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Statement submitted by Guild of Service, a non-governmental organization 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

Challenges and achievements for widows

The Guild of Service is a national voluntary non-profit developmental organization that has been working with the vision of empowering widows, single women, conflict-affected women and children for the past four decades. The Guild works towards the creation of a society where women can live in equality and justice, empowering themselves in all aspects of their lives from skill development to economic independence and dignity. We work for women's economic and political emancipation and our work for widows is exemplary.

In India, our organization has formed a network with many others, such as the War Widows Association, and has been continuously associated with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) in South Asia towards the emancipation and development of widows in rural areas.

We are also part of the South Asian Network for Widows' Empowerment in Development, which has its administrative office in Kathmandu. The Chair of the Guild is also the Chair of the Network.

Challenges

The Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women did not cover issues of widowhood. All the Millennium Development Goals are regrettably silent on this very important issue. A reference to widows and their status and the issue of their marginalization has to be provided.

History has witnessed wars since time immemorial. Today, the picture is no different. The female population, especially in developing and conflict-affected countries, continues to have widows of all ages in the form of calamity widows, war widows, religious widows, ageing widows, farm widows and child widows, among others.

Poverty — through lack of legal rights to inheritance, land and property, illiteracy and lack of training for employment — forces widows and their daughters into economic exploitation, begging, drug smuggling, prostitution and trafficking.

Ongoing wars, attacks on soldiers and terrorist activities have resulted in a rapid increase in the number of widows.

It is essential that Governments and United Nations agencies specifically focus on the particular situation of widows if the post-2015 development goals are to have any realistic chance of being reached. Poverty, neglect and invisibility recycle and expand the poverty trap to embrace all those dependent on widows, with irrevocable consequences for society as a whole. No major donor (the European Union, the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States Agency for International Development), nor any United Nations agency, including UN-Women, has so far managed adequately to support initiatives to empower widows so that their voices are heard and influence policies and decision-making at all levels, domestically and internationally.

Major issues

There is a lack of reliable data on, among others, numbers, ages, needs, roles, lifestyles, experiences of violence, coping strategies, support systems and aspirations of widows in developing and, particularly, conflict-afflicted countries. The absence of such information obstructs the planning and implementation of effective actions to improve the living conditions of widows, their families and their communities, actions that are crucial to the fulfilment of the Millennium Development Goals. Alternative methodologies must be used to fill this gap, through United Nations agencies and Governments working with civil society, such as widows' organizations, to gather information from the grass roots on the issues. A global mapping and profiling project should be a crucial first step, followed by legislation and policy changes in every country to improve the status of widows, in order to begin to reduce this important barrier to achieving the Goals.

With regard to violence and stigma in widowhood, widows are likely to suffer extreme and systematic physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence, both within their families and in the outside community. In conflict and post-conflict scenarios, this violence is exacerbated, taking the form of, for example, branding widows as witches and degrading and life-threatening mourning and burial rites. Stereotyping widows as "inauspicious" and "evil" fuels torture, such as beating and stoning, and even murder. Regrettably, in spite of huge efforts by widows' organizations to have text on widowhood violence inserted into the outcome document of the fifty-seventh session of the Commission, no such text was included.

Poverty, marginalization and stigma have an irrevocable impact on widows' dependants. Children of widows are least likely to have access to education. Widowed mothers are forced to withdraw their children from school and depend on their children's labour, whether as carers of younger siblings or in exploitation on the streets as beggars (widows' children predominate among street children). Girls, denied education, are more likely than boys to be given, sold or trafficked into early forced marriage or into prostitution. The post-2015 goals should provide opportunities to ensure the education of all children, irrespective of their financial situation.

The protection of widows in conflict and their participation in peace processes must be enhanced, in conformity with Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#) and other relevant resolutions. For example, there are many Afghan widows and wives of disappeared persons who, under the Taliban regime, lost all their fundamental rights and freedoms and need representation in peace processes. It is therefore incumbent on Member States to approve a resolution on Afghan women and girls for presentation at the fifty-eighth session of the Commission.

Widows constitute a large part of the refugees and internally displaced persons worldwide and are the last to be resettled. Widows claiming asylum on grounds of persecution because of their marital status, who may also be victims of rape in conflict zones, often face insuperable problems.

With regard to inheritance, land and property rights, widows, in spite of modern legislation ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, continue in many countries to have their lives determined by interpretations of religious, customary and traditional codes that deny

them the rights to own and inherit land or property. A lack of land rights and property grabbing are common occurrences in many regions.

Few developing countries can afford to provide social security for widows. In developed countries, owing to the recession, many elderly widows dependent on State pensions are living in relative poverty as the cost of living rises. In a few developing countries, widows often face difficulties in gaining access to their pensions owing to bureaucracy, corruption and their illiteracy, which facilitates the seizure of their benefits by male relatives. Younger widows are vulnerable to economic exploitation, including domestic and sexual slavery. Widows require employment to survive and raise their children and are often vulnerable to being trafficked as domestic servants to countries where they lose all their rights.

In many traditional communities in developing countries (especially on the Indian subcontinent and in Africa), widowhood represents what might be termed a “social death” for women. Widows do not merely lose their husbands (the main breadwinner and supporter of their children), they are also robbed of their status and consigned to the very margins of society, where they suffer the most extreme forms of discrimination and stigma.

For the post-2015 goals to accommodate the issues of widowhood, widows need to have the direct and focused support of UN-Women. We would like to see Member States support the establishment by UN-Women of a special section at its headquarters and in its regional offices that supports widows coming together to form their own associations so that they have a collective voice to inform and influence policies to implement the post-2015 goals and further identify targets. The South Asian operations of UN-Women must be considered to be a perfect example to be replicated elsewhere.

Achievements

The following are notable achievements:

- (a) After so much struggle and decades of dedicated work by various developmental organizations, the issue of widowhood has now been recognized;
- (b) International Widows’ Day has been declared;
- (c) Organizations working for the recognition of widowhood have come together to form a network;
- (d) Writing this very statement is an achievement in itself;
- (e) In India, many groups of widows have come together and raised their voices so that necessary changes in policy could be made to enable them easily to claim their rights, such as their right to a pension.

Finally, we repeat our appeal to the Secretary-General, given the huge numbers of widows and wives of the disappeared in so many regions, to appoint a United Nations representative on widowhood.