


Life After Loss

In some cultures, being a widow has meant exile, vulnerability, and abuse. But bereaved women are beginning to fight back.

INDIA In a shelter in Vrindavan, known as a "city of widows," Lalita (at right) bears the cropped hair and white wrap her culture once considered obligatory for widowhood. Shelter manager Ranjana, a much younger widow, is less constrained by traditional customs.

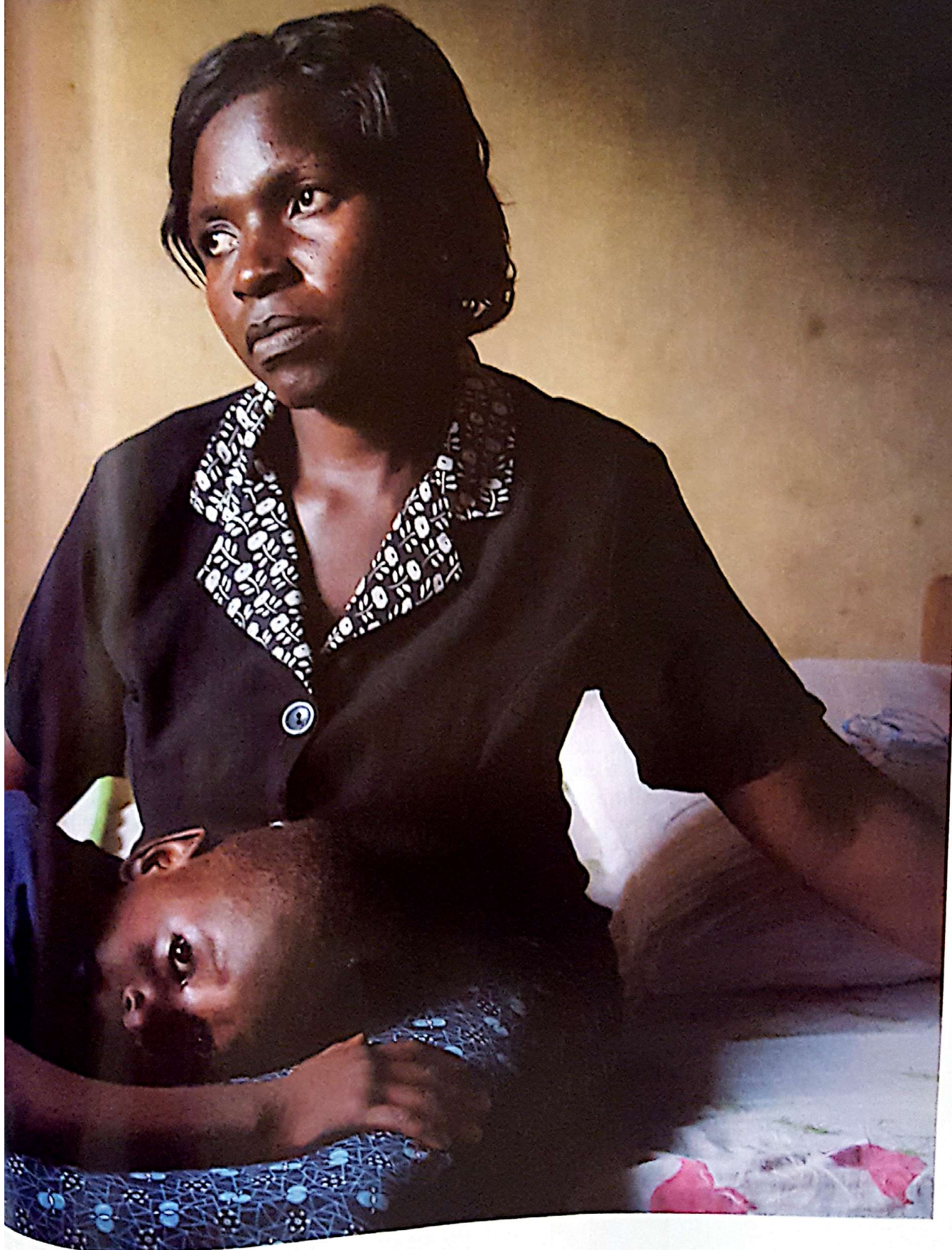


BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA On the 20th anniversary of the massacre of thousands of Bosnian Muslim men in Srebrenica, Advija Zukić is shielded from the sun as she lays to rest the remains of her husband, Alaga. Forensic experts are still working to identify victims.





UGANDA Christine Namatovu and her son Andrew bring solace to each other in the house Namatovu's in-laws tried to seize when her husband died. Pushing widows off their property is common practice in this region; Namatovu, with the help of lawyers, fought back.



BY CYNTHIA GORNEY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMY TOENSING

1. RETURNING TO LIFE *Vrindavan, India*

Long before sunrise the widows of Vrindavan hurried along dark, unpaved alleys, trying to sidestep mud puddles and fresh cow dung. There's a certain broken sidewalk on which volunteers set out a big propane burner every morning and brew a bathtub-size vat of tea. The widows know they must arrive very early, taking their place on rag mats, lifting their sari hems from the dirt, resting elbows on their knees as they wait. If they come too late, the tea might be gone. Or the puffed rice might be running out at the next charity's spot, many alleys away. "I can't rush in the morning—I'm not well," a widow complained. "But we have to rush. You don't know what you will miss."

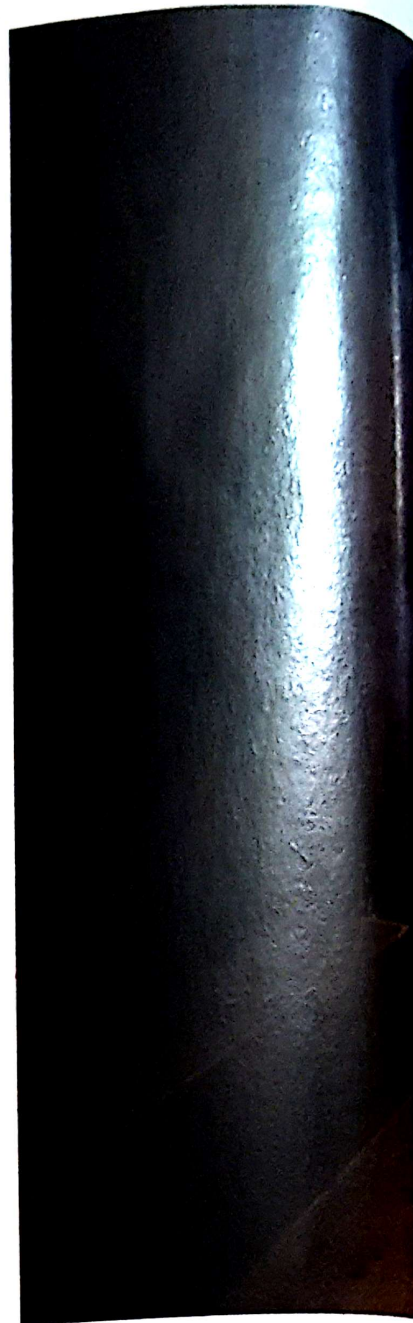
It was 5:30 a.m., a cool dawn, a sliver moon. A few widows had wrapped themselves in colorful saris, but most wore white, in India the surest signifier of a woman whose husband has died, perhaps recently, perhaps decades ago. In the dim light they moved like schools of fish, still hurrying together, pouring around street corners, a dozen here, two dozen there.

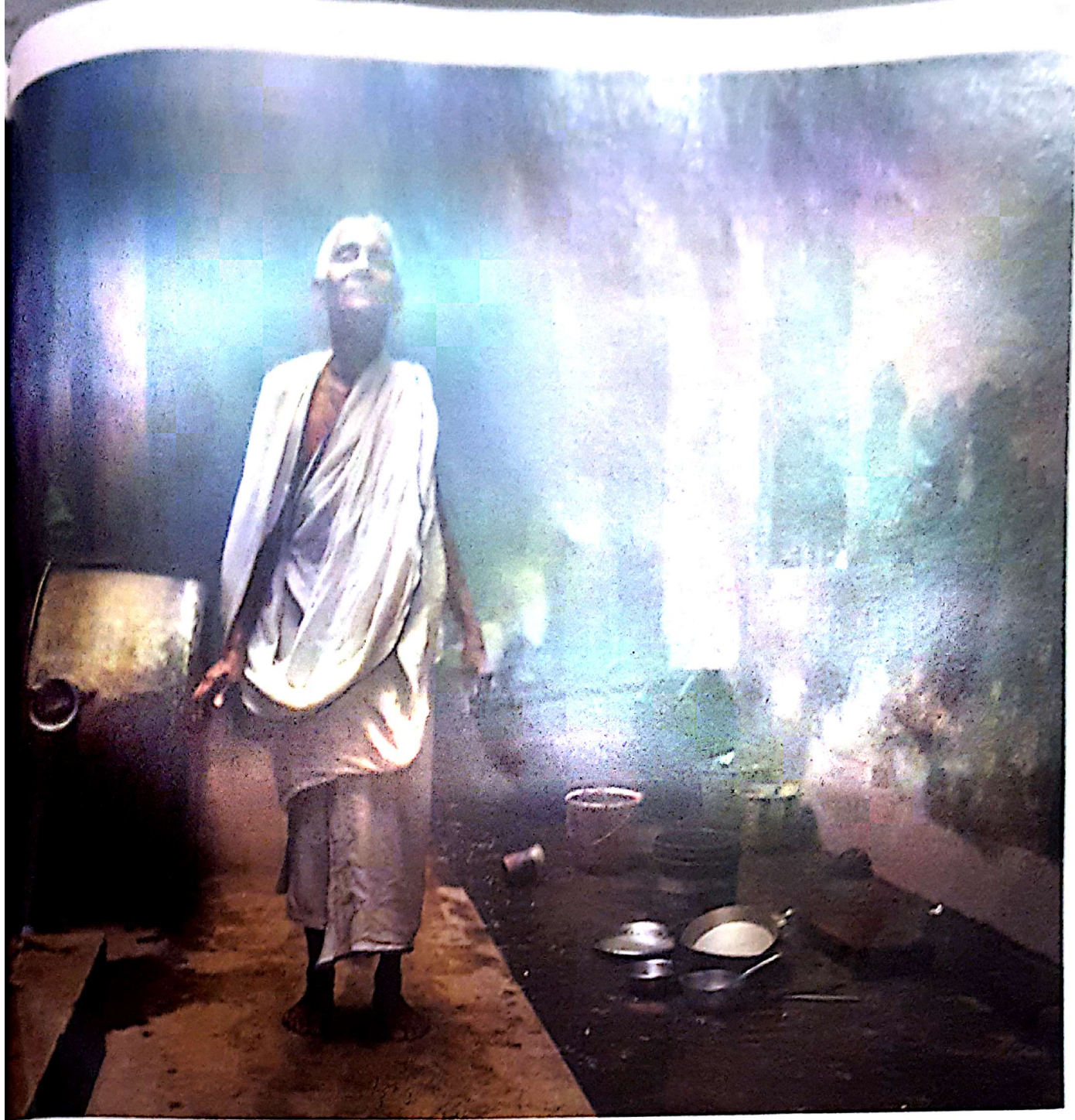
No one has reliably counted the number of widows in Vrindavan. Some reports estimate two or three thousand, others 10,000 or more; the city and its neighboring towns are a spiritual center, crowded with temples to the Hindu god Krishna and ashrams in which *bhajans*—devotional songs—are chanted all day long by impoverished widows who crowd side by side on the floor. The sanctity of bhajan ashrams is sustained by steady chanting, and although this

is nominally the role of pilgrims and priests, the widows earn hot meals, and perhaps nighttime sleeping mats, by singing these chants over and over, sometimes three or four hours at a time.

They live in shelters too, and in shared rental rooms, and under roadside tarps when no indoor accommodation will admit them. Vrindavan is about 100 miles south of Delhi, but the widows come here from all over India, particularly the state of West Bengal, where allegiance to Krishna is intense. Sometimes they arrive accompanied by gurus they trust. Sometimes their relatives bring them, depositing the family widow in an ashram or on a street corner and driving away.

Even relatives who don't literally drive a widow





INDIA Communities of widows in temple cities draw Hindu women from Nepal and Bangladesh as well. Bangladeshi widow Bhakti Dashi, 75, has lived for a quarter century in the back of a temple in the riverside spiritual center of Navadwip, West Bengal. Alongside others who have left home or been pushed away by their families, she sings prayers inside, for hours at a time, in exchange for her lodging and food.

from the family home can make it plain every day that her role among them has ended—that a widow in India, forever burdened by the misfortune of having outlived her husband, is “physically alive but socially dead,” in the words of Delhi psychologist Vasantha Patri, who has written about the plight of India’s widows. So, because Vrindavan is known as a “city of widows,” a possible source of hot meals and companionship and purpose, they also come alone, on buses or trains,

as they have for generations. “None of us wants to go back to our families,” a spidery woman named Kanaklata Adhikari declared in firm Bengali from her bed in the shelter room she shares with seven other widows. “We never talk to our families. We are our family.”

She sat cross-legged atop the bedsheet, even though her limbs were contorted by age and disease and she was able to walk only by bending over almost double and shuffling. Her white sari

was draped loosely over the top of her head; in India the shearing of a new widow's hair was once common practice, to announce the end of her womanly appeal, and the widow Adhikari appeared to have been recently reborn. "I keep it this way because my hair was *his*," she said, and squinted at her guests, the foreigner and the young interpreter, as though perplexed by the question. "A barber comes and cuts it for me. A woman's greatest beauty is in her hair and her clothes. Once my husband was not there, what would I do with it?"

How old was she now? "Ninety-six."
And how old when her husband died?
"Seventeen."

I WAS IN VRINDAVAN because photographer Amy Toensing and I were visiting extraordinary communities of widows, over the course of a year, in three very different parts of the world. It was not private grieving we set out to explore, but rather the way societies can force a jarring new identity on a woman whose husband has died: pariah, exile, nuisance, martyr, prey.

When the United Nations in 2011 designated June 23 as International Widows' Day, the official explanation was a somber one: that in many cultures widows are so vulnerable—to abusive traditions, to poverty, to the aftermath of the wars that killed their husbands—that widowhood itself must be regarded as a potential human rights calamity. The women Toensing and I met, like the caseworkers and volunteers trying to help them, became our teachers in the minutiae of special cruelties. In Bosnia and Herzegovina we spent a month with one of history's singular concentrations of war widows, women who have spent two decades searching for and burying the scattered remains of more than 7,000 slaughtered men. In Uganda we learned the phrase "widow inheritance," which for Ugandans does not mean the estate a widow receives; it means that the in-laws illegally seizing all her inherited property assume they are inheriting her too, as sex partner or wife for whichever relative they choose.

And in Vrindavan, listening to a social worker named Laxmi Gautam describe with fury the

widows she has found begging, because their families sent them away, we asked whether Laxmi had ever imagined what she would do if she were given the power to protect women from these kinds of indignities. As it turned out, she had. "I would remove the word 'widow' from the dictionary," she said. "As soon as a woman's husband is gone, she gets this name. This word, bad when it attaches, her life's troubles start."

The charitable organization of an Indian-born British business magnate, Raj Loomba, pushed the UN into sanctioning an annual widows' day, but isolation and invisibility make it hard even to figure out how many widows there are in the world; the most ambitious data gathering has come from the Loomba Foundation, which provides widows support internationally and recently estimated the total number at around 259 million, with caveats about how poorly many countries track their own widows' presence and needs. The June 23 date was Loomba's idea too. This was the day his father died in India, Loomba has written, and although more than 60 years have passed since then, the kinds of stories he tells about what happened next—his widowed mother shunned as "inauspicious" at celebratory events, marked for life as an omen of bad fortune—were repeated every day by Vrindavan women Toensing and I met.

A widow must not dress in colors or make herself pretty, because that would be inappropriate to her new role as eternally diminished mourner. A widow must eat only bland food, in small portions, because richness and spice would stir passions she should never again experience. These are fading Hindu rules, largely dismissed by educated Indians as relics of another century, but they are still taken seriously in some villages and conservative families. Meera Khanna, a Delhi writer who works for a widows' advocacy organization called Guild for Service, observes that the stigmatizing of widows comes not from the Vedas, the Hindu scriptures, but from generations of repressive tradition.

"In the Vedas nowhere is it ever said the widow has to live a life of austerity," she told me. "There's a line that says: You, woman. Why are you crying for the man who's no more? Get up,

take the hand of a living man, and start life anew.”

We planned our visits to Vrindavan, and Varanasi, a city northwest of Kolkata that also draws thousands of widows, to coincide with a simple campaign: making it possible, during celebratory festivals, for widowed women to join in. This is more subversive than it might seem. All over India the holidays of Diwali and Holi are occasions of public joy and merriment. Diwali includes gifts, bright lights, and fireworks; Holi is carried into the streets so people can “play Holi,” as Indians say, flinging brilliant powders and water at each other.

For a woman expected to live out her remaining years in muffled dignity, nothing about this kind of exuberance used to be considered acceptable. “Once you become widowed, they say you are not allowed to do any festivals,” a charity worker named Vinita Verma told me. “But we want these ladies to be a part of society. They have a full right to live their lives.”

Verma is vice president of Sulabh International, an Indian organization that provides support services and small monthly stipends to widows in shelters in Vrindavan and Varanasi. A few years ago—tentatively at first and then on a bolder scale—Sulabh began arranging Diwali and Holi events for widows in the two cities. Even in private, indoors, some of the women needed time to learn to relax among holiday flowers and Holi powders, Verma said. “They felt, ‘If I touch this red color, some bad thing will happen to me.’”

But by 2015 the holiday festivities in the “cities of widows,” as Vrindavan and Varanasi are sometimes labeled in the media, were moving purposefully outdoors. No denunciations appeared in the Indian media, and when Toensing and I were in India, the only complaint we heard about plans for the widows’ festivities was that they made for photogenic show with little substance—that what the widows really need are more comfortable lodgings, meals they don’t have to sing for, families that will take them home, communities that won’t label widowed women useless and inauspicious.

“The real change has to come from the societies that produced them,” said Gautam, the social

In many cultures widows are vulnerable to abusive traditions, to poverty, to the aftermath of wars that killed their husbands, making widowhood itself a potential human rights calamity.

worker who would like to strike “widow” from the dictionary. Gautam’s home usually houses a few widows unable to find lodging, and when I asked what labels might suit these women better, it was obvious she’d considered this before too. “Mother,” she said. “If she’s not a mother, she’s a daughter, perhaps a sister. She’s also a wife. It’s just that her husband is not alive.”

It seems important to remember too: The Vrindavan widows can be fierce. It takes stamina to chant for three hours without break, to squat on a hard temple floor, to bustle through unlit muddy streets in search of the next meal and hot tea. When I arrived, in November 2015, Diwali was about to begin, and one afternoon I followed Verma as she prepared for the Sulabh events, which would include a boisterous outdoor procession, fireworks on the river, and a thousand new saris for the widows to wear and keep as their own—in any colors they might fancy. The saris were a gift from Sulabh, and a Vrindavan store had them stacked on display; widows in the charity’s stipend program were to arrive in groups over the course of a few hours, examining and choosing as skillful Indian sari-shoppers do.

Inside the sari store my interpreter and I watched the first widows push their way toward the stack, study the saris, and summon the shopkeeper. “I like those on that other rack better,” a woman said. “Can’t we choose from those?”

No, the shopkeeper explained, those were for sale. “Humph,” a widow said. She fingered the cloth of a charity sari. “Not especially good



INDIA The exuberance of Holi, the holiday that includes flinging colored powders, was until recently thought inappropriate for widows. Aid groups, defying traditional prejudices against widows, now invite them to join celebrations like this Holi party in Vrindavan.



To the terrible residue
left for widows of war
a new burden was added:
To rebury and mourn
the Srebrenica remains
in individual gravesites,
they would have to be
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quality," another widow said. "Could you please move over?" another widow said, and the widow she was elbowing said, Why should she—there was already enough space, and another widow said the breath of the widow beside her smelled foul, that she smoked too many bidis, the strong Indian cigarettes tied together with string. It took longer than expected to get everybody attended to, and I watched one quartet of widows walk out without new saris, harrumphing to each other. "As if our time had no value," one said.

The Diwali procession and riverside fireworks would prove very grand, full of singing and sparklers and saris both white and colored—astonishing colors, to an outsider's eye: sapphire, scarlet, lime, magenta, saffron. Many Indian news photographers came. Smoke swirled, fireworks lit the river pink, floating oil lamps made glowing circles in the moving water, and in spite of this my sharpest Vrindavan memory is of those four dignified widows disdaining their gift saris and marching out the door. They stayed close to each other, wrapped in widow white, chuckling, and when they stepped off the sidewalk together to cross the busy street, the traffic stopped to let them pass.

2. BURYING THE PAST

Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina

WHEN THE FIRST CALL CAME from the forensic identification center, Mirsada Uzunović was home with her 13-year-old son and so willed herself to stay calm. The voice on the other end

was gentle. Remains of Uzunović's husband, Ekrem, had been identified by laboratory testing, the voice said. The remains were small. A partial skull. Nothing else. If Uzunović wished a burial, in the new memorial cemetery that could be arranged.

No.

For three months she told no one. In the nighttime, that was the difficult part. I was alone with my thoughts. From the big man I knew, only a piece of skull. I couldn't imagine. They killed him. But why didn't they bury him? He was scattered around. I didn't know where. *Where were those bones? Where was he?*

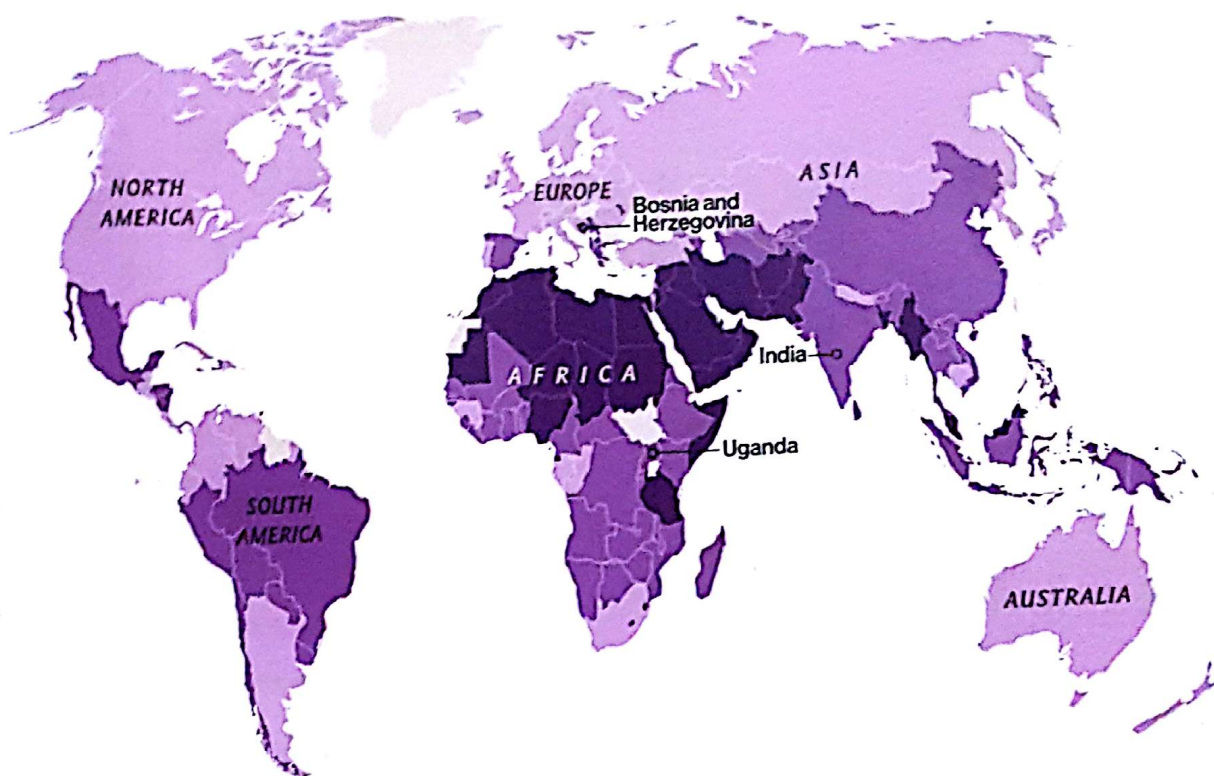
That initial call came in 2005, a decade after Bosnian Serb forces killed more than 7,000 Bosnian Muslim men—the number remains in dispute, but this is the figure on record at the International Court of Justice—during a single week of the three-year Bosnian war. From July 11 to July 19, 1995, the men were killed in and near the town of Srebrenica, on the eastern edge of the Balkan nation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some were forcibly separated from their families and bused to execution sites; most were shot as they tried to escape to safer Bosnian Army-held territory. Ekrem Uzunović, whom Mirsada had loved since they met at a village dance when she was 15, was wearing black trousers and a T-shirt the last time she saw him, and in his backpack carried a loaf of bread she had baked that morning. He bent down to kiss their son, turned away, and ran. He thought he might escape by hiding in the woods.

Their son was two. Ekrem was 27. In Tuzla, the city in which Uzunović and many other Srebrenica war widows were resettled, there is today a two-room office whose inside walls are covered to the ceiling with photos of dark-haired Bosnian men like Ekrem, all dead or presumed dead. Stacked albums hold thousands more, and in the photos the men are smiling or smoking or looking celebratory with drinks held out mid-toast. The photos also show boys barely in their teens and men old enough to have been Ekrem's grandfather. Uzunović: "In every yard there was the same scene—the men running out

Widows and the Law

There are about 259 million widows, and nearly half live in poverty, according to the United Nations. Even where laws protect their rights, widows are sometimes mistreated. In parts of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, widows can suffer discrimination, sexual assault, and the seizure of their property and children.

- Property and inheritance rights are protected by law and adequately enforced for widows and widowers.
- Equal inheritance rights are protected by law, but cultural and religious customs can override rights for widows.
- Inheritance rights are not equally guaranteed under the law, or widows have no inheritance rights.
- No data



of their houses. Women and families were crying for them, and the men didn't react or anything; they were walking toward the woods, not looking back. There was this blackness, with the forest behind it. A river of men. Yes, I have had nightmares, especially during this time of the year. After my psychotherapy it didn't get easier. But my doctor gave me pills, for July, so I can cope. I still have dreams. But it's better, because of the pills."

When we met, inside the hillside Tuzla house where Uzunović and her son still live, it was July. Every July 11, in large part because of the relentless efforts of a network of bereaved Bosnian women, a group funeral—the

coffin-by-coffin burial of remains identified during the previous year and approved by families for interment—takes place at a vast hillside cemetery established solely for the Srebrenica dead. The cemetery is in a village called Potočari, a few miles from Srebrenica; the first 600 coffins were buried in 2003, as investigators and DNA examiners were learning the full horror of what had happened to the bodies of the dead.

Now, in the first week of July 2015, the 20th anniversary was a few days away. Former U.S. president Bill Clinton was coming, Uzunović had been told, along with other international dignitaries. Uzunović was 41 now and regrettably familiar

with the cemetery in midsummer, its beautiful green undulations, its exhausting rows of headstones, its open grass for gravesites not yet dug. She had sat through many July 11 Potočari burials already: her brother, her grandfather, three uncles, four cousins, men from Ekrem's family, husbands of other widows. Every year until this one she had said not Ekrem, not yet; when the forensic center telephoned a second time, in 2007, and informed her that her husband's hip and femur bones had been identified, Uzunović had declined again to proceed with a funeral. There was still not enough of him.

"But I have been carrying such heavy baggage on my shoulders," Uzunović said to me and my interpreter, pouring thick Bosnian coffee into our cups. She had been painting a wall that morning and wore a paint-splattered sweatshirt and blue jeans, her black hair pulled into a ponytail. She looked drained and composed. "I've waited too long," Uzunović said. "I need to close the chapter. I cannot wait anymore." This year, at the Potočari ceremonies, she would bury her husband.

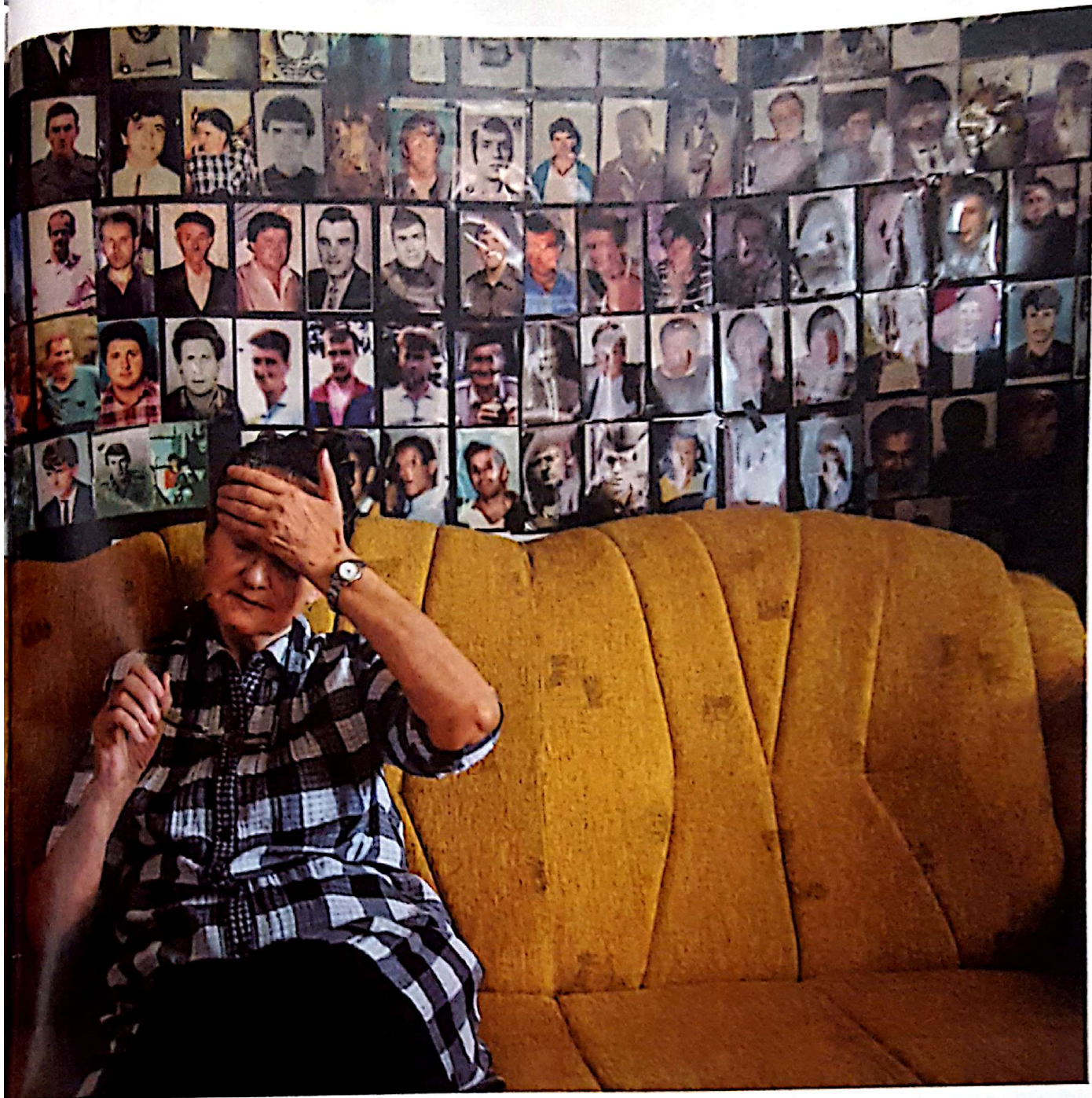
IN BOSNIAN THE WORD for widows is *udovice*. In the names of the collaborative organizations they built, though, the Bosnian war's female bereaved are called *žene*, women. Snaga Žene, for example: Women Power. During that 1995 summer, people passing the Tuzla sports center could spot at once the Srebrenica *žene* who had been removed to Tuzla by the truckload while their husbands, sons, brothers, and fathers were being shot. Men had said: When I escape, I will get to the sports center; meet me there—and for weeks women kept standing just outside, hoping. "It was unimaginable for them," Snaga Žene's president, Branka Antić-Štauber, a Tuzla physician, told me. "To realize the scope, that this huge of a number of people had been killed over just a few days. And then the parts, from individuals, began to be found in separate graves. That was unimaginable for everybody."

Bosnian Serb leaders, worried that the mass graves would be discovered, ordered thousands of corpses dug up and reburied around the countryside. Earthmoving equipment, disinterring

and hauling and dumping, broke the decomposing bodies apart. Thus to the terrible residue traditionally left for widows in the world's conflict zones—trauma, rape, isolation, financial destitution—a new burden was added: The Srebrenica remains, if they were to be reburied and mourned at individual gravesites, would have to be identified piece by piece.

The forensic detection, the exhaustive matching of bones and fragments to DNA samples from relatives, has been the work of a post-Bosnian war organization called the International Commission on Missing Persons. The demands for an accounting—the push for a single special cemetery; the hunt for photos





BOSNIA A small building in Tuzla houses the Women of Srebrenica group, which continues to demand an accounting of the men slaughtered by Bosnian Serb forces during one week of the Bosnian war. Founder Hajra Čatić, whose husband and son were killed in the 1995 massacre, sinks back in exhaustion during preparations for the anniversary commemoration. Behind her: faces of the dead and those still missing.

of all the missing; the monthly street protests to insist that each man's remains be found, the killers prosecuted, and the word "genocide" attached forever to the Srebrenica killings—have been the work of the women. "I have to say they're all heroes," Amra Begić, an official at the Srebrenica-Potočari memorial center, told me the day before the 20th-anniversary funeral. "We didn't know what strong women our mothers are."

Begić's father and grandfather were among the

victims; two headstones mark their graves. There were 6,241 finished graves before this latest delivery of the dead. The new green coffins now lined up inside the memorial center—in Islam green is a sacred color—numbered 136. The remains of Ekrem Uzunović lay in coffin 59, and on the cloudless warm morning of the funeral Mirsada Uzunović found the headstone with his name, the freshly dug grave. The relatives with her had brought folding chairs, and for a while she sat on



BOSNIA Best friends from childhood, married to brothers killed in the Bosnian war, Fata Lemeš (at left) and Hamida Lemeš now live and garden with four other war widows in the village of Skejčići. "This beautiful landscape," Fata says, "actually brought so much evil."



one and received people politely, their embraces, their murmured sympathies. From a dignitaries' tent too far away for her to see clearly, Clinton's voice could be made out faintly, but Uzunović didn't understand the English and was not especially interested. The voices changed, the prayers and intonations kept coming, and there was a moment of noisy rage when the Serbian prime minister, in attendance at a July 11 ceremony for the first time, tried to place flowers on a random headstone and was whistled and jeered so menacingly that his bodyguards hustled him to a waiting car.

An imam pleaded for respect. The cemetery went silent. The first of the green coffins could be glimpsed down below, borne by pallbearers; the imam called for prayer for the fallen, and thousands of people together on the hillsides bent simultaneously. Uzunović did not pray. She got off her chair, lit a cigarette, sat on the ground by the empty hole in the earth, and waited. Let the others pray, she thought. She had said so many prayers already, and it was Ekrem she needed to address: You told me to keep our son safe. Look, he is 22 years old. He is a university student. He is helping to carry your coffin. He will help lower it into the ground and shovel the dirt on top, and then, finally, you will have a place.

3. ENFORCING THE LAW

Mukono District, Uganda

"THE HUMBLE PETITION of Tumushabe Clare Glorious showeth as follows." In Uganda legal documents are composed in flowery, colonial-era English, and on a midsummer morning an attorney named Diana Angwech balanced two thick files on her lap, thumbing pages, reviewing. The improvised courtroom was a small red building between a corn patch and a stand of banana trees, an hour's drive from the capital, Kampala. Inside, on the concrete floor, a few wooden benches faced the magistrate's desk, which atop its clean surface displayed only a calendar, a Quran, and an old Bible held together with string.

A guard at the door stepped aside, and the people came in, filling the benches beside and behind Angwech. The widow Clare Tumushabe carried

her two-year-old daughter, the youngest of her six children, and sat down in the fourth row. Tumushabe had once been a more timid woman, but her head was now high as she studied the courtroom around her; she had been pregnant with this daughter when her husband died—a sharp headache, a hospital unable to revive him—and she was learning how to speak with clarity and passion about what happened to her next.

She was summoned—mourning, pregnant—to a meeting of important members of her deceased husband's family and clan. They informed her that the children now belonged not to her but to them; directed her to keep her hands off all crops on the household plot, as they also were no longer hers; and presented to her the brother-in-law—her husband's oldest sibling, 20 years Tumushabe's senior—who would move into the home at once and take her as the third of his wives.

The house and three acres Tumushabe's husband had inherited from his father must pass wholly to them, the in-laws said. As the widow, Tumushabe, by tradition, was essentially part of the property, like the coffee bushes and the jackfruit trees.

Tumushabe told them this was nonsense. She said she would never take this man into her bed, that her husband had left papers proving the land passed to her. The in-laws said she had apparently bewitched and stupefied her husband and that she might want to see just how much help he would be to her now, from that freshly dug grave in which he lay. Tumushabe summoned police. She harvested some crops and chopped trees for firewood. Threats escalated; epithets were directed at the children. One day a man from her husband's family appeared on the property shouting that today Tumushabe would die, and because Tumushabe's hand was cut during the encounter by a panga—a broad-bladed African machete—Diana Angwech had an assault charge with which to haul one of Tumushabe's tormentors into court.

You work with what the situation brings you, Angwech and her colleagues kept reminding us, as Toensing and I followed them through their rounds in villages of central Uganda: You

commiserate, you counsel, you try to enlighten police officers and village elders, you visit community forums to explain that bullying a new widow into giving over her family property is prohibited even when the bullies are her own in-laws. "People were in shock—'Oh my God, this is actually wrong?'" said a lawyer named Nina Asimwe, recalling the first public talks she gave after joining other Ugandan professionals in the Kampala office of International Justice Mission (IJM), the organization that employs Angwech. "They thought it was normal. An injustice, but normal. OK'd by society."

Think of these Ugandans as a widows' defense brigade: attorneys, social workers, and criminal investigators using their nation's own justice system to undo long-held assumptions about women who have lost their husbands. IJM is a U.S.-based nonprofit that supports legal advocacy in other countries for impoverished victims of violent abuse, and in one sense the agenda of its employees in Kampala is modest. They operate a pilot program, within one large, mostly rural district east of the capital, that provides free lawyers and caseworkers for victims of a crime known throughout eastern and southern Africa as "property grabbing"—extorting vulnerable people, by verbal threats or physical attacks, into giving up possession of land that is rightfully theirs.

For reasons both ancient and modern, widowed women are the most frequent victims of property grabbing in this region of the world. More than two-thirds of Uganda's 39 million people raise at least some of their own food, and holding title to one's own home and attached land remains a powerful assurance of material security: meals for the children, firewood for cooking, crops to sell at market. Because graves are often placed near the home, the person in charge of the family property also possesses ancestral history, honor, status. And the rapid growth of Uganda's population, along with the arrival of mortgage banking, are pushing up the value of land. A house and the cropland around it now constitute potential loan collateral for business investments or the accumulation of more land.


These are things traditional Ugandan culture

The Ugandan widow was told that her children belonged to her late husband's family, that her home and crops were no longer hers, and that she would become her brother-in-law's third wife.

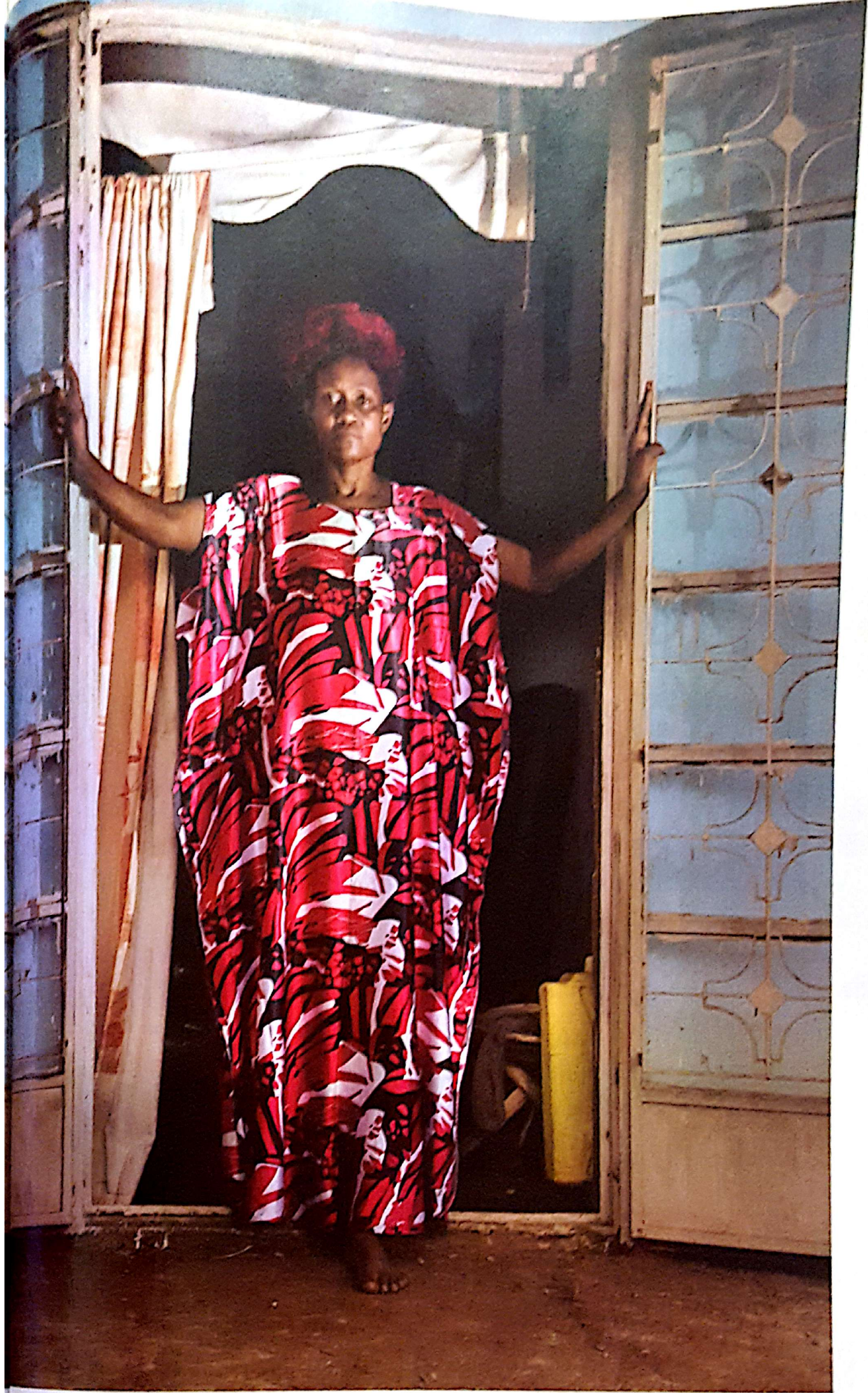
does not easily concede to a widow. The constitution, rewritten in 1995 and a source of national pride, promises gender equality. Modern statutes explicitly extend inheritance rights to wives and female children. But in practice, especially in the rural areas that make up most of Uganda, it's still widely assumed that only men should own or inherit land, that widowhood terminates a woman's social legitimacy, and that it's up to her husband's family and clan to decide what happens next—who will take the property, who will take the children, who will have sex with her now. "Plus the stigma," Asimwe said. "If you're a widow, bad luck. You're cursed. You're blamed for the death of your spouse. It could be that he had several homes, several wives, that he brought HIV into the house. But when he dies, it's you. You killed him."

So with widows as their clients, IJM advocates in the villages and courtrooms of Uganda's Mukono District have an audacious goal: to broadcast across Mukono, and perhaps throughout Uganda and beyond, the idea that seizing these women's homes and crops—as well as the assaults, threats, forgeries, and verbal abuse this often entails—is not only wrong but punishable by the courts. Diplomacy is crucial; in village meetings Asimwe always addresses her elders as "my fathers" and "my mothers." She tells them she knows widow abuse is typically treated as a family dispute to be worked out among clan leaders or by village councils, whose elected heads command respect.

But their efforts are often inadequate, she



UGANDA A week after her husband's death, Solome Sekimuli, 54, defiantly fills the doorway of the Luwero District home they shared. Weapon-brandishing relatives from his side – who forced their way in on the funeral day – have tried to wrest away the property by force.





UGANDA When widows turn to the law to battle abuse and property grabbing, the odds against them can be formidable. Archivist Michael Nyero works in the records room of the Mengo Chief Magistrate Court, one of many local courts overwhelmed by backlogs.

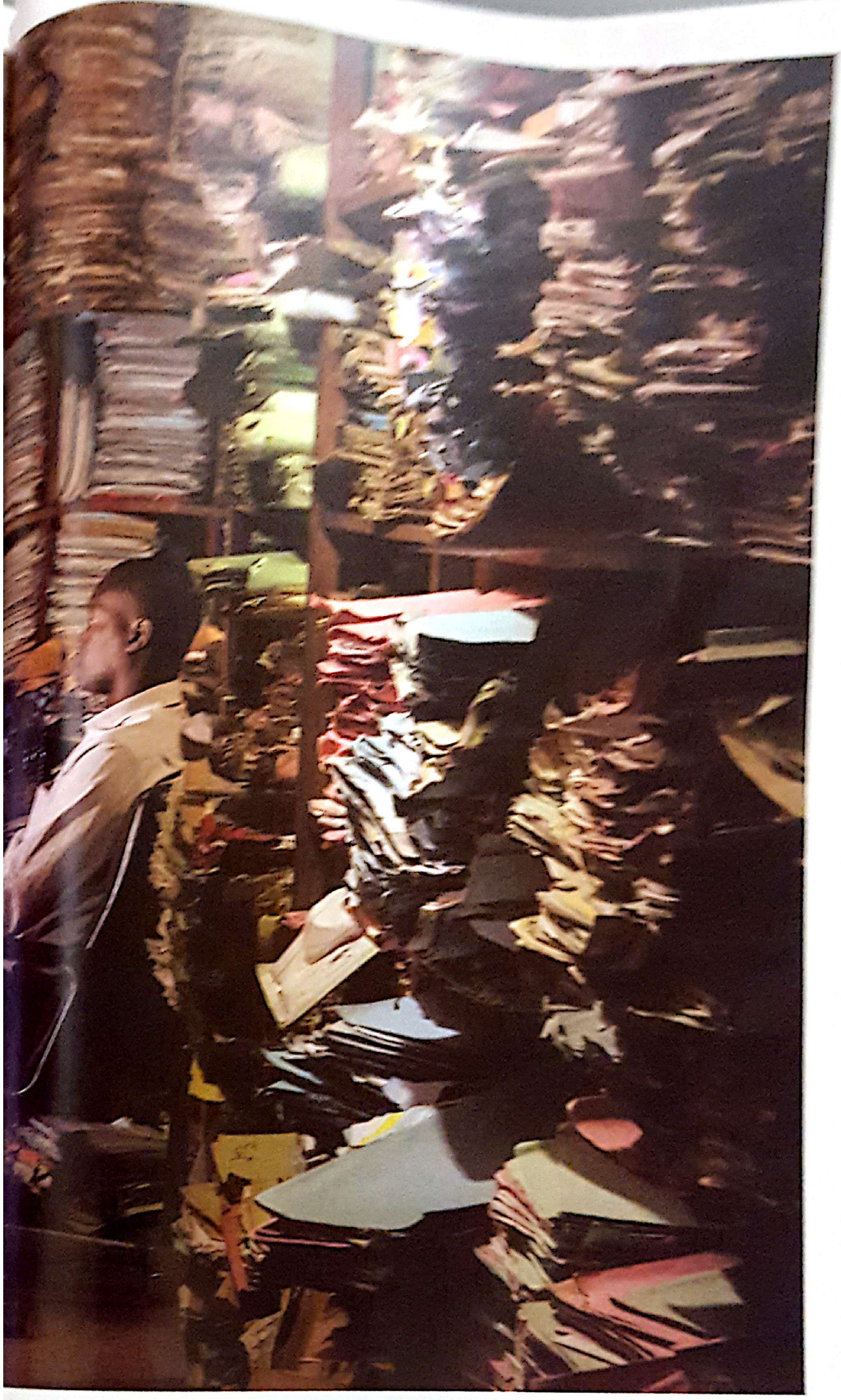


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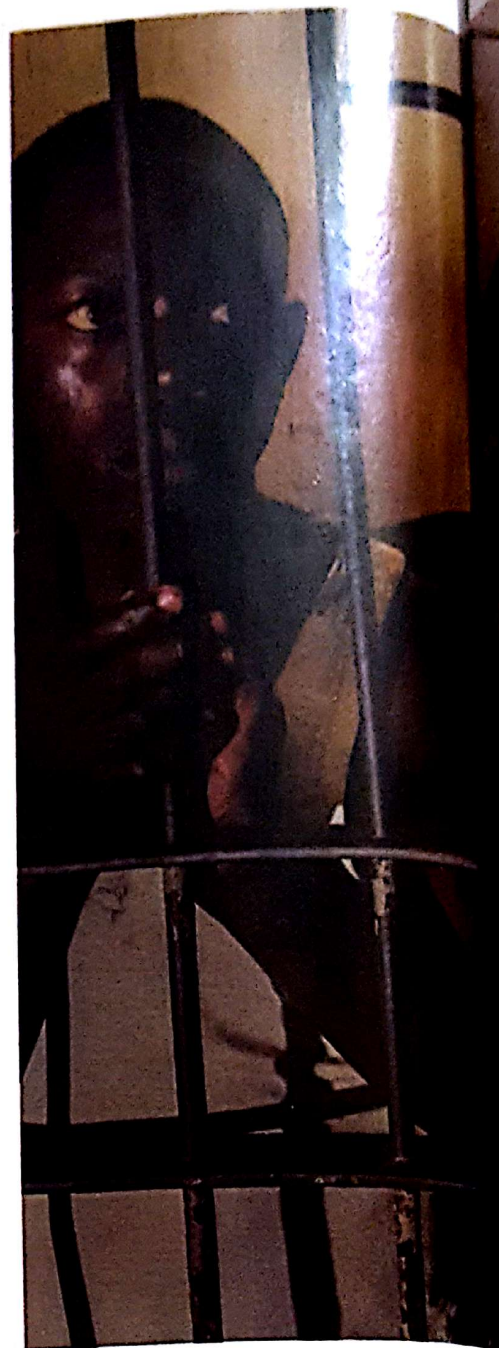
PHOTO BY [unreadable]

insists, and council heads can be bought off or threatened. In Luganda, the primary indigenous language of the area, she uses blunt words: *okubba*, stealing, and *kimenya mateeka*, criminal. She implores her listeners to remember the likely future for a widow who is chased from her home by panga-brandishing property grabbers: Her birth family may not take her back, because they can't afford to or no longer regard her as one of them. Such a widow may be left to the streets, perhaps forced into prostitution. "Then of course the society around them is going to face a problem of insecurity," Asiimwe said. "The children will become street children. People who used to eat three times a day are going to eat once a day. Malnutrition will come into play."

The buy-in is slow. A former national police officer who now directs IJM's Mukono District investigations said his policing friends were initially perplexed as he began heading into village constabularies, teaching officers to gather property-grabbing evidence and take seriously threats of violence against widows who try to fight back. Colleagues of his generation would raise an eyebrow, he told us: "What is the issue here? Is this an important matter?"

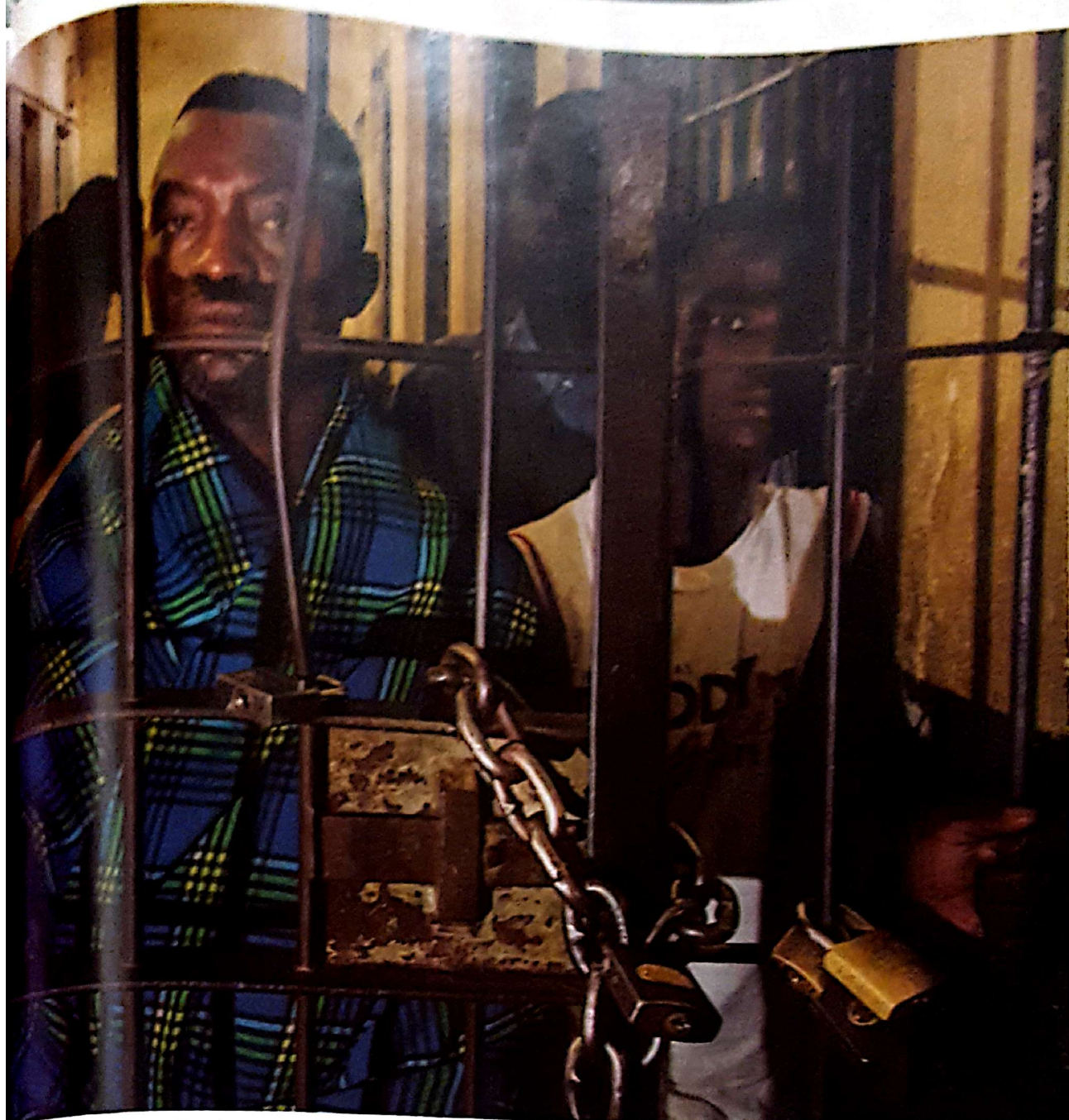
The threats are so credible and widespread, in fact, that they are sometimes directed at case investigators, which is why IJM asked that this investigator's name not be published. And the cases themselves can be enormously complex. Uganda sanctions multiple ways to possess land, both precolonial and modern, so it can be hard to prove who held ownership rights even before the husband died. Ugandans are wary of wills, such obvious portents of death. Cohabitation relationships are common, even though those aren't legal marriages; many women who regard themselves as wives turn out not to be, for inheritance purposes. "But I believe that there is hope," lawyer and casework director Alice Muhairwe Mparana told Toensing and me last June. "We are not 100 percent there, but we have begun the work. We already have nine convictions this year."

Some of the charges that stuck during the first half of 2016: unlawful eviction, criminal trespass, intermeddling, which means impermissibly



interfering with someone else's business matters. There is no law in Uganda, or anywhere else, making it criminal to treat a widow as though her life no longer has value. But June 23 marked the sixth International Widows' Day, and in the biggest town in Mukono, a grassy square facing the courthouse was given over to a special commemoration, with microphones, a uniformed band, hundreds of folding chairs, and a tented seating area roped off, as the signpost read, for "Honoured Widows." Important people rose to speak: the police chief, for example; and the head magistrate; and Clare Glorious Tumushabe, who took more time at the microphone than any of them.

With help, Tumushabe said, she had remained



UGANDA Joseph Ssenkima (at center), accused of terrorizing a Mukono District widow named Betty Nanozi, is believed to be one of more than 70 people who destroyed her crops and threatened her son's life. Since Nanozi's husband died, members of his family and their allies have tried to drive her from the home he willed to her. Police working with International Justice Mission pursued suspects for weeks.

on her family property. "I only loved one man," she shouted in Luganda, her voice rising like a preacher's, and the Honoured Widows cheered. "I said to my husband's clan, 'How would you give me to another man? I didn't get married to a whole clan.'"

Three months later Toensing and I got the news: The man who attacked Tumushabe had been convicted of "assault occasioning actual bodily harm" and was commencing his yearlong

sentence in jail. Tumushabe and the lawyers were exultant. But his siblings were furious, and the lead investigator was worried about the widow and her children. "We have beefed up security for her," he said. "And we have looked into going to the community, to sensitize them. She's isolated where she lives. But she is tough and strong." □

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