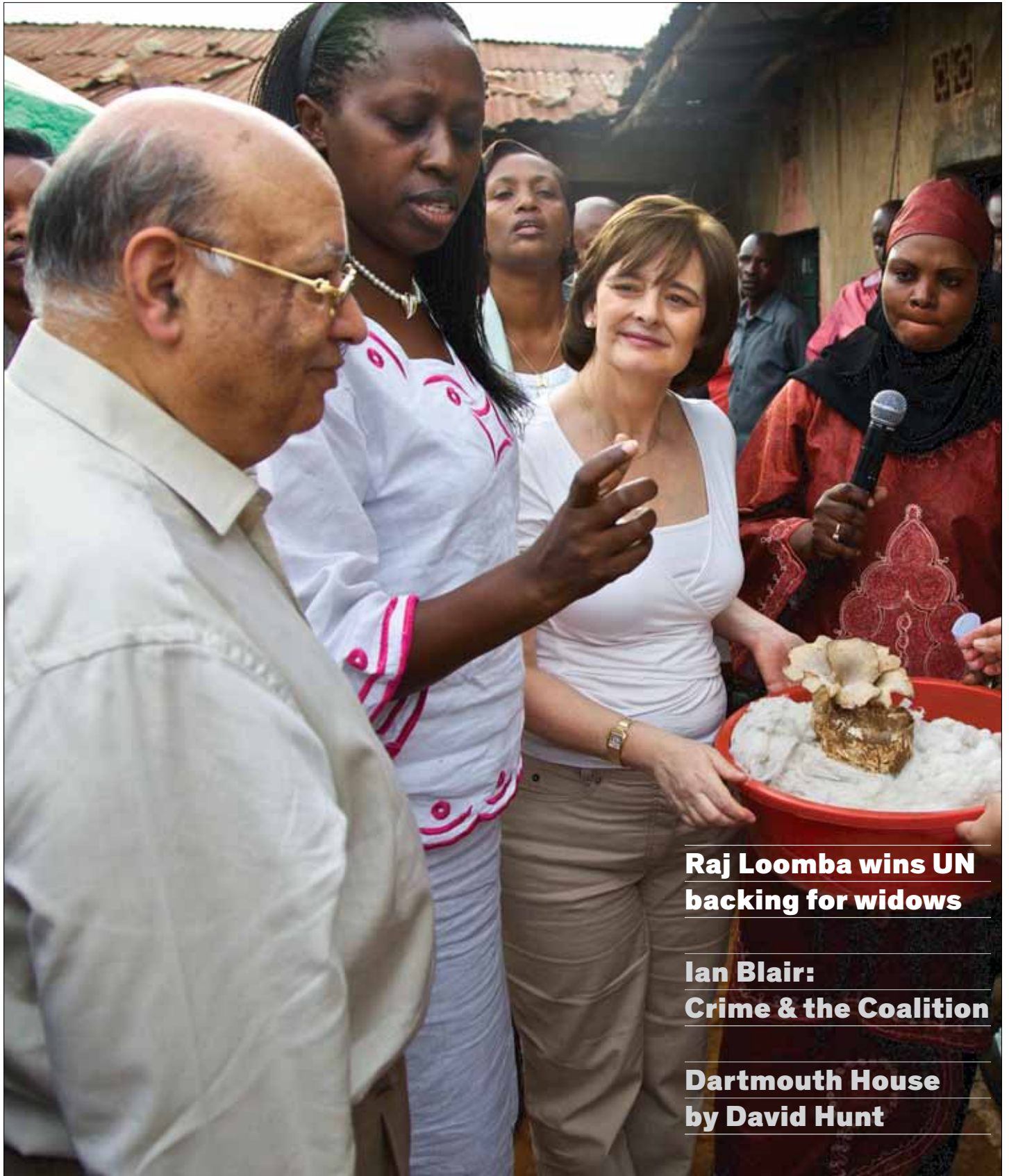


# THE LONDON ROTARIAN

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**Raj Loomba wins UN  
backing for widows**

**Ian Blair:  
Crime & the Coalition**

**Dartmouth House  
by David Hunt**

# The Widows' Voice



Above: Beneficiaries of the Loomba Foundation's education programme in India.

Right: Lord Loomba.

How Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba inspired the campaign that brought global recognition of a desperately important cause. **Kasper de Graaf** meets up with the man who would not take No for an answer.



The lot of a widow is shocking in many parts of the world, the sorrow of losing her husband compounded by cruelty and injustice. Tradition variously dictates that she is unable to work or remarry; subjected to degrading 'cleansing' rituals; ejected from her home; her wealth taken by the deceased husband's relatives; banned from wearing jewellery or coloured clothing; and left without any means of supporting herself or her children.

Much is made, rightly, of gender inequality – the lack of opportunity and education faced by millions of girls and the routine abuse and discrimination faced by women. But ironically, the more we have



become aware of women's issues generally, the less visible have been the needs of widows. Truly they are the bottom of the pile – invisible, unheard, the poorest of the poor. The major initiatives aimed at relieving poverty – the Millennium Development Goals, the IMF Poverty Reduction Programme, Make Poverty History, the G20 – all are silent on the subject of widows.

Yet the problem, identified in a comprehensive research study last year,\* is huge: 245 million widows around the world, of whom 100 million live below the poverty line. Together with their dependent children we are looking at a crisis directly affecting some three quarters of a billion people. One and a half million children of poor widows will die before they reach the age of five. Cut off from earning a living, many widows have to rely on the efforts of their children, who miss out on education and end up on the streets or in factories, victims of exploitation and abuse.

After sweeping this desperate issue under the carpet for many years, on 22 December 2010 the United Nations General Assembly, on a resolution by the government of Gabon and by unanimous acclaim, adopted 23 June as an annual global day of action to raise awareness of the issue: International Widows Day was officially recognised.



This moment signified the unique achievement of one man: Raj Loomba, clothing tycoon, member of the Rotary Club of London and peer of the realm, who in 1997 set up a charity in honour of his mother to right the terrible wrongs that widows face and to give a voice to those who so long have suffered in silence.

"I was only 10½ years old when my father died, in Punjab, India," Lord Loomba recalls when we meet

up with him at London's South Bank University, a few minutes from the House of Lords. "His body wasn't even cremated yet, but my grandmother ordered her to remove her bangles, jewellery and bindhi – which is the sign of a married woman – and asked her not to wear coloured clothes ever again.

"I was too young to apprehend the situation, but gradually I saw that her life had totally changed. Before, she was a happy wife. Now, she was a very distressed widow.

"Later, when I got married, the ceremony was taking place and the priest asked my mother to move away from the altar – the reason being she was a widow and she could bring bad luck to me. I became very angry. Why, a mother who gave me birth, a mother who brought me up, who educated me and always wished well for me – how could she bring me bad luck?"

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Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba was just 37 in 1954 when – on 23 June, the day now named by the United Nations as International Widows Day – she lost her husband to tuberculosis and was left with seven children to care for. She was, as her son later came to realise, luckier than many: her husband had been a wealthy businessman and left her the means to look after the family. How she chose to invest that wealth is what ultimately provided the inspiration for the work that has now brought the plight of widows to the attention of the world. Never having had a day's formal schooling herself, Mrs Loomba's vision was to make sure that all her children received a good education.

"We were all educated," Raj Loomba explains. "My two sisters graduated from Punjab University in India in the 1950s, when most girls weren't even going to school. I was educated in the US and it is this that has kept me going on this path. I always thought, if my mother had not educated me, or if she had not had the financial resources to do so, where would I be today? I would probably be in India plying a rickshaw – God knows what I would be doing.

"And my mother was no different from any

**Left: Widowed at 37, Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba's determination to see her children educated inspired the Loomba Foundation's fight to improve the plight of widows all over the world.**

**\* Vijay Dutt, *Invisible Forgotten Sufferers - the Plight of Widows around the World*, with research by Risto F Harma, Loomba Foundation / Konark Publishers, Delhi, 2010.**

other mothers. They all want the best for their children. So therefore, I decided to set up a charity in her name and focus on educating the children of poor widows in India.”

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**My mother was no different from any other mothers – they all want the best for their children. So I set up a charity in her name to educate children of poor widows in India.**

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When Raj Loomba started his working life, however, all this was still far from his mind. The wealth so wisely invested was now gone and in 1962, when the family moved to England, he had to start from scratch, working at a factory in Staines where he mopped floors in the evening and took the rubbish out in a wheelbarrow.

The turning point came from the savings made from selling ice cream from a van for four months in the North of England. “With that money my uncle, who was a wholesaler in Wigan, set up a small business for me - a stall in Widnes market. That is where I started selling ladies’ stockings and pantyhose, those sorts of things. I moved slowly into knitwear, from a market stall I moved into a retail shop, from retail shop to wholesale, from wholesale to import, from import to manufacturing - and today we have 300 retail concession shops in the UK. We have offices in London, China and Delhi. We supply House of Fraser, Debenhams and other major stores.” Today, though still executive chairman of Rinku Group PLC, Lord Loomba is wholly focused on his public and charitable work, while the business is run by his son, Rinku Loomba.

When Mrs Loomba passed away in 1992, her son began to think what would be a fitting tribute. “It is quite normal in India that children build a hospital or a school or an ashram in honour of their loved ones,” Lord Loomba says, “and I thought of doing something like that initially. But then I thought that if my mother hadn’t done what she did, God knows where the family would be today.”

And he knew that most widows in India could not do what his mother had done.

“In India we have a family system that’s still going on today,” he explains. “Normally, a son and

his wife live with his parents in the same house. When the son dies, the parents first of all think it was the bad luck this woman has brought to our family, and our son has died. So they start hating her, they really don’t want her to live with them, and they want to get rid of her - especially if they are not rich. She cannot go to her parents, because in India, according to the tradition and culture, the parents have given away the daughter and if she came back as a widow, they would think it was a bad reflection for her siblings, so they do not accept her back. What does she do? She’s poor, she’s uneducated, she can’t get a job, she can’t even remarry. So she has to depend on her children, who work on the streets or in factories which, as you know, are a common place for abuse of child labour.”

So it was that Raj and his wife Veena established the Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba Memorial Foundation in 1997 with the aim of helping thousands of impoverished Indian widows do what Raj’s mother had done: educate their children and so break the cycle of deprivation that is often set in train by widowhood.

The founding day target was modest when compared to the scale of the problem, but undoubtedly ambitious for a fledgling charity: to fund the education of 100 children of poor widows in each of the 29 States of India.

Within a decade that target had been surpassed. By 2006 the Loomba Foundation was educating more than 3,500 children in India – in the process transforming the lives and prospects of thousands of families who by cruel circumstance had been plunged into despair. That achievement was due in no small measure to the support Raj Loomba was famously able to garner from corporate partners, political leaders, public figures and private individuals. The launch of the charity was attended in both Britain and India by the respective prime ministers of the two countries. Sir Richard Branson became patron-in-chief, personally committing to fund the education of 250 children for five years and raising the charity’s profile with collections on his Virgin Atlantic flights all over the world. Joanna Lumley became an eloquent supporter and the BBC’s revered India correspondent Sir Mark Tully made a documentary for the charity. The Loomba Foundation’s annual Diwali dinners became a fixture in the London social calendar, attended by luminaries from Princess Anne to Boris Johnson, with charity auctions conducted by broadcaster Alastair Stewart. Most supporters have stayed the distance and in ten years the Diwali dinners have raised more than three million pounds to support the Loomba Foundation’s aid programmes.

Opposite: Loomba Foundation president Cherie Blair, flanked by Lords Dholakia and Loomba, at the 2005 launch of International Widows Day in London.

Of all the dignitaries whose support has helped raise awareness of the widows' cause, Lord Loomba has reason to be particularly grateful to two. First, Lord Dholakia, the Liberal Democrat deputy leader in the House of Lords, who has been a trustee of the charity from the outset and whose wise counsel has helped the Foundation on its successful course. Second, Cherie Blair, who has supported the charity since attending its 1997 launch with her husband, and who has been its dedicated president since 2005, helping to develop its initiatives, opening doors, bringing the cause to the attention of political leaders and attending events and tours all over the world; giving generously of her time without ever receiving a penny recompense, *Daily Mail* please note.

In the course of fulfilling his first target, however, Raj Loomba came to realise that this problem is by no means confined to India alone. "I was shocked to discover that widowhood was a huge problem not only in India, but across Africa. They were losing husbands through HIV, through genocide, through conflict, and they were becoming destitute. They were not looked after by governments or NGOs and they were shunned by society.

"It's such a big problem, and yet nothing has been done. Nobody in the world, including the United Nations, had ever addressed the problem of widows."

In Africa, too, the problem is more deep-rooted than current devastations like genocide and HIV. Attitudes are founded in traditions and so-called 'customary laws'.

"Widows have been very badly mistreated," Raj discovered. "It is shocking to see that in some countries, when a woman loses her husband, she is ritually forced to have sex with her brother-in-law, and if the brother-in-law is not there, the father-in-law. And if the father-in-law is not there, anybody in the street. And she has to go through this whole process for a week to 'cleanse' herself. This is dehumanising for a woman and I think the United Nations should step in, should take care of these unfortunate women and help them. So this is what happened to my thinking, that we need to go right to the top and knock at their doors and find a solution for the widows around the world."

In 2005 Cherie Blair launched International Widows Day at the House of Lords in London and over the next five years, she and Raj Loomba did go knocking on all those doors, calling for international recognition of this day as a focus for sustained, effective, global action to bring about a radical and lasting transformation in the plight of widows. In 2006 the Loomba

Foundation held an international conference on the topic at the Foreign Office in London, addressed by widows from ten countries as well as Cherie Blair, Hillary Clinton, Indian cabinet

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minister Renuka Chowdhury, Yoko Ono and the then Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon. The Foundation established offices in America and Canada and organised meetings at the United Nations, gaining the attention and support of leaders like Rwandan president





Dr Paul Kagame and the former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan.

The Loomba Foundation's global programme grew through partnerships with Oxfam, Richard Branson's Virgin Unite and the Prince of Wales' overseas charity Youth Business International. Directly and with its partners, the Foundation today delivers aid programmes in 13 countries.

Education remained an important factor but the focus increasingly shifted to encompass the empowerment of widows too. "Empowerment is important," explains Lord Loomba, "because if we help widows become economically independent

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they will be able to educate all their children, whereas in India we educated one, or at most two, from each family. I think this is the better route. It is quite true that if you give money to a man, he will spend sixty percent of that money on himself, but if you empower a woman, she will

spend ninety percent of that money on the family. You help the mother to be independent and she can look after herself, her family, and live a life of dignity."

The big problem with this cause was its invisibility. "I saw widows suffering in many, many countries. I travelled across Africa and South Asia, and wherever I went, widows were suffering in silence. They were not able to make their complaint to anybody, because nobody was listening to them." Governments, NGOs, international organisations – all neglected the issue because so very little was known about it. What was needed was solid research – facts and figures to back up the many anecdotal case studies; analysis that showed the impact of this terrible blot on humanity. The Loomba Foundation initiated and supported an investigative programme with writers, researchers and institutions including Chatham House and in 2010, Vijay Dutt's *Invisible Forgotten Sufferers* was published, with research by Risto Harma: the first comprehensive study of the plight of widows around the world.

Backed with that hard information, support for UN recognition grew and the issue finally came to a head when President Ali Bongo Ondimba of Gabon and his wife Sylvia Najma Valentin threw their weight behind the campaign, with Gabon sponsoring the successful resolution in December.

Lord Loomba is humbled but not diverted by the honours now heaped on him: a commander of the order of the British Empire since 2008 and a peer of the UK's governing coalition (as a Liberal Democrat) since January 2011. His investiture on 14 January, just as the Constitutional Bill plunged the House of Lords into all night sittings for the first time in decades, gave him a baptism of fire in the corridors of power, but his focus will remain on humanitarian issues generally and widows in particular. "I'm very honoured to receive a life peerage," he says. "It will help me raise awareness on a different platform, highlighting the problem of widows across the world and working on development aid programmes so that real help goes to these countries and the people who need it."

The Loomba Foundation will continue delivering aid directly and with its partners, but now the charity will increase its focus on advocacy and on supporting others to start their own programmes too. This year on 23 June, it will be 56 years since Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba became a widow – and, inspired by her vision, this will also be the first UN-recognised global day of action aimed at eradicating the injustices faced by widows from the world. ■



Above right: Hillary Clinton addresses the International Widows Conference in London, 2006.



Below right: Knocking on the doors of the powerful: Lord Loomba and Cherie Blair with Kofi Annan and Lady Loomba.