

Breaking Barriers to Justice
Silver Lining/ WRI CSW 70 event

Breaking Barriers to Justice - what this means for widows
Presentation by Widows' Rights International Chair
Zarin Hainsworth OBE

Good morning

Thank you to all those involved in organising this event and to all of you for joining us on this first day of CSW70.

When we talk about justice, we often think about courts, laws, and formal rights. But justice is also about everyday dignity — safety, economic security, belonging, and the ability to make choices about one's life. For millions of widows around the world, justice is not theoretical. It determines whether they can stay in their homes, inherit property, support their families, and remain respected members of their communities.



Widowhood is not only a personal loss. For many women, it becomes a turning point that exposes them to legal vulnerability, economic hardship, and social exclusion. Today, let us explore what it truly means to break barriers to justice — through the lived realities of widows.

Who Are Widows Today?

There are more than 250 million widows globally. We don't have data disaggregated by marital status so we don't really know the exact number. But probably more widows than people who suffered from Apartheid. They live in every region, culture, and economic context. Many widows are:

- Primary caregivers
- Heads of households
- Key contributors to local economies

Yet widows are often invisible in public policy and social systems. Widowhood can suddenly shift a woman's social and economic status. Instead of protection and support, many face new risks and restrictions. So this is not a niche issue — it's a global justice issue.

The Barriers Widows Face

Widows encounter multiple, overlapping barriers:
Legal barriers

They may be denied inheritance, land, housing, or access to marital assets. Without legal documentation such as birth or marriage certificates, or representation, claiming rights becomes extremely difficult.

Economic barriers

The loss of a spouse often means the loss of income and financial stability. Many widows face limited access to credit, employment, or asset ownership.

Social and cultural barriers

In some communities, widows face stigma, discrimination, or harmful traditional practices. They may be blamed, isolated, or excluded from community life.

Institutional barriers

Legal systems can be complex, expensive, and inaccessible. Many widows are unaware of their rights or lack support to pursue justice. Justice is not only about having rights on paper — it's about being able to access and exercise those rights in reality.



What Justice Should Mean for Widows

Justice for widows should ensure:

- Legal recognition and equal protection under the law
- Secure rights to property, inheritance, and assets
- Economic independence and sustainable livelihoods
- Protection from violence, coercion, and dispossession
- A voice in decisions affecting their lives
- Dignity, respect, and inclusion in society

In simple terms, justice is the difference between vulnerability and self-determination.

Breaking Barriers: Where Change Happens

Real change happens across several areas:

Law and policy

Countries must enforce equal inheritance and property rights.

Widows need legal identity, documentation, and gender-responsive reforms.

Economic empowerment

Access to finance, entrepreneurship opportunities, skills training, and employment pathways are essential.

Social protection systems can provide critical safety nets.

Community and culture

We must challenge stigma and harmful norms.

Community education and local advocacy help shift attitudes and protect rights.

Access to justice systems

Legal aid, simplified processes, and local dispute resolution mechanisms make justice reachable.

Justice must be accessible, affordable, and inclusive.

Widows as Leaders and Change-makers

Widows are not just recipients of support — they are agents of change.

Across the world, widows are:

- Running businesses
- Leading households
- Supporting children's education
- Organizing community groups
- Advocating for rights and reform



When barriers are removed, widows strengthen families, economies, and communities. Justice unlocks their potential.

What We Must Do

Breaking barriers requires collective responsibility. Governments must enforce rights and protections. We must ask for this
Legal systems must be accessible and responsive. We must fight for this
Financial institutions must expand inclusive services. We must demand this
Communities must replace stigma with solidarity. We can all do this
Civil society must amplify widows' voices. Please all of us do this
Justice becomes real when systems work for those most excluded.



Closing Reflection

If justice truly means fairness, dignity, and opportunity for all, then widows cannot remain invisible or marginalised. Breaking barriers to justice means moving beyond sympathy. It means rights, access, voice, protection, and inclusion. When widows are supported, families are stronger, communities are stronger, and societies experience more justice for all

Looking forward to working with you all in our advocacy for a better world for all. Wishing you well this week and next week in all you do. Thank you.

