



Global Fund for Widows

Operationalizing Widowhood:

Addressing its Intersectionalities Across UN Frameworks

A Virtual Side Event to the Opening of UNGA 76

Co-Sponsored by the Permanent Mission of Costa Rica to the United Nations

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UNGA Side Event
Operationalizing Widowhood: Addressing its Intersectionalities
Across Existing UN Frameworks

Monday, 27 September 2021, 10:00am EST

Hosted By:

The Permanent Mission of Costa Rica to the United Nations and the Global Fund for Widows

Moderated By:

Professor Yasmine Ergas
Director, Institute for the Study of Human Rights
Director, Specialization on Gender and Public Policy, SIPA
Columbia University

Panelists:

Amb. Maritza Chan Valverde
Deputy Permanent Representative of Costa Rica to the United Nations

Ms. Agnieszka Fal-Dutra Santos
Director of Programs – Global Network of Women Peacebuilders

Ms. Heather Ibrahim-Leathers
President and Founder – Global Fund for Widows

Ms. Stephanie Johansen
Associate Director of Advocacy and UN Representative – Women’s Refugee Commission

Ms. Beth Roberts
Director – Center for Women’s Land Rights, Landesa Rural Land Development Institute

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Virtual Event Summary Report

Monday, 27 September 2021

As the United Nations marked the Opening of its 76th session, the Permanent Mission of Costa Rica to the United Nations and Global Fund for Widows (GFW), convened a panel of expert policymakers and practitioners across thematic agendas for a discussion on widowhood and its intersectionality within existing UN frameworks. The panel discussed the ways in which widows are present within the existing work of the discussants, but also the overarching challenges gender practitioners face in calling for additional attention to marginalized groups and the underlying cultural gender inequalities that continue to persist in certain localities. During the Q&A portion, the group opined on ways in which gender sensitivities and policymaking can be better interlinked, and the ongoing need for data and open discussion to better mainstream gender equality and development agendas.

Widowhood and COVID-19

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, killing twice as many men as women, the nature of its “widow-making” phenomenon was noted by several panelists, including Ambassador Chan Valverde in her opening remarks. As a result of the rising death toll and current global conflicts, widowhood is another secondary and spreading epidemic. Ambassador Chan Valverde discussed the effect of COVID-19 on the world including how it has caused rampant hunger and soaring unemployment, effects that widows are already extremely vulnerable to. Many of the panelists noted that disaggregated data collection on widows, female heads of household, and marital status is a challenge to ongoing development programs and policymaking – something that will be particularly critical as the international community looks to overcome the setbacks incurred during the pandemic – in order to ensure that widows are mainstreamed into recovery measures and social protection programs.

Disinheritance & Development: Widows at the Nexus of Family and Economic Policy

Professor Ergas commented on how widowhood is perched at the intersection of family and economic policy, which disinheritance is a part of. Panelists observed that the close link between widowhood to disinheritance and family affairs has slowed the progress of widows’ rights as the matter is considered a “private” affair. Beth Roberts noted that land tenure is crucial for many people’s livelihoods, which is a challenge from a development perspective for poverty alleviation for widows, as land ownership is particularly critical in rural communities, it offers widows one of the only opportunities for economic independence. Heather Ibrahim-Leathers elaborated on how all of the human rights violations widows suffer, especially disinheritance, intersect with the 12 of the SDGs within the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Ibrahim-Leathers noted that in the UN’s review of the SDGs’ implementation, policymakers have agreed to take a multi-pronged approach to alleviate poverty, but few have taken meaningful steps to ensure comprehensive and inclusive social protection programs, citing examples of changing laws around inheritance, inclusion in social

protection programs, and more specific programming monitoring, evaluation, and reporting metrics.

Widowhood in Conflict and Humanitarian Emergency Settings

Panelists agreed there are numerous intersections between widowhood and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. Agnieszka Fal-Dutra Santos noted that while widows face unique challenges, they have been at the forefront of peace movements such as in Chechnya and Argentina. Using the example of Ukraine and the localization of UNSCR 1325, the experiences of widows have been brought to the fore in the peace process, which has convened stakeholders at all levels to discuss women's priorities and create gender-sensitive and inclusive policies. While widows are not explicitly mentioned in the WPS Agenda and are therefore largely absent or invisible at the policy level, discussion and implementation must be altered to incorporate and recognize the needs and diversity of widows across its Four Pillars, a theme that was emphasized by Stephanie Johanssen in her remarks on displaced and refugee widows. Existing UN frameworks are designed to protect against discrimination, but Member States must assume these responsibilities and be inclusive to the needs of widows at reception centers, in migration policies, and eliminate laws that discriminate against women and utilize the humanitarian policies in place.

Legal Frameworks Surrounding Widowhood

Widowhood is the starkest reminder that marriage and family law still impact and control so much of women's lives, and all panelists touched on the implementation difference between formal and customary law. Panelists saw many gaps in regulation and enforcement when it comes to the bridge the cultural and legal differences between formal and customary law. Member States continue to improve gender sensitivities and equal rights provisions within their legal frameworks, but the international development and gender rights communities can continue to spearhead change. Whether it be through utilizing technology to increase access to legal services, implement economic inclusion initiatives that move beyond income generation and creates pathways to public life, or shift social norms engaging women in work alongside their husbands and other community members, the interventions the panelists delivered offered the audience concrete perspectives on how global actors can continue to push and change the perception from, "my wife is my property," to being able to work side by side.

Conclusions

All panelists emphasized that widows are the forgotten women, facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, because they are women, because they are widows, and are even further disadvantaged when they are victims of conflict. Despite these challenges, panelists acknowledged and demonstrated that widows are resilient, making meaningful contributions to their communities through their agricultural, entrepreneurial, and peacemaking endeavors. Widows come from armed conflict, natural disasters, situations of migration and displacement, and public health challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, but all were urged to de-privatize the problem of widowhood and bring forward their independent existence within their policies and programming.