



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

#### Fifty-ninth session

9-20 March 2015

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”**

### **Statement submitted by Guild of Service, a non-governmental organization 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.



## Statement

Widowhood issues must no longer be ignored, and must be strongly addressed in reviewing implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Widows comprise 7 to 16 per cent of all adult women across most of the world. Over 115 million widows and their 500 million children live in extreme poverty.

Recent, unprecedentedly huge increases in the number of widows have resulted from an increase in armed conflicts, ethnic cleansing, HIV/AIDS, “natural” disasters and other negative impacts of climate change, and the persistence of such harmful traditional practices as early and forced marriages.

The families of households headed by widows are likely to live in extreme poverty owing to discriminatory customs and laws; restricted personal autonomy; the lack of inheritance, land and property rights; expulsion from the marital home; and the inaccessibility of capital, credit, employment, housing, health care, social security and technology.

Widows, primarily in rural sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, face such harmful traditional practices as discrimination and marginalization, as well as mourning rituals that restrict personal autonomy and prevent the economic and social mainstreaming of widows. Countries with legislation banning discrimination against widows tend not to enforce such laws.

Widowhood affects future generations as well. A widow’s children usually share her abject poverty and are more likely to be out of school, begging or in exploitative work, with the daughters caring for the family or married early. The cycle of poverty is unbroken, as the daughter of a widow, out of school, remains illiterate and untrained, with no access to decent employment.

Despite the reality of the physical, social and economic vulnerabilities of widows, there is, astonishingly, very little data available on them. This situation reflects the lack of interest and consideration from which they suffer and that prevents them from enjoying the fundamental right to be included correctly in censuses. The lack of income data disaggregated by head of household and marital status prevents the direct documentation of the economic vulnerability of households headed by widows. Without adequate data, it is impossible to demonstrate the economic, social and political vulnerabilities of widows.

In most national and international policies, widows are included in the homogenous body of women as a whole, resulting in the masking of the multiple social and economic vulnerabilities that widows face:

- (a) While most women are unable to own land or property, inheritance laws, by tradition and custom, discriminate against widows;
- (b) While most women are likely to be underemployed and paid less than men, widows are also prevented from pursuing education, job training and employment by mourning rites or an unwritten code of behaviour;
- (c) While most women do not own their homes, widows face homelessness, migration and increased physical insecurity, since they, along with their children,

are expelled from the marital home and may not be welcome in the home of their birth;

(d) While most women are given secondary status in patriarchal societies, social isolation and the avoidance of widows often result in their being denied training, employment, health care and education, as well as access to other information and opportunities;

(e) While large numbers of women face violence, widows and their children face increased gender-based violence in regions affected by conflict, since they do not have the protection of men.

In spite of international and national legislation to eliminate discrimination against women, widowhood remains the most neglected of all gender and human rights issues.

The Guild of Service, together with the South Asian Network for Widows' Empowerment in Development (a coalition of South Asian non-governmental organizations (NGOs)) and Widows for Peace through Democracy (a coalition of NGOs working in countries affected by conflict), urges that the Commission on the Status of Women, at its fifty-ninth session, which will focus on the review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, recognize the multilayered vulnerabilities that widows face as women, as widows and as poor widows.

It is imperative to recognize that widowhood cuts across almost all critical areas of concern encapsulated by the Beijing Platform for Action.

To effectively eliminate discrimination against women, it is vital to mainstream widowhood issues into all international and regional policy meetings, and in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals, Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) and the Council's subsequent resolutions, as well as in the interventions of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

We repeat our appeal to the United Nations on the vital need for the following:

- (a) A United Nations report on widowhood in conflict;
- (b) A United Nations special representative on widowhood;
- (c) A fund to enable widows' organizations to mobilize to ensure that the voices of widows are heard on issues related to peace negotiations and legal reforms, including constitutional reform and law committees;
- (d) The urging of States parties to fund the collection and disaggregation of data on the basis of marital status and family structure, including data that can be used to combat marginalization and multiple marginalization;
- (e) Consideration, by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, of the recommendation of the Guild of Service that the Committee monitor the status of widows at the country level and adopt a general recommendation to States parties on the issue;
- (f) International meetings in Asia and Africa on widowhood and its relation to human rights, poverty and justice;

(g) The urging of States parties to recognize that the Millennium Development Goals and the goals of the Beijing Platform for Action cannot be reached if widows remain an invisible group within the larger, homogenous group of women;

(h) The inclusion of widows as a specific category in national action plans for implementing resolution 1325 (2000).

We wish to acknowledge the following organizations for their support to this statement:

- (a) All India Women's Conference (Veena Kohli, President);
  - (b) Montage Initiative (Joanne Watkins);
  - (c) War Widows Association;
  - (d) Widows for Peace through Democracy (Margaret Owen, Founder and Director);
  - (e) Women for Human Rights (Lily Thapa);
  - (f) Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), India (Vinodhini Moses).
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