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Statement submitted by Global Fund for Widows, Guild of Service, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, Soroptimist International, The Tandem Project, Women for Human Rights and single women group, Widows for Peace through Democracy, and Widows Rights International, 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

Widowhood: 25 Years and still invisible

Beijing+25 agreed conclusions must include widows

Despite its global prominence and grave implications, widowhood remains one of the most neglected of all gender and human rights issues. Widows are not mentioned in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, although each of its 12 critical areas of action has relevance to their low status, vulnerability, and lack of protection from discrimination and violence. Nor have the agreed conclusions of the annual Commission on the Status of Women since 1997 given adequate reference to widows' needs and roles, although their numbers have increased exponentially due to armed conflicts, fundamental extremism, disease, and natural disasters. States parties must recognize that the Sustainable Development Goals and goal of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action cannot be achieved if widows remain an invisible group within the larger, homogenous group of "women".

Special attention is also needed to address the particular plight of uncounted millions of half-widows, wives of the missing and forcibly disappeared. The lack of official recognition of their widowhood status creates extremely specific and unaddressed humanitarian problems. Without a death certificate, half-widows have no access to government aid and pensions, where they exist, no inheritance rights, and in many cultures they remain bound to their marital commitments. This creates a state of inescapable legal, fiscal, and emotional entrapment.

Governments must adopt equitable inheritance laws and protect widow's inheritance rights from cultural obstructions. Furthermore, we assert that protecting 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.

Widows 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 forced ritual "cleansing" (unprotected) sex with strangers, witchcraft accusations, stoning, scarification, and the shaving of 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.

Importantly, the lack of appropriate personal identification, marital records, and children's birth certificates result in further challenges a widow may face in accessing her legal and human rights.

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 instances where statutory laws do allow widows to inherit, inheritance laws often discriminate against widows by tradition and custom. While most women may not own their homes, expulsion of widows and their children from a marital home leads many to homelessness, migration, refugee, or displacement camps, as well as increased physical insecurity.

Systematic oppression and unique challenges of widows in conflict zones

Armed conflicts create a disproportionately large number of widows and female-headed households due to men being displaced, kidnapped, detained, or killed. A recent estimate from the United States Department of State stated that approximately 80 per cent of the female marital age population in Syria are widows. Conservative estimates from local associates place the number around at least 45 per cent and 47 per cent in Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively. These widows face unique challenges as their previous system of traditional protection and social order often completely breaks down. Because conflict zones often have patriarchal structures in which women depend on their husbands for sustenance, single women often lack resources or ability to provide for their families, education, or land.

During conflict and especially post-conflict, widows are subject to crimes of victor's justice due to the alleged, perceived, or actual affiliation of their former husbands with enemy groups. Most recently, forced-marriage widows of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria fighters have faced massive systemic oppression within Iraq and Syria. These women are denied basic bureaucratic functions, placed in detention camps, targeted for violence, and denied any chance at re-entering society. The children of these widows often possess no documentation due to their birth under Islamic State of Iraq and Syria occupation; they are not allowed new documentation by the state and are essentially stateless. Due to their stateless status, vulnerability, and lack of a patriarchal figure, these children are especially vulnerable to extremist recruitment. The increased recruitment of these widows and children helps ensure the survival of violent ideologies, thus prolonging conflicts across generations.

Recommendations

Widows' organizations globally look to the sixty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women to recommend that all States parties adopt the following measures:

Inheritance rights

The most critical step in the attainment of human rights is securing inheritance rights for widows. Inheritance laws must reflect the gender equality targets outlined by the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 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 and religious media.

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

Improved safety conditions via access to, enrollment in, and availability of comprehensive social protections including but not limited to noncontributory (universal) social pension plans as well marital, identity and nationality, social, housing, health care, childcare, and education protections and benefits,

Economic empowerment

Best practices and intervention by civil society has proven that by offering widows economic opportunity through skills-based trainings, financial literacy, access to microcredit, and honing of entrepreneurial skills is critical in preventing this vicious cycle of poverty from commencing.

Establish and enforce special protections in conflict zones

The protections established in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 must be adhered to. In addition, specific protections regarding the unique needs of widows must be added.

Widows must play a role in all post-conflict reconciliation processes. Failure to include widowed women will ensure that divides between conflicting parties persist into future generations. Additionally, the international community must ensure that accountability does not solely focus on punishment for the perpetrators. We must put an end to collective punishment, the targeting of families of combatants, and harmful traditional mistreatment of war widows. Post-conflict efforts must emphasize restoring the dignity and rights of those who have suffered violations on both sides of the conflict.

Special attention must be given to half-widows. The wives of the disappeared must be guaranteed a fair, timely, and accessible process through which they may obtain documentation of death through absentia. This documentation must also allow for remarriage, inheritance, and social protection against harmful traditional practices.

Impact on children

The forgotten children of widows become the lost generation, with no hope, no freedom, and no opportunity. As these children feed into slavery, prostitution, and armed groups at dramatically-increased rates, the vicious cycle of violence and intergenerational poverty ensues.

Statistical invisibility of widows and widowhood

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.

Adequate and appropriate data reflecting the extent of their marginalization, the economic disempowerment, 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.

United Nations special rapporteur

In order to assist with these changes, it is appropriate to appoint a special rapporteur on the topic of widowhood.

Global Fund for Widows

Guild for Service

International Federation of Business and Professional Women

International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse

National Alliance of Women's Organizations

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The Tandem Project

Widows for Peace through Democracy

Widows Rights International

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