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Statement submitted by Association of War-Affected Women, Global Fund for Women, Gray Panthers, Guild of Service, HelpAge International, International Longevity Center Global Alliance, International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, Mama Zimbi Foundation, Widows Rights International, Widows for Peace through Democracy and Women for Human Rights, Single Women Group, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Let No Widow Be Left Behind-Widows' Rights are Women's Rights are Human Rights.

Widowhood is one of the most neglected of all gender and human rights issues, and this neglect condemns countless of millions of widows and their children, whose lives are determined more often, not by modern laws, but by discriminatory interpretations of religious, customary and traditional law, after which extreme poverty and marginalization is often an outcome as a result of these discriminatory laws. Unaddressed, widowhood is, and continues to be, a root cause of poverty across generations, forcing widows to withdraw their children from school, and resort to begging, prostitution, and child labour. Widowhood is also a major component in early and enforced child marriage, which in turn has the great possibility to create more child widows due to the death or abandonment of the husband depending on circumstances.

She is subjected to harmful stigmatization rites, which include brutal and life-threatening mourning and burial rights. Specifically, these include hideous acts such as being forced to wash her dead husband's body and drink the bath water, or being forced to have ritual "cleansing" (unprotected) sex with strangers to purge herself of the sin of her husband's death, witchcraft accusations, stoning, scarification, and the shaving her body and head with unclean razors or broken bottles by male members of her community. In some cultures, the practice of levirate is condoned, where the widow becomes part of her husband's estate, and is 'inherited' as chattel through forced marriage to her husband's next of kin. She is subjected to extreme restrictions on mobility, diet, dress, and freedom of association, losing her rightful PLACE and VOICE in her society.

In the context of armed conflicts and civil war, many women find themselves as "half-widows", wives of the forcibly disappeared or "missing". They are unable to rebuild their lives, as their legal status is so equivocal.

Today, in the Middle East, ISIS is creating thousands of new widows including abducted Jihadi brides kidnapped into marriage with ISIS fighters, who then are killed or have disappeared. The Syrian regime has also created many new widows through its barrel bombing and other indiscriminate violence. Sri Lanka hosts the largest number of "missing" people, in the world, after Iraq and Syria, numbering over 5,676 individuals, leaving some 4,000 Tamil women not knowing the fate of their husbands, as well as some 89,000 Tamil war widows in the north and east of the country.

It is of utmost critical importance that the gap in data on widowhood must be rectified by using alternative methodologies to gather information, using, for example the Women for Human Rights, single woman's group (Nepal) Mapping and Profiling Widows Project which engages and empowers widows to work with local development committees to fill this gap. Within this data, it is also important to consider the phenomenon of "half-widows," the women whose husbands, due to armed conflict, revolution, sectarian violence and natural disasters, have gone "missing" or have been "forcibly disappeared." In addition, it is estimated that 500 million children fall victim to human rights violations as well, all because their

mothers are subjected to a life of widowhood. This results in over 785 million people, roughly 16% of the global population, who are impacted by this single event of widowhood. This is a critical demographic and one that must no longer be ignored.

In instances of widows as refugees, migrants, or internally or internationally displaced by acts of terror, war or natural disaster, the widow's most basic human right, her very own nationality is revoked or unrecognized, as is her ability to transfer nationality to her children. Without an identity, her ability to access her rights under state or host country law is almost totally impaired.

In all instances, a widow is subjected to Economic Violence. In all instances she is left behind. Her limited marketable skills, cultural barriers, and need to care for young children are among only a few reasons why the widow is denied any economic opportunity and faces no prospects of work, or at least safe or dignified work. Without income, the widow may no longer be able to educate her children, condemning them to an impoverished life at best, but more likely to a life of wrought of crime and vulnerability to indoctrination of radicalized beliefs. Widows may be forced to marry their young daughters as child brides for their "safety," thereby setting off a cycle of child brides and child widows. In the worst cases, widows are forced to sell their children in to the vicious underworld of human and sex trafficking. These forgotten children become the lost generation, with no hope, no freedom, and no opportunity. As a result, the vicious cycle of violence and inter-generational poverty ensues.

We strongly believe that global poverty can be alleviated by ensuring the human rights of widows. This must be attained through a two tiered, top-down and bottom-up approach.

Inheritance Rights; The most critical step in the attainment of human rights is securing inheritance rights for widows. This top-down approach means that inheritance laws must reflect the gender equality targets outlined by the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda and endorsed by Member States. In addition, the social and cultural barriers that prevent a widow from accessing her legal inheritance rights must be changed through dedicated social and public service campaigns, enlisting not only mass media but the ever important endorsement of local religious leaders and cultural/ethnic chieftains.

Finally, governments must criminalize all acts of harmful and degrading stigmatization rites against widows.

Economic Empowerment; Best practices and intervention by civil society has proven that by offering widows an economic opportunity through skills based training, financial literacy, access to micro-credit, and honing of entrepreneurial skills is critical in preventing this vicious cycle of poverty from commencing. In a comprehensive research report conducted by the Global Fund for Widows (www.amalproject.org) on over 1,500 widows who had received economic opportunity through training and micro-loan programs, there proved to be an inextricable link between economic empowerment, an improvement in their human rights status, and also achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda.

We wish to bring to your attention that there is no group more affected by the sin of omission than widows. They are painfully absent from the statistics of many developing countries, and they are rarely mentioned in the multitude of reports on women's poverty, development, health or human rights published in the last twenty-five years. The fact that they do not appear in any statistics, reflects, above all the lack of interest and consideration from which they suffer, as a result they do not enjoy the fundamental right to be included correctly in censuses.

Adequate and appropriate data reflecting the extent of their marginalization, the economic dis empowerment, the lost economic opportunities, the vulnerability to poverty on heading households with very little social and economic security needs to be collated for focusing on a policy to empower widows. A widow's lack of such rights is directly linked to global poverty. A widow's lack of such rights subjects her to violence. Finally, we also assert that the Sustainable Development Goals can only be achieved if widows' rights are underscored and acknowledged in the 2030 Agenda.

Importantly, we seek your assistance and championship in recommending that Governments adopt equitable inheritance laws and protect the widow's inheritance rights from cultural obstructions. Furthermore, we assert that economic empowerment of these widows is key to achieving, not only human rights, but also attaining the Sustainable Development Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, and 11 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Finally, in this Statement, we repeat our appeal to the United Nations Secretary-General, given the huge numbers of widows and wives of the disappeared in so many regions, to:

- Appoint a United Nations Special Representative on WIDOWHOOD
- Approve the drafting of a United Nations Resolution on WIDOWHOOD
- Commission a special report on "widowhood in armed conflict"
- Support a special desk dedicated to Widowhood issues at UN WOMEN
- Select WIDOWHOOD as the "Emerging Issue" for future sessions of the Commission on the Status of women
- Ensure that "marital status" is added to "gender and age" in the disaggregation of statistics.
- Emerging issue/Focus area should incorporate issues of widowhood