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Statement submitted by Global Fund for Widows, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, Widows for Peace through Democracy, and Widows Rights International, non-governmental organizations 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

Widows matter, and must not be ignored. Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction, requires that policies and programmes take into account the impacts on widows of climate change and crisis and that all action must be fully widow-sensitive and widow-aware.

Millions of widows, of all ages, from child widows and young mothers, older women and grandmothers, including the “half-widows” (wives of the missing or forcibly disappeared), have for decades suffered extreme, systematic and widespread discrimination and abuse, at the hands of community and family as well as state actors.

Covid-19, with its significantly higher mortality rate for men compared with women, is adding to the quarter of a billion widows documented by the Loomba Foundation in 2015, but accurate data on numbers of widows are not yet available.

Despite the strong language of the Beijing Programme for Action on “Women and the Environment”, very few of the recommended actions have been implemented; widows are not referenced. Widows and their families in rural areas whose livelihoods depend on their agricultural labour are still woefully under-represented in decision-making bodies concerned with environmental management, adaptation to and mitigation of global warming, disaster prevention and relief.

Widows of all ages represent a large percentage of the millions of ‘invisible women’, at risk of rising sea levels in small island states and coastal areas and, in landlocked areas of drought, soil erosion and desertification. Widows and their families are already being forced by climate change to flee their homes, driven by poverty and famine. The impacts of climate change and conflict fall hardest on the poorest and most marginalised, and therefore on widows and their families. Uprooted from their communities and homes they are vulnerable to violence and sexual assault while those who cannot leave may be abandoned and at risk of traffickers, slavery and child marriage.

In conflict areas, even long after fighting has ceased, land owned by widows can still be made life-threatening by land mines and IEDs. The lack of personal identification, marital records and children’s birth certificates are a particular problem for widows, whether they remain in their communities or are forced to migrate. The absence or loss of these documents affects their rights to land, often forcibly appropriated by their own or their husbands’ relatives, and their entitlement to social protection.

National and international agencies are often insensitive to the vulnerabilities of single women. Assistance made available as disaster relief therefore must be widow-aware. For example, single and widowed women living alone in opaque tents are far more likely to be raped than those in clear plastic tents.

Lack of documentation and low literacy impact on widows caught in ongoing conflict and migration. They find it difficult and struggle to adapt and acquire new skills through lack of access to retraining. In such circumstances widows are at risk of exploitation in the form of low wages, forced marriages and personal and financial abuse. Widow-sensitive needs assessment, prevention and protection against violence and exploitation are therefore essential to safeguard widows and their families as power dynamics change.

The risk of gender-based violence faced by all women increases with disruption caused by climate variability and climate shocks. In the absence of social controls

and legal protection widowed women and children are at greater risk of becoming targets for exploitation and gender-based violence. The most marginalised women, including widows, and girls suffer disproportionately. Existing social norms that define women's and men's work roles at home and in the community mean that in widow and single women households the burden of unpaid work falls on them alone.

At the same time, increased climate variability and climate shocks affect widowed women's access to work and livelihoods and add to the burden of unpaid work and domestic duties, and negatively affect opportunities for education. Climate change also means that women have to travel further for water and firewood. Travelling greater distances exposes them to sexual violence, affects productivity and mental health, and girls are pulled out of school to help with household chores.

Priority Areas for action:

Capacity Building, knowledge management and communication

- Strengthen and integrate the perspectives that widows can bring to climate policy and action. Their voice and experience will help to deliver gender-sensitive policy and actions. Outreach to the most marginalised women should target the most left behind women, those who have so far been invisible, among whom are widows of all ages.
- All training, knowledge sharing and communication of expertise and gender-aware climate activities must be reviewed to ensure they are widow-responsive. Covid-19 is a widow-maker, and it is therefore especially important both to enhance widows' voices and visibility and to promote their leadership in decision-making fora. The experience and agency of widows is essential to the task of formulating and implementing gender-responsive climate policy and action.
- All climate response participation and women's leadership programmes should be widow-aware. A woman's marital status is a vital factor in determining her access to adaptive strategies and support for her livelihood and family. Compared with other women, widows and female divorcees are disadvantaged by their low status in the community and family and therefore require specific support in the fields of agriculture, water management and social protection. Disaster risk responses must include consideration of the needs and rights of widows. This in turn requires a multi-agency approach.
- Gender mainstreaming that is widow-aware and clearly targets the most marginalised women should feature in dedicated climate finance and in approaches to climate smart Official Development Assistance (ODA).

Coherence

- Building capacity and strengthening widow-sensitive and widow-aware work must be a priority within the work of all UN agencies, the UN secretariat and other UN entities and civil society stakeholders. Widows are not yet mainstreamed in their gender-related mandates and activities. Training and education must be shared across the UN system to ensure that widows and their dependants are no longer invisible.

Widow-responsive implementation and means of implementation

- Follow up to the Paris Agreement must guarantee the respect, promotion and empowerment of widows. They are rights holders and are custodians of local knowledge and, if properly empowered as leaders in their communities, can and do actively contribute to climate resilience, ranging from disaster preparedness

to better environmental governance, such as forestry and coping with flooding and drought. Where widows are consulted as respected voices in their families and communities, society at large benefits – socially, politically and economically.

Widow-responsive monitoring and reporting

- Widows need to have a collective voice in order to achieve CEDAW articles. They have a vital role to play in successful implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on peace building and reconstruction.
- It is essential to gather reliable, disaggregated and comprehensive data on widowhood if the urgent issues of climate change, conflict prevention and the achievement of the SDGs are to be effectively addressed by the UN, member states and civil society.
- Tracking and reporting on gender-related, widow-sensitive mandates is needed in all programmes and action plans. Marital status must be included in all disaggregated data sets. Without this, widows are invisible to statisticians, analysts, policy makers and legislators. This is already evident in Covid-19 statistics – accurate figures for the numbers of widows have not been calculated, excluding millions from essential social protection and benefits.
- Priority must be given to the collection and use of disaggregated statistics on marital status, the numbers and ages of widows and their children; for assessment of their needs in the face of climate change/crisis; of the support systems on offer; and of the coping strategies and actual roles of widows and ‘half widows’ in building resilience and survivorship. The gathering and analysis of such data is a responsibility of all States Parties and is called for in SDG 17. However, lack of capacity, at both national and international levels, is an issue. Conventional survey methods are not always feasible, particularly in conflict- and post-conflict situations where widows may be homeless, undocumented, possibly illiterate, and moving between refugee and IDP camps. Alternative methods of data collection are needed to provide the comprehensive information detailed above, and there is a vital role for NGOs in alternative data collection to fill this knowledge gap.
- It is imperative that widows of all ages are properly counted and registered so that the impact on them of climate change and environmental disasters can be monitored and addressed and made visible.
