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

Statement submitted by Widows for Peace through Democracy, 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

According to UN Women's 2018 report, "Turning promises into action: Gender equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," it is estimated that nearly one in ten of the 258 million widows worldwide live in extreme poverty. At least 1.3 million of this number are child widows, but the true number is likely higher due to under-reporting (Millions of Child Widows Forgotten, Invisible and Vulnerable, Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage, 2018).

There can be no elimination of poverty and hunger, nor achievement of the SDGs if the situation and low status of widows is not addressed. Abuses directly linked to widowhood is a root cause of expanding and extending poverty and inequality down across the generations. Governments' continuing failure to prioritise this urgent gender and human rights issue is scandalous.

Widows of all ages are among the very poorest of all poor women, due to deeply entrenched patriarchal prejudices, and Harmful Traditional Practices (HTPs) that deprive them and their children of rights to inheritance, land ownership, access to justice, social protection and essential services and expose them to extreme forms of violence.

None of the SDGs are achievable unless Widowhood discrimination, abuse and poverty is addressed. They are still the largest category of left behind women, left behind and marginalised because too many are uncounted and unheard. Half widows (wives of the disappeared) face special challenges including extreme poverty as they cannot prove the death of a husband who has disappeared.

Widowhood is the root cause of extending poverty and inequality down across the generations, a key cause of children withdrawn from school, delivering girls into early marriage as child brides, or into hands of traffickers, boys into exploitation in child labour or swelling the numbers of unaccompanied child asylum seekers searching for education and decent work in other countries.

In many countries, widows do not have equal inheritance rights, and they may be stripped of their land, evicted from their home, or even separated from their children. They may be denied access to inheritance, bank accounts, and credit, which can have significant financial impacts for them, their children, and future generations.

Women are also much less likely to have access to pensions than men, so the death of a spouse can lead to destitution for women of older ages; widows often lack documentation to enable pension claims. On the other hand, child widows, girls given into marriage before 18 years old and whose husbands have died, experience multiple rights violations and face life-long impacts from premature marriage and widowhood.

To acknowledge, safeguard and advance widows' rights, here are some actions that governments, policymakers and each of us can take:

- Adopt social and economic reforms to improve widows' access to inheritance, land, pensions, and all forms of social protection.
- Ensure that fiscal policies and economic relief measures for COVID-19 recovery includes widows.
- End discriminatory laws and patriarchal systems that have long disadvantaged women. Women cannot inherit equally as men in 36 countries, cannot be heads of households or families in 31 countries, and cannot have a job or pursue a profession in 17 states. Such discriminatory laws, which rob widows of property, shelter, income, social benefits, and opportunity, must be urgently reformed to advance all women's rights worldwide.

- Empower widows to support themselves and their families and live with dignity; by ensuring their access to education and training opportunities, decent work and equal pay, to social protection, and by reversing social stigmas that exclude, discriminate, or lead to harmful and violent practices against widows.
 - Collect widow and age disaggregated gender data—better quality demographic information, which is broken down by age, gender and marital status to ensure that widows are counted and supported, now and in the future. The United Nations suggests a minimum of five marital status categories when collecting census data, “widowed and not remarried” included.
 - Support international efforts and advocacy to uphold and expand the rights of widows as enshrined in international laws and conventions.
 - Pay attention to the growing numbers of widows worldwide due to conflict, demographic ageing and the impact of Covid 19; and learn from and share stories, listen to and respond to the voices and experiences of widows and support their rights.
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