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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Joint written statement* submitted by Global Fund for Widows, Guild of Service, Widows' Rights International and National Alliance of Women's Organizations, non- governmental organizations in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[3 June 2019]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



Widows and their children comprise 10-12% of our global population, or over 580 million people globally. Alone, there are over 300 million widows globally, 115 million of which find themselves in abject poverty as a direct result of their widowhood status. These widows are not the elderly, peaceful women most Westerners have in mind. Rather, they are mostly young mothers, widowed before the age of 39 with families to feed and lacking resources. They are women in areas of conflict, whose husbands fell victim to war and/or violence surrounded by chaos. Most tragically, they are children as young as 10 years old, victims firstly of early and forced child marriage, and now victimized by their widowhood status, which they will carry for the remainder of their lives.

To understand the vicious phenomenon of the child widow, it is critical to understand the plight of widows generally. Primarily in developing countries, widows face three critical rights violations: Disinheritance, Discrimination, and Harmful Traditional Practices.

Disinheritance is a widespread practice which excludes the widow from rightfully inheriting valuable goods, assets and property. Instead, while widows mourn the death of their husband, in-law family members rush to government offices to collect death certificates and documentation necessary for collection of the deceased's assets. The widow is then removed from her marital home, barred from even collecting her belongings, children's clothing, and/or critical documentation such as birth and marriage certificates. If those practices did not prevent widow inheritance strongly enough, some cultures also practice levirate, which dictates the widow become part of her husband's estate, 'inherited' as chattel through forced marriage to her husband's next of kin. Left with limited skills, no access to education and children to care for, the widow has no opportunity to provide for her family. Prospects for work are extremely limited; access to safe and dignified work is unheard of.

In addition, the widow faces harmful traditional practices, which are culturally endorsed and aim to "cleanse" her of the "sin of her husband's death." In many regions across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, it is commonplace for widows to be cleansed through acts of rape and sexual violence, either by a village cleanser or in-law family members. Facing such violence, these widows lose control over their families, household finances, and their bodies.

Finally, discrimination facing women across the globe is heightened for widows, who face extreme stigma and ostracization in their communities. Surveying widows in Egypt revealed many of them had not left their homes since the death of their husband. Many reported feeling unimportant without the voice of a man to endorse them. They said, "When my husband died, I died." Together with these violations, she is subjected to extreme restrictions on mobility, diet, dress and freedom of association, losing her rightful PLACE AND VOICE in society.

Widowhood is also a major component in early and forced child marriage, which in turn proliferates the hideous phenomenon of the child widow. Widows may marry their young daughters as child brides for their "safety," thereby setting off a cycle of child brides and child widows. In some cases, widows are forced to sell their children into the vicious underworld of human and sex trafficking. These forgotten children become the lost generation, with no hope, no freedom, and no opportunity. As a result, the vicious cycle of violence and intergenerational poverty ensues. This phenomenon is unimaginable for those who have never seen it firsthand. But the stories of these girls are real and true.

In 2018, we rejoiced with the release of 100 Dapchi school girls in Nigeria, and three years ago with the release of the 100 Chibok girls who were being held in captivity by Boko Haram. But the stories of these Dapchi girls, as well as the thousands that have been left behind in the wake of Boko Haram, El Shabab, ISIS, have not yet been fully told to the West. These young girls have faced forceful suffering we cannot imagine: being purchased as brides by their captors using a tactic known as a "drive by." In reality, these girls were kidnapped from school when Boko Haram recruits drove their motorcycles into their village, tossing only a few coins to the ground in a symbolic act of a dowry payment, and driving away. Later, the recruits returned with lorries to collect their new forced brides. Once beautiful girls seeking education, these new child brides later return to us as widows at the ages of 16, 13, and even 10 years-old.

Returning to their villages as child brides many barriers prevent her from pursuing economic opportunity and security. She faces no prospects of work. Safe or dignified work is most certainly off the table.

The child widow who finds herself disinherited will face all the barriers described above for adult widows, but is even less likely to find justice in a court system than an adult widow, who already lacks access. With customary practices determining her fate, the child widow has little hope to live a dignified life. Customary practices force even child widows into “cleansing” forced sexual acts. These acts have become large transmitters of HIV/AIDS. Not only does the child widow lack agency in her decisions and stigma and ostracization as a widow. Now, she must live with this fatal disease for the remainder of her life, potentially passing it on to her children, and likely lacking the means necessary for proper treatment thus transmitting the disease to any future sexual partners as well. These girl children are at significant risk with little access to inheritance, health resources, justice, economic stability, and social empowerment. Without these necessities, child widows face an unthinkable struggle for decades, with no way out. As she begins to understand herself and the world, she is locked into a life of difficulty and hopelessness.

Not only are these rights violations preventing these young women from living the full and prosperous lives they deserve; this phenomenon prevents our global society from achieving all it can. SDG’s 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11, and 16 are all reliant on progress being made in various sectors, all of which widows are inherently a part of. We cannot end global hunger, poverty, or create sustainable cities and communities (SDGs 1, 2, 11), and much more without empowering these vulnerable women and widows. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights Preamble states that recognizing the inherent dignity and equality of all humans is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world. These child widows are being stripped of this very dignity and equality, preventing them, and us as a global society, from achieving true freedom, justice, and peace.

Women’s UN Report Network without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.