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### Commission on the Status of Women

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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and  
to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly  
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and  
peace for the twenty-first century”

### **Statement submitted by Association of War-Affected Women, Global Fund for Widows, Gray Panthers, Guild of Service, Widows for Peace through Democracy, 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.

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\* 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 nearly 300 million widows and 750 million of their children, to a life of poverty and marginalization. Such human rights violations are most often as a result of discriminatory interpretations of religious, customary and traditional law. In the rural context, where customary and religious law prevail, violations against widows occur with impunity. 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 forced 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.

Widows, especially those living in rural locations where customary and religious law supersede secular law, are 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.

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 intergenerational poverty ensues.

Strategies to ensure the rights of widows, especially in the rural context include:

### **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.

### **Property and Land Rights**

Securing land rights are also critical to the attainment of human rights for the rural widow. Unable to inherit her own land due to forcible interventions of her late husband's family, she is unable to farm, consume or sell the yield of her own land. In truth, the loss of a widow's husband is tantamount to living death for the widow herself, and nearly guarantees a life relegated to extreme poverty.

### **Rights Awareness Media Campaign**

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. Additionally, women themselves must be aware of the importance of securing a marriage certificate AND the critical death certificate, in order to be able to prove matrimony and their claims to inheritance.

### **Criminalization**

Governments must criminalize all acts of harmful and degrading stigmatization rites against widows as well as any act that impedes a widow from securing her legal claim to her inheritance.

### **Economic Empowerment**

Government procurement programs are the best way in which the economic power of widows may be harnessed for every country. Best practices and intervention by civil society has proven that by offering widows an economic opportunity through skills based trainings, 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](http://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.

### **Disaggregated Data**

Adequate and appropriate disaggregated data on widowhood is required in order for countries to be able to assess the extent of their exposure to the vagaries of widowhood. Countries must recognize that widows and their children constitute a meaningful percentage of their populations, and are in need of specialized needs and attention.

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 (SDGs) 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 UN Secretary-General, given the huge numbers of widows and wives of the disappeared in so many regions, to:

- Appoint a UN Special Representative on Widowhood;
- Approve the drafting of a UN 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.

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