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Over 115 million widows live in poverty, report says

UNITED NATIONS: At least 245 million women around the world have been widowed and more than 115 million of them live in devastating poverty, according to a new study launched Tuesday night by Cherie Blair, wife of the former British Prime Minister.

The most dire consequences are faced by 2 million Afghan widows and at least 740,000 Iraqi widows who lost their husbands as a result of the ongoing conflicts; by widows and their children evicted from their family homes in sub-Saharan Africa; by elderly widows caring for grandchildren orphaned by the HIV/AIDS crisis, and by child widows aged 7 to 17 in developing countries, the report said.

"Across the world, widows suffer dreadful discrimination and abuse," Blair said. "In too many cases they're pushed to the very margins of society, trapped in poverty and left vulnerable to abuse and exploitation."

She said many are cheated out of their husbands' assets and property and expelled from their family home – and since they have no money they can't support their children, "so misery is heaped on grief."

Blair was in New York to launch the report entitled "Invisible Forgotten Sufferers: The Plight of Widows around the World," commissioned by the Loomba Foundation which works in a dozen countries to help widows and educate their children.

"The plight of widows – in the shadows of the world – is a human rights catastrophe," said Blair, the foundation's president. "It's really a hidden humanitarian

crisis."

She said the foundation had been working on the basis that there were about 100 million widows but decided to do a study from published sources to get a more accurate figure. She said the foundation was surprised to discover there were at least 245 million widows worldwide, almost half living in poverty.

The report stressed that persecution against widows and their children is not limited to the developing world, noting that large numbers of widows are also found in Europe and Central Asia.

According to the report, the countries with the highest number of widows in 2010 were China with 43 million, India with 42.4 million, the United States with 13.6 million, Indonesia with 9.4 million, Japan with 7.4 million, Russia with 7.1 million, Brazil with 5.6 million, Germany with 5.1 million, and Bangladesh and Vietnam with about 4.7 million each.

Blair said women become widows when their husbands are killed in conflicts, die of diseases including HIV/AIDS, or are killed because they work in dangerous conditions; the only jobs available to many poor men.

When their husbands die, she said, some women are required to be "cleansed," some are erroneously accused of murder or witchcraft, some are required to marry another member of the family, many are disinherited and forced out of their homes and many are raped.

According to the report, over 500 million dependent and adult children of widows are caught in a vicious underworld in which disease, forced servitude, homelessness and violence are rampant and youngsters are denied schooling, enslaved or preyed upon by human traffickers.

The foundation was established in 1997 by Raj and Veena Loomba in honor of Loomba's mother, who was widowed at the age of 37 in India when her husband died of tuberculosis and raised her seven children by herself.

"There are few resources in the world available to help widows achieve a safer, more comfortable existence and to promote their equality and pursue justice on their behalf," Loomba said.

He said that's why the foundation is campaigning to put the plight of the world's widows on the UN agenda and to have June 23 – his mother's birthday – declared International Widows Day to raise awareness of the crisis. – AP