

Conference Report

Background to the Conference

MIFUMI has been working to end violence and abuse against women since 1999 and from this work, bride price was indicated as a major contributing factor to domestic violence. Research on the subject highlighted the fact that the debate on bride price and women's rights was not new (Kalema Report on Marriage and Divorce 1964, FIDA, UNFPA 1996). Women's World Conferences had flagged up the issue of bride price and dowry as contradictions to women's equality and development. Bride price was implicit in international conventions and law.

In 2000 MIFUMI commissioned a baseline survey on bride price that revealed the practice as being rife with injustices and ripe for reform and hence began our two-year campaign project funded by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office Human Rights Project Fund. MIFUMI then commissioned papers to examine bride price from a human rights perspective (Kulsum Wakabi: A Briefing Paper on Bride Price, Mifumi 2000), a Bride Price Baseline Survey (Martin Osuna, Mifumi 2001) and a religious perspective (Eriot Deo Fr., Religious and Cultural Perspectives on Bride Price, 2001). The campaign included several consultative workshops and debate forums with traditional leaders, policy makers, and civil society. Drama was also carried out to enact the social issues.

The height of MIFUMI's campaign on bride price occurred on 22nd December 2001, the people of Tororo district in the East of Uganda held a referendum on the reform of bride price, organized by MIFUMI at the end of the two-year campaign. The question was whether bride price should become a non-refundable gift. The referendum was won with 60% in favour of reform. The need for this intervention arose out of our work with women who highlighted the fact that bride price is a major contributing factor to domestic violence and poverty.

Planning the Conference

The idea to hold an international conference on bride price was conceived in Guadalajara Mexico during the AWID (Association of Women in Development) conference when MIFUMI had opportunity to share their work on bride price with participants from Africa and other parts of the world. MIFUMI was encouraged by colleagues to a forum within Africa to disseminate the work on the campaign and referendum. At first we had hoped that a platform would be sought at a Pan African conference, however Juliane Osterhaus of GTZ who was also present at the conference very kindly agreed to consider an application to provide funding for an international conference on bride price.

Once the conference was confirmed UK and Uganda working groups were established. Country working groups commented on conference papers, provided funding, identified keynote and guest speakers and collaborated on the printing of press articles. Initially the conference was due to be held at the Computer Science Institute but due to them cancelling at the last minute, the conference shifted to the Department of Gender and Women's Studies at Makerere University.

Calls for papers went out and we embarked on intensive electronic communication with participants from all over Africa, Europe and USA and in February 2004 - we were ready for the conference. Presenters were asked to prepare a presentation of about 10-15 minutes under the given themes and guidelines for presentations. We also encouraged participants to bring along communication materials that they used in their work. Space was made available for display of the materials.

The purpose

The purpose of the conference was to develop a programme of action to reduce or remove the significance of bride price as a factor contributing to violence and gender inequality, hindering the improvement in the quality of life of families and the realization of the rights of children in the countries where it is practiced.

Conference Theme

The main theme for the conference was Coalition and Action to safeguard women and children in the family. We were clear about wanting women and the gender context recognized and *named* in the theme because although many people would like to consider bride price only as a poverty issue, the MIFUMI campaign arose out of our work with women within the context of domestic violence.

Conference Objectives

- To present evidence and expert opinion on the intersection between bride price and identified socio-cultural practices, and human rights violation, poverty and gender inequality.
- To provide a platform for sharing experiences and innovative approaches across the globe on tackling bride price and other harmful cultural practices.
- To bring together groups and individuals from countries affected by the practice, and representatives from governments, intergovernmental bodies and civil society, to adopt a declaration of action for the reform or removal of bride price.

Participants

The purpose of the conference was to raise awareness about the issue of bride price and its different manifestation across Africa and to rally a Pan African force to spearhead reform. Participants were invited on the basis of their work, knowledge and experience on the issue of bride price and other harmful cultural practices. Many of the participants were also members of the Mifumi Feel Free network established to campaign for the reform of bride price across Africa and the conference was in a way the first formal gathering of the forum.

Invitations to the conference also went out to experts in the field of gender violence and human rights and harmful socio-cultural practices that contribute to gender violence and inequality. Experts on reproductive health and rights, activists on the rights of women and children, politicians and other stakeholders from Governments, intergovernmental agencies, academia, the media, civil society organizations and educationists were also invited.

The conference was attended by 150 participants from 18 countries. From an analysis of the participants it was evident that a large number of them were from the civil society organizations particularly those working on gender, health and human rights. A significant number were also from grassroots communities a fact that firmly grounded the issue of bride price as one mainly experienced by rural communities/women. There was also a significant presence from the police force, particularly those from Tororo, and experts in the field of health and HIV/AIDS.

Languages

The conference was conducted in English but translation into French was available.

Keynote addresses and Plenary papers

Opening Plenary – Day I

The Mistress of ceremony Evelyn Okoth, Development Education Officer of PROMPT UK welcomed participants to the conference and took care of house keeping issues. Atuki Turner, Director of the Mifumi Project provided introductory remarks on the work of MIFUMI and its campaign against bride price. This was followed by the opening and keynote address by the Guest of Honour Hon. Miria Matembe, MP Mbarara District and Pan African Member of Parliament. Hon. Matembe's paper was a highly intellectual and interesting paper and declared the conference open.

Also present at the opening were Mr Solbert Deputy Ambassador of the German Embassy, Dorothee Hutter, Head GTZ Kampala, Lynda St. Cooke, Second Secretary of the British High Commission, Marguerite Garling, Regional Human Rights Advisor, British High Commission, Mr Henry Kalule, Deputy Director UNFPA, Dr Gill Hague, Head of School of Policy, Bristol University and Domestic Violence Group, UK, Dr Rita Schaeffer, Professor of Anthropology, Humboldt University and other dignitaries.

Plenary Day II

The keynote address on the second day was presented by Dr Sylvia Tamale Senior Lecturer and Dean of Law at Makerere University in her paper *Women's Sexuality As A Site Of Control & Resistance: Views On The African Context*.

This was followed by Dr Noerine Kaleeba Founder of TASO and Board Chair of Action Aid who spoke on *Multiple Vulnerabilities* drawing on statistics from around the world on HIV/AIDS.

Six Survivors then presented powerful and thought provoking testimonies on the relationship between and impact of HIV/AIDS domestic violence and bride price on their lives.

Dr Dan Kaye, Lecturer in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Mulago Hospital then presented a paper on the *Commoditization Of Sexuality: Implications For Domestic Violence And Reproductive Health*.

This was followed by a presentation by Justice Margaret Oguli, then Director of Legal Department of the NRM Secretariat in her paper *Bride Price And Violence Against Women: The Case Of Uganda*

In the afternoon Mrs Wambui Otieno Mau Mau fighter and women's activist from Kenya and a privileged and honoured guest presented a paper on *Life History And Disadvantage Of Some Cultures (Especially To Women)*

This was followed by Hon. Jane Frances Kuka the renowned Ugandan activist against female genital mutilation and former Minister of Disaster Preparedness. She spoke on *Gender Violence: Female Genital Mutilation In Uganda*.

Dr Jane Okoth from USA spoke about the similarities of bride price to slave like practices and its impact on society. She conducted a straw poll to determine the prevalence of domestic violence and the results found that 75% of those present and voting at the conference had suffered some form of violence in their lives.

Closing Plenary – Day III

The final day was chaired by Ms Naava Nabagesera who interpreted the current domestic relations bill's provision on bride price and other cultural practices. It was then time to close the conference. The Guest of Honour at the closing was Mrs Margaret Sekaggya, Chair of the Uganda Human Rights Commission who presented the closing address in a paper that grounded bride price as a human rights violation in her paper: *Analysis of Bride Price from a Human Rights Perspective*.

After the closing address Ms Naava Nabagesera, Presidential Legal Adviser and Goodwill Ambassador for Mifumi led the conference to vote for the abolition or reform of bride price by a show of hands. The Conference voted overwhelming for the abolition of bride price. The conference then relocated to the grounds in front of Makerere Guest House for a lunch and a colourful closing ceremony. The national anthem of different countries were sung by the participants from those countries and an impromptu song composed as a "bride price anthem" and also sang.

The *Kampala Declaration* an outcome of the conference was read and affirmed by the participants recognizing the practice as a human rights violation, decrying its negative social, economic, health and legal impact on the status of women and calling on National governments to rise to their obligations towards international conventions and laws protecting women and children from inequality.

Mrs Margaret Sekaggya then declared the first International Conference on bride price closed.