



Global Fund for Widows

Widowhood and Extremism

An Intergenerational Cycle

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Widowhood and violent extremism are fundamentally intertwined. As conflict creates new widows, dehumanizing discrimination, neglect, and poverty make them and their children among society's most vulnerable to radicalization.

The international community has largely recognized the unique ways conflict affects the lives of women and children through lasting social, economic, and emotional impacts. However, gender-based considerations must give further attention to marital status, and changes in it, when addressing post-conflict recovery and development. The effects of combat and extremism on families are mitigated by resilient social support networks, however, these networks are often unavailable or overwhelmed in regions where widows are most vulnerable. This is especially evident in developing nations with entrenched discriminatory attitudes towards widows and female-headed households.

The widow, often left destitute as a result of her widowed status, is a part of a uniquely vulnerable social group and is often directly affected by conflict. This report will outline the myriad of challenges faced by conflict widows, demonstrating why widowhood remains one of the most significant Women, Peace and Security issues.

In some cases, widows themselves are pushed into extremism. This may be due to radicalization; most evident among the infamous "black widows" of Chechnya. The "black widows" would often participate in suicide attacks, reportedly due to despair over their widowed status, as well as anger over the death of their husbands.¹ However, widows are more commonly forced into terror groups. This has been seen throughout the Islamic State and Boko Haram conflicts. In 2017, incidences of female suicide bombings in Nigeria rose significantly, with over 50% of attacks conducted by women, the vast majority of whom were abducted widows or girls.²

However, the greatest risk lies with the children of widows. Children raised in female-headed households are especially vulnerable to the push factors which drive individuals towards extremism. These push factors are exasperated through the discrimination faced by their widowed mothers. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's *Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups*, established the following push factors for child recruitment to extremism, which the Global Fund for Widows has linked directly to widowhood.

¹ Anne Speckhard, Khapta Akhmedova, *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?* Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2006, Pg. 63-80.

² Galehan. <http://theconversation.com/boko-haram-deploys-lots-of-women-suicide-bombers-i-found-out-why-118535>

Connecting Extremism’s Push Factors to Widowhood

Push Factor (per UNODC) ³	Connection to Widowhood
<p><i>Poverty, marginalization, discrimination and a weakened social structure.</i> These are crucial factors since special risk groups, such as street children, the rural poor, refugee children and internally displaced children may be particularly vulnerable to recruitment.</p>	<p>Widows are one of the most vulnerable demographics for poverty, marginalization, and discrimination. These risks are heightened in combat zones, and often result in both the widow and her children being in a high- risk group susceptible to recruitment.</p>
<p><i>Lack of protection, disruptive social contexts and experience of violence.</i> Children who are left without parents or families to look after them are more vulnerable, especially in conflict areas. At the same time, parents are often coerced into handing over their children; in other instances, parents may “volunteer” their children for ideological reasons or material benefits. Children who have experienced violence, trauma, and loss or who have been displaced from their communities also tend to be more vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist groups.</p>	<p>Widows suffer from high levels of discrimination and a broad lack of social support. They are often disinherited and disowned by their in-laws, leaving them destitute. In conflict zones, widows and their children are targeted for sexual violence, abuse, and exploitation. It is not uncommon for desperate widows to marry off underage children or contract them out for child labor.</p>
<p><i>Lack of a feeling of autonomy and identity.</i> Children who feel disenfranchised and without any real opportunities to achieve social success and those who may be searching for answers to the meaning of life may in their personal search for identity be attracted by violent extremist groups.</p>	<p>These feelings are amplified by the discrimination and extreme poverty often faced by widows. The families of combatants are often subject to scrutiny and abuse by security forces. In addition, the children of widows and combatants may be born stateless, or otherwise disenfranchised.</p>
<p><i>The notion of injustice</i> (whether real or perceived), including because of disappointment with democratic processes, widespread corruption, police violence, and perceived or real discrimination.</p>	<p>Widows across the world face grave injustices and near invisibility in the broader lens of the global human rights and humanitarian efforts. Widows and their children face discrimination which is</p>

³ https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Child-Victims/Handbook_on_Children_Recruited_and_Exploited_by_Terrorist_and_Violent_Extremist_Groups_the_Role_of_the_Justice_System.E.pdf

	amplified if the deceased husband was connected to a militant movement. Real or perceived affiliation with extremist groups may result in social exile for widows and their children.
<i>Lack of education and employment opportunities.</i> These represent crucial factors that may drive a child to seek opportunities within the groups.	The loss of educational opportunity for children is one of the most common consequences of widowhood. Widows often cannot afford school fees, and institutionalized discrimination prevents them from finding dignified work for themselves and their families keeping children from accessing education.

The unique systemic challenges faced by children of widows makes them one of the most vulnerable demographics for extremist recruitment. With the prevalence of widowhood being significantly increased in combat zones, their children remain as a pool of potential recruits for both active, reemerging, and future insurgencies. Data from the 2017 UDNP report, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*, shows that at least one in three extremist recruits in Africa came from a widowed household.⁴

“Because they consider me the same as an IS fighter, they will rape me and return me back [to my tent]. They want to show everyone what they can do to me – to take away my honor.” – Dana, widowed, 20 years old, Iraq.⁴

In modern insurgencies, such as the Tigray, Boko Haram, and Islamic State conflicts, hostage taking, and sexual violence, have targeted vulnerable women en masse. The survivors of these crimes then find themselves at heightened risk of discrimination through arbitrary detention, ostracization, and reprisals. Interviews in Iraq and Nigeria have revealed that thousands of women who have perceived affiliations with extremist groups are subjected to discrimination and abuse from government forces, vigilantes, and community leaders.⁵ This discrimination is especially apparent among the children of war widows. In Iraq, “Registrars refuse to register births to women with suspected ISIL husbands, and schools will not enroll their children.

⁴ https://www.undp.org/content/dam/denmark/docs/Journey%20to%20Extremism_report.pdf

⁵ <https://www.justsecurity.org/60426/isis-widows-boko-haram-wives-overlooked-abuses-iraq-nigeria/>

Mothers are turned away from welfare, and mukhtars (community mayors) won't let the families move into their neighborhoods".⁶ As a result, untold thousands of children are being raised stateless and without educational opportunity, labeled as pariahs within their societies, and immensely vulnerable throughout their youth and adolescence.

While socioeconomic factors play the most direct role in increasing vulnerability, these factors are amplified by the loss of social and emotional benefits associated with children having an active father-figure. Research has shown that involved fatherhood leads to higher achievement, better mental health, and lower levels of delinquency. In addition, father-child interaction has been shown to be important for the development of empathy and other social skills which aid in reconciliation and peacebuilding.⁷ As recognized by the Global Counterterrorism Forum, "family, as a conduit of culture and belief, can play a central role in shaping attitudes toward non-violence". Positive social networks, especially those within the family, have been shown to be crucial in shaping individual perspectives on nonviolence.⁸ While female-headed households are capable of providing these positive social networks, institutionalized discrimination and economic hardship place a disproportionate strain on single mothers, where these networks may not be available to them, or for those who lack adequate time or resources for full-time childcare.

The risk is perhaps most clear in modern day Syria, where the massive loss of life and displacement has left untold thousands of women functionally widowed. The children of these widows, many of them born into war, face extreme poverty and exposure to frequent violence. Lacking economic opportunity, education, and positive social networks, the push factors towards extremism are clear. These children risk becoming the next generation of extremists and victims of an intergenerational cycle of continuing violence. This pattern is occurring in conflict zones around the world,⁹ ¹⁰ while widows continue to slip below the radar in dialogues on Women, Peace and Security.

While widows are afforded protections under international law, the specific nature of the discrimination they face demands explicit mention in international covenants. It is imperative that widows and their unique needs be adequately accounted for in post-conflict reconciliation and development plans. Per the UN Peacebuilding Support Office, "it is important to reform property and inheritance law to protect the rights of women, and to ensure appropriate

⁶ <https://apnews.com/article/islamic-state-group-discrimination-ap-top-news-middle-east-international-news-21ffa86803964ed79b34d397735e1736>

⁷ https://www.un.org/development/desa/family/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2020/06/Parenting-Education_-the-role-of-fathers_-paper_CA.pdf

⁸ <https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Lifecycle%20Toolkit-documents/English-The-Role-of-Families-in-PCVE.pdf?ver=2016-09-13-141058-860>

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/01/world/asia/afghanistan-widows-war.html>

¹⁰ <https://news.trust.org/slideshow/?id=40ab36dc-9184-4691-86c4-b42cf7a20956>

provision is made for groups left particularly vulnerable in the wake of conflict, such as widows and women heading households".¹¹ As anecdotal evidence from the Global Fund for Widows' economic empowerment and inclusion initiatives shows, a widow's first investment is almost always in the wellbeing and education of her children. When widows are protected from discriminatory practices and have access to necessary social assistance networks, they become some of the strongest advocates for development, reconciliation, and peace.

Cover Photo: (Jon_Brown) A Young FDLR recruit standing at attention in the village Chai, in DRC's volatile North Kivu province. This region is known for violent conflict and discriminatory widowhood practices. A report compiled by 20 local NGOs in 2013 reported the following:

The rite of widowhood perfectly illustrates the persistence of customary law. This ritual involves the internment of the widow for several weeks while her in-laws take over the property left by their son and simply abandon the widow with her children. She therefore carries on her back the burden of the whole family. She does not even enjoy the property she had acquired with her late husband, the fruit of their combined efforts. Her eldest son, improperly termed the heir, in adulthood tends to expel her from the house which he then uses at his discretion, in violation of the Family Code which protects the widow.

In some cultures, the widowed woman is subjected to torture due to the presumption that she must have caused the death of her husband. In other societies, the practice of wife inheritance, which obliges the widow to marry a generally very elderly relative of her late husband, is commonplace. If a widow resists this practice she suffers reprisals such as loss of custody of her children, the obligation to repay the dowry immediately and leave the home without any rights. In principle, this practice aims to protect the widow by not leaving her alone. However, this is a violation of the freedoms accorded to every person, including the freedom to choose a marriage partner.¹²

¹¹https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/peacebuilding_orientation.pdf

¹² World Organisation against Torture, Women's Synergy for Victims of Sexual Violence, *Report on violence against women in North and South Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of Congo*, Alternative report for the Committee on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against Women 55th session, July 8 – 26, 2013.