



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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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, a 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]

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



Widowhood impacts over 300 million women around the world, 115 million of which live in abject poverty as a direct result of their widowhood status. Widowhood is the most neglected of all gender and human rights issues, condemning millions of widows and their children to lives of suffering. These lives, determined more often not by modern laws, but by discriminatory interpretations of religious, customary and traditional law, become overwhelmed by extreme poverty and marginalization is often an outcome as a result of these discriminatory laws.

Widows experience violence in a variety of forms including economic, physical, and social violence to which they are subject because of their widowhood status. These are perpetuated by a widow's in-laws, family members, community members, and lacking justice systems.

Violence against women restricts these individuals' human rights and subjects women and their children to horrendous and undeserved outcomes. As a focus of many UN treaties and policies, we must address violence against women, which cannot be done without reaching widows specifically.

The plight of widowhood is extreme but remains unknown largely. After the death or disappearance of her husband, a widow finds herself in a life of struggle. Customary laws and cultural norms propagate a practice of institutionalized *economic violence against women* by endorsing property grabbing by a widows' in-laws or family, despite protections she may enjoy under statutory law. Additionally, social barriers prevent these widows from accessing justice and stifle their voices, rendering them ostracized and stigmatized. Without meaningful inheritance, skills, support, or opportunity, widows often succumb to a viscous cycle of poverty.

Without income, the widow, experiences economic violence, and may no longer be able to educate her children, condemning them to an impoverished life at best, but more likely to a life of wrought of crime and vulnerability to indoctrination of radicalized beliefs. Widows may be forced to marry their young daughters as child brides for their "safety." In the worst cases, widows are forced to sell their children in to the vicious underworld of human trafficking. Sons are not exempt from the gendered issue either; a UN report proved that 33% of extremist recruits in Africa come from widowed households.

Widows are also subjected to *physical violence* in the form of harmful traditional practices. Where more violent practices are observed, she may be forced into sexual cleansing rites with multiple strangers or family members, propagating *physical violence* against women and girls and the transmission of diseases including HIV/AIDS. Where a "bride price" is paid, the widow is considered property, and may be forced to marry her husband's next of kin. Having endured such atrocities, widows are silenced by shame, threats and taboo, stigmatizing them in an act of *social violence*, and silencing them locally thus preventing the issue from entering our global consciousness.

Further, widows can be subjected to harmful stigmatization rites, which include brutal and life-threatening mourning and burial rights. Specifically, these include hideous acts such as being forced to wash her dead husband's body and drink the bath water, or being forced to have ritual "cleansing" (unprotected) sex with strangers to purge herself of the sin of her husband's death, witchcraft accusations, stoning, scarification, and the shaving her body and head with unclean razors or broken bottles by male members of her community. In some cultures, the practice of levirate is condoned, where the widow becomes part of her husband's estate, and is 'inherited' as chattel through forced marriage to her husband's next of kin. She is subjected to extreme restrictions on mobility, diet, dress, and freedom of association, losing her rightful place and voice in her society.

The violence widows face is broader than mere physical violence. Violence Against Widows has a lasting impact on these vulnerable women and their families, communities and societies as well. It is pertinent that this issue is addressed to ensure the safety and well-being of women and children all over the world.

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