gender-based violence, economic and political empowerment of disadvantaged groups of women; and promoting women, peace and security agenda.

The emphasis of her work has been on strengthening rural and indigenous women's rights groups working on environment, climate change, as well as promoting women's leadership in decision-making processes.

Centre for Human Rights and Development is a Mongolian national NGO established in 1998. Operates in rural areas and urban disadvantaged districts of the capital city. Implements programmes on human rights education, with a strong focus on gender equality and marginalised groups, carries out advocacy on law and policies in areas of sustainable development, natural resource management, mining, rural livelihoods, impact of climate change. CHRD coordinates the CSO networks on monitoring of SDGs, most recently, CSO inputs to the UPR. CHRD is a member of the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, HelpAge International, Global Alliance for the Rights of Older Persons.

Dr. Saba Haddad



Dr. Saba Haddad, UN Representative, Baha'i International Community, Geneva

Dr. Saba Haddad is a Representative of the Bahá'í International Community's United Nations Office in Geneva. Her work focuses primarily on human rights, including the promotion of freedom of religion or belief, peace, and coexistence.

Dr. Haddad has, for almost two decades, coordinated educational projects aimed at the empowerment of youth and migrants in different parts of the world, including in Iraq and India. She

led the Youth Interfaith Dialogue pre-summit in 2014 and worked as a trainer at the Barli Institute for the Development of Rural Women in India, empowering girls and young women to become agents of transformation in their villages, reshape societal norms, and build capacity to promote values of equality, sustainability, health, and education.

Dr Haddad holds a Bachelor in Biotechnology from the Al-Mustansiriyah University in Baghdad, a Masters in Biotechnology from the Justus Liebig University Giessen, and a PhD with distinction in Natural Sciences from the Medizinische Hochschule Hannover. She worked as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Sheffield Medical School, UK.

Yasmin Wilkinson-Smith



Yasmin Wilkinson-Smith advocates for women's and girls' rights. Working in local grassroots initiatives to help young people to find and express their inherent skills for the benefit of the community around them. These groups for young people centre service to the community whilst teaching character development and life skills that are complementary to their academic education.

She currently works with One World Development Associates (OWDA) alongside work in the arts to raise awareness of women's rights, most recently, the ongoing persecution of Bahá'í Women in Iran, by contributing artwork and poetry to a social media campaign called 'Our Story is One' highlighting how the current women's movement in Iran has been slowly growing for decades, honouring the women who gave their lives in pursuit of equality. Having studied Education, Gender and International Development, the links between education and prevailing gender disparities is of particular importance and interest.

Heather Ibrahim Leathers



As the Founder and Chairwoman of the Global Fund for Widows, Ms. Ibrahim-Leathers has raised millions of dollars towards the little known and overlooked root source of global poverty: Widowhood. Ms. Ibrahim-Leathers innovated a financial inclusion platform, a “microbank” that is bringing transformative financial access and empowerment to the world’s poorest and most vulnerable. With this innovation in financial inclusion, Ms. Ibrahim-Leathers has economically empowered over 138,000 widows and their children throughout the emerging markets through the establishment of 358 microbanks.

In addition to accomplishments in the field, Ms. Ibrahim-Leathers advocates for widows at the highest level, including presenting regularly at the UN Security Council, the Human Rights Council, the US Congress and Department of State, and the House of Lords. After drafting, negotiating, and meeting with over 100 UN Member States in 2021, Ms. Ibrahim-Leathers’ strategic advocacy resulted in the unanimous adoption of the world’s first UN General Assembly resolution, *AR 76/252 “Addressing the situation of widows”* which recognized the issue of widowhood and called for global social protections for them.

For her groundbreaking work in financial inclusion, women’s rights, economic development, and peacebuilding, the Egyptian-American has been conferred with various recognitions including the 2025 Inc. Female Founders Award, 2025 Crains’ Notable Leader in Philanthropy Award, 2025 Reputation Poll’s 100 Most Reputable Africans, 2023 Crains’ Notable Nonprofit Leaders, the Business Council for Peace Women Forward – Financial Catalyst Award, and the Acquisition International Excellence in Financial Innovation Award. In 2021, Ms. Ibrahim-Leathers received the honor of a lifetime with a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Due to the numerous conflicts across the globe, widowhood, particularly for young women, is increasing. Widows around the world are exposed to deep social, economic, and psychological vulnerability shaped by stigma, harmful norms, and gaps between legal rights and lived realities. Despite diverse contexts, from Mongolia to Western Asia, to grassroots African communities, common struggles highlight the need for community-driven change, legal reform, and sustained investment in widows' economic and psychosocial wellbeing.

KEY INSIGHTS

1. Stigma, Social Exclusion, and Harmful Practices

- Even in countries where widows retain rights in law, they often lack the social support and community acceptance needed to exercise them.
- Harmful traditional practices such as cleansing rituals, disinheritance, and exclusion from decision-making remain widespread.
- Widowhood functions as a social identifier that shapes how women are treated. This can lead to isolation, being perceived as a burden and unmarriageable.

2. Community-Led Change as the Foundation

- Sustainable change must be generated within communities rather than imposed externally.
- Engaging community leaders, peer groups, schools, faith groups, and local champions is essential to shifting norms.
- Collective care and sustained psychosocial wellbeing are central to long-term resilience.

3. Legal Gaps and Weak Enforcement

- In Mongolia, there is no formal legislation protecting widows, and young widows receive limited state support.
- Across contexts, a persistent gap exists between legal frameworks and lived experience.
- Justice must be understood not only as a legal mechanism but as a societal force that shapes dignity, security, and opportunity.

4. Economic Insecurity as a Driver of Vulnerability

- Disinheritance, lack of access to assets, and limited income opportunities push widows into poverty.
- Data from the Global Fund for Widows highlights the scale of the crisis. Of the widows they have worked with:
 - 90% lived below the poverty line
 - 51% were under the age of 39 when widowed
 - 33% were child brides
 - 76% were disinherited
 - 48% experienced harmful practices
 - 33% experienced depression with 7% reporting suicidal ideation
- Economic empowerment can dramatically improve outcomes, including children's education and family health.

5. Wellbeing and Mental Health

- Widows face profound emotional, economic and social distress, often tied to their children's wellbeing and social exclusion.
- Safe spaces, peer support, and mental health services are essential components of recovery and empowerment.



RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

1. Align Legal Reform with Community Transformation

- Legislative change must occur alongside grassroots norm-shifting to avoid disconnects that stall progress.
- Training for lawyers, judges, and community leaders must be gender-responsive and ongoing.

2. Invest in Education and Awareness

- Education is a powerful mechanism for change. Awareness campaigns, school curriculums, and NGO-government partnerships can remove stigma and build understanding of widows rights.
- Education for children of widows is critical. Keeping girls in school reduces child marriage (of which they are disproportionately vulnerable to becoming widowed early themselves), and boys' education can reduce vulnerability to extremist recruitment.

3. Strengthen Economic Security

- Improve pension access and financial protections for widows.
- Government bursaries should ensure children of widows can attend school.
- Support VSLA (Village Savings and Loan Association) and matched-funding models that enable widows to build sustainable livelihoods.

4. Acknowledge Widows' Voices

- Storytelling and survivor narratives help communities understand root causes and humanise the issue.
- Lived experience should inform institutions, policies, and program design.

5. Expand Psychosocial and Community Support

- Create community-led safe spaces, peer networks, and mental health services tailored to widows' needs.

CONCLUSION

Lasting progress requires a dual approach: legal empowerment to secure rights and community-driven cultural change to make those rights meaningful. When widows gain economic autonomy, social recognition, and psychological support, they not only rebuild their own lives, but they strengthen their families, communities, and societies.



All photos of the event were taken by [Enoch Samushonga](https://www.linkedin.com/in/enoch-samushonga-20ab261bb/) <https://www.linkedin.com/in/enoch-samushonga-20ab261bb/>

ANNEX

Bloomwell Collective

Website: <https://www.bloomwellcollective.com/>

Instagram: [https://www.instagram.com/bloomwellcollective /](https://www.instagram.com/bloomwellcollective/)

Centre for Human Rights and Development

Website: <https://chrdomongolia.org/>

Bahá'í International Community

Website: <https://www.bic.org/about/about-us>

Global Fund for Widows

Website: <https://www.globalfundforwidows.org/>

NAWO Young Women's Alliance

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/nawo.youth/>

