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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women
and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled
“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the
twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives
and action in critical areas of concern and further actions
and initiatives**

Statement submitted by Guild of Service, Women for Human Rights, Single Women Group, and Widows for Peace Through Democracy, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

Prevention and elimination of violence towards widows, a neglected gender-based violence issue

On the occasion of the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Women for Human Rights, Single Women Group, Guild of Service and Widows for Peace Through Democracy take this opportunity to express our continued support for the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

In the light of the priority theme of the session, “Elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls”, we, the organizations representing widows of all ages in developing, conflict and post-conflict countries, draw attention to widowhood as an urgent and neglected cross-cutting issue. We particularly welcome the opportunity to highlight the often hidden aspects of violence perpetrated against widows and their daughters. Widow-related gender-based violence has not been adequately researched; nor is there reliable data or qualitative information on the causes, nature and consequences of this practice. This issue has been neglected by Governments and the international community. Furthermore, even where Member States have legislated to criminalize violence against women, laws are poorly enforced.

Widows of all ages, child widows, young mothers and elderly women in developing countries, especially in Africa, South Asia and the Middle East, experience many different forms of violence. In conflict and post-conflict contexts, which are more complex environments, the violence is exacerbated, leaving scars that last a lifetime and affect society and its future.

Widows are likely to silently suffer extreme and systematic physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence both within their families and in the wider community. Across regions, religions, cultures, castes and classes, widows can be stigmatized as bringing bad luck, being “inauspicious” or having the “evil eye”. The word for “widow” in many dialects is usually pejorative, synonymous with words for harlot, witch, prostitute and sorceress. In rural areas, widows’ lives are determined not by modern laws but by discriminatory patriarchal interpretations of religion, customs and traditions. Harmful traditional practices, such as degrading and life-threatening mourning and burial rites that oppress widows within their families, rarely get mentioned. Owing to illiteracy, location and economic, social and cultural obstacles, widows often have little or no access to justice systems.

Deprived of the right to inherit property and land, they can be “inherited” as chattel through forced marriage to a dead husband’s relative. Powerless, widows are often exploited as domestic, agricultural and sexual slaves. Mourning and burial rites forced on widows may include “ritual cleansing by sex” (a practice believed to exorcise the evil spirits), extreme restrictions on mobility, diet, dress and freedom of association. These restrictions can all result in grave psychological trauma, which can lead to depression and suicide. Impoverished landless widows who are evicted from their homes often find that their only means of survival is through begging or prostitution, which puts them at risk of further violence, stigma and HIV and AIDS. In the event that widows are courageous enough to seek justice for their rights

through the courts, they often provoke further physical and psychological violence because they dare to challenge deep-seated societal and patriarchal norms.

Many poor rural widows migrate to urban centres in the hope of finding employment to feed themselves and their children, where, again, their poverty and powerlessness leave them vulnerable to the worst forms of exploitation, including trafficking. In addition, the daughters of poor widows are also at risk of the violence of “forced child marriage”, which is violent in itself. A common action of poor widows is to remove their daughters from school and marry them off or sell them to older men, who are often widowers and infected with HIV. Many of these little girls themselves become child widows and subjected also to the stigma and violence that their mothers faced.

Armed conflict and post-conflict have resulted in a huge increase in the numbers of widows. A common feature of present-day conflicts is the separation and killing of men and boys and sexual violence, including rape, against women and girls as a weapon of war. In some conflicts, widows had to witness the murder of their husbands before or after they were raped. Widows often also face threats of violence and death, should they be brave enough to testify against the rapists at international or national tribunals.

Displacement as a consequence of war affects widows and their dependants disproportionately. Without any adult male protector, they are greatly at risk, whether in internally displaced persons or refugee camps or in flight, seeking safety across frontiers. In camps, they may lack adequate security and be in danger when they leave the site in search of water and firewood. A culture of “food for sex” often operates within the camps, with its particular impact on widows and their daughters.

Homelessness and displacement in the post-conflict transitional period leaves millions of uncounted widows without any sources of support. For example, widows in Kabul, unable to feed their children, are known to sell their daughters for as little as US\$ 10, while many widows have committed suicide through self-immolation. Widows fleeing the violence of a forced remarriage to a brother-in-law are kept in prison, ostensibly for their own protection, even though they have committed no crime. In Iraq, poor widows and their daughters are frequently subjected to rape, abductions, kidnappings and forced prostitution. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, widows and their daughters are subjected to multiple rape and sexual mutilation.

The greatest obstacle to effectively preventing and eliminating violence against widows is the lack of data: numbers, ages, numbers of dependants, needs, roles, coping strategies, support systems, legal status and access to justice. Also, the perception in the development community that women are a “homogenous” category ignores subsets of women, such as widows, who suffer particular forms of discrimination and abuse, which demand a strategic and specific tailored response. Conventional methodologies to gather data have failed, since widows’ isolation and the cultural taboo on any discussions of their personal status require alternative initiatives to give them a voice. Widows require financial and human resources to support them in establishing their own organizations and networks. In banding together, widows will have a collective voice, be able to access training so they can utilize national and international human rights mechanisms and norms and participate equally in decision-making bodies, such as peace tables and committees on law reform and constitutional redrafting. Associations of widows (as in Nepal)

can be supported in their work with their Governments to collect and disseminate data so as to influence policymakers and be key monitors of the implementation of new laws. Supporting widows through literacy and income-generating skills often ensures their economic empowerment and is a key strategy to protect them from family violence. For example, in the case of small fishers' widows in Sri Lanka, violence from relatives ceased once the widows became economically independent.

We, the non-governmental organizations listed above, concerned with widowhood issues, ask that the following recommendations be taken up by the United Nations system and Governments:

- Commission a United Nations report on widowhood in conflict.
- Appoint a United Nations Special Representative on Widowhood.
- Create a fund to enable widows' organizations to mobilize and ensure that the voices of widows are heard on their issues with regard to peace negotiations and legal reforms, including constitutional reform and law committees.
- Urge Member States to fund the collection and disaggregation of data based on marital status and family structure, including data to combat marginalization and multiple marginalization.
- Recommend that the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women consider monitoring the status of widows at the country level and adopting a general recommendation to States parties on this issue.
- Organize international meetings in Asia and Africa in 2014 on widowhood and its relation to human rights, poverty and justice.
- Acknowledge and urge Member States to recognize that the Millennium Development Goals and the full implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action cannot be reached if widows remain an invisible group within the larger, homogenous group of "women". There is a vital need to mainstream widowhood issues into United Nations action to achieve the Goals and the objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action, Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) and its subsequent resolutions, and all international and regional policy meetings.
- Include widows as a specific category in national action plans for implementing Security Council resolutions and for development.
- Ensure that widowhood is mainstreamed into the Millennium Development Goals, as poverty, social attitudes and lack of economic independence make widows targets of violence.
- In compliance with article 5 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, use all means available to provide formal and informal education to communities to change.