



Global Fund for Widows

Widowhood, Empowerment, and the Path to Public Life

The 65th Commission on the Status of Women

Side Event Final Report

#MakeWidowsMatter

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“Widowhood, Empowerment, & the Path to Public Life”

Side Event:

65th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women
March 19, 2021. 11:00 AM EST

Hosted by:

Permanent Mission of Sierra Leone to the United Nations
Permanent Representative – His Excellency Ambassador Dr. Alie Kabba

Moderated by:

Heather Ibrahim-Leathers, *President and Founder, The Global Fund for Widows*

Panelists:

Ambassador Alie Kabba

*Permanent Representative to the United Nations – Sierra Leone
Global Goodwill Ambassador for Widows in Peace and Security*

Hon. Minister Manty Tarawalli

Minister for Gender and Children’s Affairs – Sierra Leone

Hon. Minister Williametta Piso Saydee-Tarr, MA, BA, AS

Minister of Gender, Children, and Social Protection – Liberia

Ambassador Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

*Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations – South Africa
Executive Director of UN Women*

Ambassador Mohamed Edrees

Permanent Representative to the United Nations – Egypt

Mary Ellen Iskendarien

CEO, Women’s World Banking – United States

Dianah Kamande

Founder and President of Come Together Widows and Orphans Organization - Kenya

Hon. Minister Professor Margaret Kobia, PhD, MGH

Minister for Public Service, Youth, and Gender– Kenya

Report by:

Jack Onofrio – Global Fund for Widows

Moderator (Heather Ibrahim-Leathers)

This event was moderated by the Global Fund for Widows' Founder and President, Heather Ibrahim Leathers. Ibrahim-Leathers began the event by giving a brief overview of GFW's global efforts, highlighting the importance of economic empowerment. She emphasized the benefits of the Widow's Savings and Loan Association, GFW's proprietary micro bank model, which has demonstrated outstanding effectiveness in paving a path to public life.

Ambassador Dr. Alie Kabba

The opening remarks were delivered by *Global Goodwill Ambassador for Widows in Peace and Security*, Ambassador Alie Kabba, Permanent Representative of the Sierra Leone to the United Nations.

Ambassador Kabba spoke about how his country is recovering from a devastating conflict and outbreaks of infectious disease, both of which have created unprecedented number of widows. He reaffirmed that widows as a group have been left behind for too long, damaging the very core of society and resulting in a tragic intergenerational cycle of poverty and discrimination. He lamented the invisibility of widows in existing UN Resolutions, especially in the work of the Security Council.

In a bold and first even commitment, the Ambassador pledged to bring forward a resolution on widowhood in the General Assembly. He stated that it is time for a seminal resolution that will "protect, promote and advance widows fundamental human rights". Ambassador Kabba further expressed his hope that with the world's support widows may finally find their path and their voice. He outlined the direct connection between the empowerment of widows and the Sustainable Development Goals, reiterating the societal benefits of empowering widows.

Hon. Minister Manty Tarawalli

The Keynote Address was delivered by The Honorable Minister Tarawalli, Sierra Leone's Minister for Gender and Children's Affairs. Minister Tarawalli extended warm greetings from the government of Sierra Leone, especially President Julius Maada Bio. She reaffirmed that Sierra Leone is committed to the empowerment of women and highlighted some of the initiatives undertaken to advance gender equality. These include the ratification of critical international agreements, and the development of comprehensive national policies, including gender justice laws, and an effective Customary Marriage and Divorce Act. Minister Tarawalli stressed the importance of providing an enabling environment for all women. She noted that Sierra Leone's Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment policy specifically addresses the discrimination faced by widows and calls for specific policies to address the special needs of widows. In a historic moment, the Minister announced the commencement of the following initiatives,

- 1) The establishment of a comprehensive national widow registry, identifying widows' needs, age, and experiences with disinheritance, discrimination and/or Harmful Traditional Practices. She expressed her hope that this disaggregated data would allow Sierra Leone's government to establish best practices, mainstreaming the national and international response.
- 2) The Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs will propose various social protection measures for widows. The Minister noted that the Ministry is currently exploring an affirmative action employment plan via public/private partnerships, as well as school bursaries for vulnerable children of widows.
- 3) The Ministry will further look to provide space for widows to participate politically in local and national government as well as financial inclusion initiatives.
- 4) The Minister personally committed to ensure acts and policies in place are faithfully implemented.

In addition to these commitments, the Minister pledged to work with ministerial colleagues in order to mainstream widows as a human rights crisis that must be addressed nationally and internationally. She expressed her intention to work with Sierra Leone's UN mission in order to introduce a General Assembly resolution protecting widows around the world.

In closing, Minister Tarawalli stated that it is no longer acceptable that widows suffer from the sin of omission, reaffirming that it is clear the time has come for widows of all ages to be recognized by global community as a specific vulnerable and marginalized group and be accorded the respect and dignity they deserve.

Hon. Minister Williametta Piso Saydee-Tarr, MA, BA, AS

The Cornerstone Address was delivered by The Honorable Minister Williametta Piso Saydee-Tarr, Liberia's Minister of Gender, Children, and Social Protection. The minister began her address by stating how widows must be included in international efforts to "leave no one behind" and be part of the broader conversation on global women's rights.

She mentioned that Liberia has a large group of widows called AFL widows (Armed Forces of Liberia). This group is made up of widows of national army soldiers who were killed in the Civil War. The widows organized themselves after the war in order to create a united advocacy front in order to protest for benefits such as pensions. She spoke about their effective advocacy, and the importance of group savings models such as the Global Fund for Widows' financial inclusion innovation the WISALA, for economically empowering groups of vulnerable women such as widows.

The Minister mentioned that Liberia has widows all over the country, but the government lacks any consolidated information on widows. She lamented that Liberia's war widows have still not been properly counted and aided. In addition, disproportionate numbers of widows continue to

be created by COVID-19 and other diseases. She noted that there is a great need for disaggregated data especially because widows in Liberia frequently experience property grabbing, disinheritance and compelled levirate. Because of this, her Ministry is exploring the creation of a national widowhood registry and reaffirming their support for the inclusion of widows in the Agreed Conclusions.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

Prerecorded remarks were delivered by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka of South Africa, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UNWomen. Ms. Mlambo expressed her unwavering support for expanding protections for widows. She spoke about the unfortunate continued prevalence of property grabbing, disinheritance, loss of child custody, and levirate among widows across the world. In addition, she stated that we must work to ensure a legal environment for recourse and prevention and address these issues at a national as well as international level.

Ambassador Mohamed Edrees

Ambassador Mohamad Edrees, Egypt's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, hosted the first even CSW side event on widowhood during CSW63. After reflecting on this event, the Ambassador expressed his dissatisfaction that the empowerment of widows is not sufficiently discussed in UN documents. He expressed hope of the potential for change due to the combined efforts of the panelists and other advocates.

As stated by GFW publications, the numbers of widows is increasing and COVID-19 is a widow making machine. Edrees stressed that action must be taken to address this increase in global widowhood, as well as existing inequalities. He spoke on the importance of social protection policies and including widows as a specific marginalized group in economic recovery plans. On this topic, he noted that in 2015 Egypt and the World Bank launched a program to provide income support to vulnerable groups, with widows being major beneficiaries of this program. Despite the success of this program, he noted that more has to be done nationally and internationally and nationally in order to properly aid widows and include widow discrimination in high level meetings.

Mary Ellen Iskenderian

The CEO of Women's World Banking, Mary Ellen Iskenderian spoke on the work Women's World Banking does to provide financial products and services to low-income women. She noted that she had not been aware of the extent of widow-specific issues as discussed by other panelists and was struck by how closely the work of Women's World Banking relates to the needs of widows. Mirroring the comments of Ibrahim-Leathers and other panelists, she

stressed the importance of financial security as a means of change. The economic empowerment of women moves them into formal economy, giving them critical visibility.

Iskenderian spoke about how the number of female headed households has seriously increased in recent years, especially because of the pandemic. However, when we collect data on households we are not necessarily getting the entire picture, and many widows are remaining uncounted. Elaborating on this, she stated that stimulus/aid payments have been much more beneficial for families when they are made directly into women's accounts. This practice was adopted in India and Peru, both of which saw a dramatic increase in banked women and economic empowerment. She finished by stressing the global need to improve property rights, especially considering that the vast majority of banks require collateral.

Dianah Kamande H.S.C.

Dianah Kamande is a Kenyan widow and founder of Come Together Widows and Orphans Organization. She shared her personal story of surviving a brutal attack by her husband who then committed suicide. While recovering from serious injuries sustained during her husband's attack, Kamande was discriminated against and accused of murder by her former in-laws. Even being taken to court. However, while healing she met more widows like herself and was motivated to make a change. Kamande attributes her ability to organize and enact change to the education she received as a child. She noted that education is freedom, and every woman needs freedom.

Speaking on the situation in Kenya, Kamande stressed the importance of women led government ministry for gender equality. She stated that much of the progress that has been made was due to the efforts of the Ministry of Public Service and Gender. Working with this Ministry she was able to expand table banking groups, and widow's issues were mainstreamed in Kenyan politics, resulting in the creation of an affirmative action fund. However, she noted that widows still experience significant discrimination. In Kamande's capacity as a member of the anti-FGM board she discovered that some widows had embraced FGM as a form of income and worked with the gov to end this practice and provide other economic opportunities for widows.

Speaking on her partnership with the Global Fund for Widows, Kamande reflected on how she met Heather Ibrahim-Leathers online and worked with her to start the economic empowerment programs for widows. One group, the Vision Sisters Group made a profit of 5,000 USD due to their ability to choose their unique entrepreneurial paths.

Hon. Cabinet Secretary Professor Margaret Kobia, PhD, MGH

The Capstone Address was given by Kenya's Minister of Public Service and Gender, The Honorable Minister Professor Margaret Kobia. She spoke about the status of widows in Kenya, noting that she had instructed her government to gather disaggregated census data on widows. This data confirmed the seriousness and pervasiveness of widow discrimination, finding that within Kenya 40% of widows are under the age of 45, 40% have been disinherited, and 44% subjected to HTP. She stressed that this matter must be seriously addressed, and that the SDGs are intertwined with widowhood on all levels. Kobia confirmed that many widows find themselves with no income and facing deep rooted gender inequalities. Widows are also forced into unpaid domestic work, a trend that has only increased throughout the pandemic.

Minister Kobia confirmed that the Kenyan government is reviewing policies and legislative framework on widows as a marginalized community and commencing special outreach. She stated that she was working to strengthen widows' rights to property and inheritance through a new action plan. This plan is based off of the following observations, 1) recognition of widows as integral part of society and the government's obligation to protect their rights, 2) economic empowerment is critical, 3) understanding that the government must engage in a structured manner with widows in order to address full range of specific issues. The Minister expressed her hope that moving forward the government can mainstream widows as a human rights issue and noted that widows have a special role to play in the development of society.

Conclusion

The Global Fund for Widows was proud to welcome a diverse array of attendees representing twenty-three different countries across four continents. The importance of including widowhood in the agreed conclusions of the CSW was stressed repeatedly by panelists and audience members. However, despite the introduction of extensive language on widows and unanimous support of the Africa Group, as well as the U.K. and U.S. Missions, all mentions of widowhood were removed from the final draft. This was especially regrettable, and only reiterates the need for decisive action going forward.

This high-level panel's commitment to address widowhood discrimination represents a major milestone in the gender equality movement. We especially welcome Ambassador Kabba's commitment to introduce a resolution on widowhood at the UN General Assembly. There has not been a single substantive resolution on widowhood, and only one resolution A/RES/65/189 in 2011 which established International Widows' Day. The Global fund for Widows is looking forward to working with Sierra Leone's Mission to prepare, introduce and pass this resolution. We also welcome the commitments of Ministers Tarawalli and Saydee-Tarr to explore the creation of widow registries. The lack of reliable data is a major obstacle, and we hope that these registries may give a clearer picture of the discrimination that these widows face.

Our panelists all called for significant national and international improvements to improve protections and opportunities for widows. With the effects of COVID-19 mounting, this is more important now than ever. The failure to address the plight of widowhood has left hundreds of millions of women suffering, and this must be considered in plans to Build Back Better.