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Statement submitted by Widows Rights International, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Significant advances have been made in access to education and the creation of environments in which women thrive, though much remains to be done. Systemic and structural injustice continues to prevent women's potential being realised. Until such inequalities are uprooted from society, humanity will remain unbalanced and experience conflict and despair. The path towards prosperity being paved by global governance has many obstacles but there is hope. One group remains absent from these developments and yet is a vital component of hope for communities: widows and female-headed households.

Despite unreliable statistics, it is estimated that there are at least 285 million widows of all ages, with over 115 million experiencing life as the poorest and most marginalised of women. The neglect of this issue by decision makers at all levels must end, if these millions and their children are to play their rightful part in the development of a prosperous and peaceful world. A flourishing world civilization has to draw on the participation of all its people so their skills and talents can be engaged in the greater good. In communities where widows have been supported, their positive influence on the whole community is evident.

The face of a widow can be that of a child or a grandmother and all ages in between. Habits and perspectives that underpin an individual's whole life are formed in childhood therefore access to a quality education helps them develop their intellectual and moral capabilities. The period of youth is one of immense significance: a time of preparation and action in which the young can develop an orientation to service and a sense of social responsibility they will carry with them forever. Formal education enables young people prepare for their contribution to the life of their community, including the economy. If rising generations are to contribute to a flourishing society rather than merely to labour in an ailing system, such abilities must be cultivated. Throughout these key stages of life, the potential of each phase is denied to many of those who experience life in a widowhood family.

The family is a crucial social environment within which formative education takes place. The tendencies to be unjust or act with kindness, to be dishonest or trustworthy, are usually developed at home. Women are the first educators of the next generation so their education needs to be given priority. The opportunities for personal growth that enable widows and their children to be fully engaged in the life of society are restricted or absent due to widowhood. Their experience of "family" is limited. Indeed, the abuse they endure through stigma and discrimination can often teach them a despairing vision of life. This has to change.

The poorest widows are those living in rural areas, who survive the results of climate change and natural disasters, without social support or that of family. Unaddressed, widowhood continues to be a root cause of poverty across generations, causing widows to withdraw their children from school, resort to begging, prostitution, child labour and child marriage. Widows, especially those living in rural locations where customary and religious law supersede secular law, are subjected to harmful stigmatisation rites, including life-threatening mourning and burial rights, forced marriage to her husband's next of kin, restrictions on mobility, diet, dress, and freedom of association.

Many landless rural widows experiencing such abuse, deprived of rights, without social security or food security, migrate with their children to urban areas to

seek work. These rural widows are then at risk of economic and sexual exploitation by traffickers and are at risk of becoming modern-day slaves.

In the context of armed conflicts and civil war, many women find themselves as wives of the “disappeared” or “missing” and are unable to rebuild their lives due to their uncertain legal status. Where widows are refugees, migrants, or internally or internationally displaced, their own nationality can be unrecognized and their ability to transfer nationality to their children revoked. Without an identity, their ability to access their rights under state or host country law is crucially impaired. In the context of Agenda 2030, where no one should be left behind, widowhood is a clear indicator to being left behind in all areas of life. The Sustainable Development Goals can only be achieved if widows’ rights are acknowledged and upheld. The empowerment of widows is key to Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, and 11.

Widows’ Rights International (WRI) joins sister organisations asking states parties to consider key strategies to ensure the rights of women and girls experiencing widowhood, especially in the rural context:

Inheritance Rights: inheritance laws must reflect the gender equality targets outlined by the Sustainable Development Goals. We urge States Parties to adopt equitable inheritance laws.

Land Rights: Securing land rights are critical to the attainment of human rights for the rural widow as this provides food security, income, shelter, and the means to educate her children, keep her daughters in school and protect them from early marriage and other exploitation.

Rights Awareness: The barriers that prevent a widow from accessing her legal rights must be changed through dedicated campaigns, including with faith and community leaders as well as all forms of media.

Disaggregated Data: Adequate and appropriate data needs to be collated to ensure the formation of robust policies to empower widows.

Criminalisation: All acts of harmful and degrading stigmatization rites and harmful traditional practices against widows and acts that impede a widow from securing her legal claim to her inheritance should be criminalised in national law.

Economic Empowerment: There is a clear link between economic empowerment and an improvement in the human rights status of widows. Activities undertaken by civil society have proven that offering widows economic opportunity and human rights training is critical to preventing the cycle of poverty. Indeed civil society can offer many examples of best practice in regard to this and many other areas of work for widows.

WRI joins sister organisations in urging States Parties to:

- Appoint a UN Special Representative on Widowhood
- Approve the drafting of a UN Resolution on Widowhood
- Commission a special report on “widowhood in armed conflict”
- Support a special desk dedicated to Widowhood issues at UN Women
- Select widowhood as the “Emerging Issue” for future sessions of CSW
- Ensure that “marital status” is added to disaggregation of statistics

- Acknowledge that rural widows are a sub-set of women experiencing special forms of abuse that require specific responses and remedies
- Support initiatives and “best practices” to fill the gap in data on widows
- Acknowledge that widowhood is a root cause of expanding and increasing poverty and inequality across generations
- Develop a CEDAW General Recommendation on the rights of widows
- Mainstream widowhood issues in the 2030 Agenda, Women, Peace and Security and the VAWG agendas
- Acknowledge and encourage research into widowhood as a driver of child marriage
- Ensure legislation that protects land and inheritance rights for widows

WRI provides an exchange of vital information for all those concerned with challenging the abuse of widows. We support the international campaign to end harmful cultural practices that ignore the human rights of widows and lead to their dire poverty and social exclusion. We raise awareness and understanding of the discrimination and violence encountered by widows across the globe. We advocate for widows’ rights to be integrated into the human rights agendas of national and international agencies. We promote the emergence of a vibrant and informed network of community based groups, widows’ groups, NGOs, lawyers and human rights activists working on widowhood issues.

We urge States Parties and actors at all levels to create robust mechanisms that recognise the dire situation of widows and take fully funded action to ensure their positives futures are realised.

Co-signatories with consultative status with ECOSOC: Association of War Affected Women, Global Fund for Widows, National Alliance of Women’s Organizations, Widows for Peace through Democracy, Mother’s Union, Wales Assembly of Women.
