



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

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**Statement submitted by Global Fund for Widows, Guild of Service, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, Widows for Peace through Democracy, Widows Rights International, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

### Make widows matter

Women's full and effective participation and decision making in public life cannot be achieved until the harmful stigma surrounding widowhood is eliminated. Every year millions of widows fall victim to economic discrimination via disinheritance, social shaming, and harmful traditional practices. These abuses are global, ubiquitous trends that remain largely unaddressed at the United Nations. In 2011 the adoption of resolution [A/RES/65/189](#) made critical acknowledgments about the plights of widows, calling on the United Nations system to give special attention to the situation of widows and their children. Yet this call has gone unanswered. Widows remain conspicuously absent from the Beijing Platform for Action, and since 2011 no United Nation organ has taken substantive action relating to the plight of widows. Inheritance regimes around the world remain extremely discriminatory towards widows and their children. Patrilineal customary law is often enabled by, or existing in plurality with, inadequate civil codes. Addressing this unjust system of inheritance is of the utmost importance for the protection and empowerment of millions of widows and their children, and an imperative for successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The COVID-19 pandemic and multiple protracted conflicts has exponentially increased the number of widows worldwide. Now more than ever we are obligated to closely examine how cultures treat surviving spouses and their families following both unexpected and expected deaths. The Loomba Foundation Report on Widows of 2015, indicated that there were an estimated 285 million widows globally, but it is important now to get updated figures, to map widows in countries around the world, and to more closely examine legal regimes and protections surrounding widowhood.

The World Bank's working paper on Marital Shocks and Women's Welfare in Africa found that widows suffer from significantly lower overall welfare and nutritional status. While we regret that there is not further research and data available on the relationship between widowhood and poverty, there is a wealth of qualitative evidence and case studies supporting these findings. The economic disadvantage is largely due to a combination of institutionalized human rights violations. Often most significant for widows are asymmetrical inheritance laws, especially the imbalance of land inheritance rights. Additionally, sociocultural barriers and codes often functionally prevent widows from inheriting, often overruling or operating outside of statutory laws which protect inheritance rights.

In patrilineal cultures where men are the primary earners widows experience challenges and structuralized economic inequality. Limited marketable skills, cultural barriers, and the need for childcare all contribute to a lack of economic opportunity or safe, dignified work. Unaddressed widowhood 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 labor. Widowhood is also a major component in early and forced child marriage, which in turn has the great possibility to create the tragic phenomenon of the child widow.

In addition to economic abuse, widows are subjected to harmful stigmatization rites, which include brutal mourning and burial rights. In customary regimes widows may be accused of causing the death of their husband, and subjected to torturous rites including defacement (forced shaving of head/body, forced to not bathe for extended periods, burning/scarification, and covering with excrement), trial by ordeal (being forced to drink water used to clean her husband's corpse, various witchcraft rituals, and more), or ritual cleansing which entails unprotected sex with either a relative of her deceased husband or a designated traditional cleanser. In many cultures, the

practice of levirate is expected, 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. This practice is endorsed in the civil codes of several African nations. Other codified discriminatory practices include mandatory mourning periods and restrictions on the widows right to remarry. While the prevalence of these rites has declined in recent years, the true scope has been largely under-examined.

Often the lack of appropriate personal identification, marital records, or children's birth certificates result in further challenges a widow may face in accessing her legal and human rights. The prevalence of unregistered marriages and inadequate, complex, or poorly implemented laws relating to marriage and inheritance contribute directly to these complexities.

In instances of widows as refugees, migrants, or internally 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. This is most evident in widows who have been taken as forced brides of extremist groups such as the Islamic State or Boko Haram. Even after their rescue these women remained shunned for their affiliation with their captors. Children born in captivity lack any legal recognition and are further discriminated against for the crimes of their fathers. If unaddressed, the intergenerational damage caused by this broken family structure will continue to directly propagate the cycle of conflict and instability.

Therefore, we believe that this must be attained through a three tiered, top-down and bottom-up approach.

### **Tier 1: 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.

### **Tier 2: Economic Empowerment**

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 repeating.

### **Tier 3: Post-Conflict Precautions**

It is important to recognise that one of the major outcomes of conflict is the high incidence of widowhood and like all women their experience is multi-faceted, but at an exacerbated level, since patriarchal norms place widows higher on the vulnerability scale. Widows experience separation, loss of relatives, physical and economic insecurity, an increased risk of sexual violence, abuse, detention, deprivation and displacement. There must be a concerted effort by state parties to ensure that relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction interventions specifically target

widows, as widows, they are often unable to negotiate for themselves. It is important that widows are not just seen as victims of conflict but also as stakeholders in the reconstruction process and should factor their lived experience into rehabilitation and reconstruction interventions.

### **Statistical invisibility of widows and widowhood**

The sheer number of widows facing poverty and discrimination should mark their absence in the global conversation and demographics as a grave failure. They are painfully absent from the statistics and planning 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 attention 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 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.

We call for intersectional high-level political and diplomatic action to take necessary steps to document the status of widows, and advocacy to Make Widows Matter.

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