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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

THE INVISIBILITY OF RURAL WIDOWS

This 62nd session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, which has, as its priority theme, “gender equality and empowerment of rural women and girls” must not, as it did in 2012, at the 56th CSW, which focused also on rural women, ignore the particular plight, poverty, and discrimination experienced by rural widows, of all ages.

Although there exists no reliable statistics, it is estimated that there are at least 285 million widows, of all ages, around the world, with over 115 million living in deep poverty, as the poorest and most marginalized of all poor women.

We must dispel the myth that most widows are elderly, respected and looked after by their families. There are millions of child widows whose lives are blighted forever, young widowed mothers, as well as elderly grandmothers who may be the sole provider of orphaned grandchildren. The poorest widows are those living in rural areas, victims of drought, floods, and climate change, without any social support, desperately struggling to survive and nurture their children.

Uncounted and unheard, their numbers are increasing every day due to armed conflicts, revolutions, sectarian strife, HIV and AIDS, natural disasters and Harmful Traditional Practices (HTPs), such as the underage marriage of girls to older men.

Widows in the rural areas of developing countries, especially in Africa, South Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, where many women and girls are illiterate, are particularly at risk of human rights abuses, ignorant of their rights, and unable to access an independent justice system to protect them from discrimination and violence. Their future is determined not by modern laws complying with international human rights legislation, such as the CEDAW, but on discriminatory interpretations of religious, customary and traditional law based on centuries-old practices that have their roots in patriarchy and regard women and girls as the property of men.

Inheritance and land rights are essential to rural widows, providing them with food security, income, and the means to shelter, feed and educate their children, and particularly to keep their daughters in school and protect them from early marriage and further exploitation.

Because data on women’s status is rarely disaggregated by marital status, at every level of gender statistics, widows are invisible.

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. Also, Burmese army, police, and ethnic Rakhine armed groups attack in the Rohingya villages since August 25, 2017, has led to many killings leaving many widows and thousands are fleeing towards Bangladesh in which many are rural widows with their children.

Furthermore, widows and their children predominate in refugee and Internally Displaced Persons’ camps and face particular problems accessing services and support.

Yet it is well known that uncounted millions of impoverished widows, especially those living in rural areas in developing and particularly conflict-afflicted countries,

face multiple and intersectings of marginalization, discrimination, abuse, and violence. In rural areas degrading and life-threatening HTPs in mourning and burial sites such as shaving and scarification, severe restrictions on diet, hygiene, mobility, “ritual cleansing” through forced sex with designated persons continue to occur; with little access to the justice systems and laws, international and national, that are meant to protect them from massive violations of their human rights.

It is a matter of great regret to those who struggled to draw attention to the status of widows at successive CSWs, that member states were unable to agree to a conclusion at the end of the 56th CSW IN 2012 when its priority theme had been “the Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls”.

That year many widows’ organizations from around the world joined together to write a statement drawing attention to the extreme plight of destitute rural widows, so often denied their rights to inheritance, land ownership or property, making them vulnerable to many forms of economic, domestic and sexual violence.

We NGOs representing widows’ rights and empowerment, had hopes that for the first time widows would be referenced in the Agreed Conclusions, as they were in the draft that was approved by the Europe bloc. But that was not to be.

It is vital, therefore this 2018 CSW focusing on rural women does not ignore the status of rural widows, but robustly addresses how to eliminate the many barriers these women face, chased off their homesteads, or forcibly married to a dead husband’s relative, their property grabbed, made homeless, without pensions or any form of social security, as they perform their crucial roles not only as sole heads of households, carers of children and other dependents, but as key economic workers, as farmers, labourers, producers, and market women.

The first target of SDG Goal 5 is “end all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere”. A further target is “to undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic rights to economic resources as well as access to training for decent work, credit, and protection from violence”.

Rural widows suffer from what Amartya Sen called “non-income poverty”, the poverty of loss of dignity, respect and of isolation. Indigenous widows in various countries also experience this stigma. Rural widows in part of Africa and South Asia, particularly the elderly, risk being accused of being “witches”. A Help Age International (HAI) report from Tanzania in 2005 reported the stoning to death of 400 widows condemned as witches.

Only a few Member States have criminalized the acts of anyone coercing a widow to undergo harmful mourning and burial rites, but there have been few prosecutions. Rural widows are unaware of such law reforms.

Many landless rural widows, experiencing such abuse, deprivation of rights, without any social security and without food security, migrate with their children to urban areas to seek work, as, for example, domestic servants. In towns and cities, these rural widows are at risk of economic and sexual exploitation by traffickers. They risk becoming modern-day slaves.

Rural widows must be supported, with land allocations and appropriate training to remain in their rural homesteads and provide for their families, in dignity. They require literacy, education, and training for income-generation. Also, training in non-traditional occupations as has been instituted in Nepal. Agriutrlcooperatives managed by rural widows have been established in Rwanda and elsewhere.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

To UN, international Community, Governments and CEDAW

Ensure that widowhood issues are mainstreamed in all the SDGs, not just Goal 5 on Gender Equality and that widows are not “Left Behind”.

- Acknowledge that rural widows are a sub-sect of women experiencing special forms of abuse that require specific responses and remedies, and neglecting their needs and refusing to support their roles has irrevocable consequences for the future.
- Support initiatives and “best practices” to fill the gap in data on widows. (Such as the “Mapping and Profiling of widows of Nepal, undertaken by WHR-SWG).
- UN to appoint a Special Representative to report on the status of Widows in selected countries.
- UN to commission a special report on the Issues of Widowhood in developing/conflict-afflicted countries.
- UN to acknowledge that Widowhood in developing countries is a root cause of expanding and increasing poverty and inequality across the generations.
- CEDAW to develop a General Recommendation on the rights of widows to protection from discrimination.
- UN Women to establish a Special Desk to address the cross-cutting issues of widowhood in context of SDGS.
- Mainstream Widowhood issues in the 2030 Agenda, Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325 etc.), and the VAWG agenda.
- Acknowledge and encourage research into how impoverished widowhood is a driver of under-age marriage, creating more child widows.
- Governments should criminalize all actions that are discriminatory, abusive and violent, particularly with reference to inheritance, land and property rights, and HTPs (Harmful Traditional Practices).
- Governments should legislate to ensure that all land registrations are held in the wife’s name as well as her husbands.
- UN and Governments should support widows to “band together” so as to have a collective voice to articulate their needs and describe their roles and hopes.