



# Economic and Social Council

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## Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-ninth session

10 –21 March 2025

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 Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba Memorial Foundation, The, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

As the most progressive blueprint ever for advancing women's rights, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is of great importance to all those who fight for gender equality and against discrimination. Yet when we look at one of the largest categories of women who are simultaneously the most marginalised, abused and disadvantaged of all, namely widows, we see that the efforts in recent decades to increase awareness and visibility have not translated into meaningful improvement or change.

There is no mention of widows in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and only one in the Beijing+5 Political Declaration and Outcome, which notes that "given the gap between male and female life expectancy, the number of widows and older single women has increased considerably, often leading to their social isolation and other social challenges".

### **Widows as a central concern in the struggle for gender equality**

For centuries, widows have been ignored by society: the poorest of the poor, invisible and unheard. Historically subjected to dehumanising rituals from widow cleansing to self-immolation, widows are often deprived of any inheritance and prevented from taking on regular employment. Cast into instant poverty, they are unable to provide for their children who are often taken out of school and, like their mothers, become vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. The impact on dependent children's life chances means that the scourge of widowhood often traps multiple generations in poverty.

In male-dominated societies, widows are seen as a threat to maintaining family wealth – a factor that entrenches discrimination against girls and preferment of boys in areas including schooling and inheritance also in families where both parents are living.

The plight of widows matters in the wider struggle for gender equality because for most girls and women, the prospect of widowhood is a greater and more significant risk than general forms of gender discrimination, and further because the gender discrimination that is faced by widows in all its forms is often more intensified and acute. Widowhood brings disadvantage in all parts of the world and must be understood as a universal risk factor for all women and girls.

The significance of widows as a demographic to the Beijing Declaration and Platform was noted by the United Nations General Assembly in its first-ever resolution on widowhood, [A/RES/65/189](#) passed on 21 December 2010, which recalled "in particular, the agreed conclusions endorsing the eradication of poverty through the empowerment of women throughout their life cycle adopted by the Commission on the Status of Women at its forty-sixth session, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women on 15 September 1995". It was in this Resolution that the General Assembly decided to observe International Widows Day on 23 June each year.

It is right to consider the progress made on this issue now, at the sixty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, since it has the objective of reviewing and appraising the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcomes of the 23rd special session of the General Assembly, including an assessment of current challenges that affect the implementation of the Platform for Action, the achievement of gender equality, the empowerment of women, and the part this plays in the full realisation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

One reason the issue of widowhood has remained hidden for so long is the absence of data. In 2002, UN Women (then the Division for the Advancement of Women) stated that “there is no group more affected by the sin of omission than widows. They are painfully absent from the statistics of many developing countries, and they are rarely mentioned in the multitude of reports on women’s poverty, development, health or human rights published in the last twenty-five years.”

The lack of improvement in the plight of widows worldwide has not been for want of effort. Over the last three decades the Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba Memorial Foundation (the Loomba Foundation) has worked alongside and in partnership with numerous NGOs with the active support of India, the United Kingdom and other Member States to raise awareness. The launch of International Widows Day by the Loomba Foundation in 2005 and its adoption by the United Nations in 2010 brought the issue to the attention of the international community, resulting in legislative action by numerous Member States and the development of empowerment and support programmes that have transformed the lives of many individual widows and their families, and yet the overall scale of the issue has continued to grow.

In 2015 the Loomba Foundation commissioned and published the World Widows Report – the first and hitherto only attempt to bring together known data and research about widows both country-by-country and worldwide. This yielded important information about the scale of the issue. With at least 258 million widows with 585 million dependent children, nearly a billion people overall are directly affected. The report brought together detailed research about customary practices in many countries and the impacts of conflict, natural disasters and poor working conditions, all of which produce higher mortality of working-age males, leaving mothers and children without breadwinners or means of support. Given the scale and the nature of the impacts on mothers and their families it is clear that failure to address the plight of widows represents an insurmountable obstacle not only to Goal 5 of the United Nations Global Goals for Sustainable Development, but also to Goal 1 (“End poverty in all its forms everywhere”), Goal 2 (“End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture”), Goal 3 (“Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages”), Goal 4 (“Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”) and Goal 8 (“Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”).

Yet while the World Widows Report brought together much of what we do know about the plight of widows, it also showed up the extensive gaps in our knowledge, where estimates had to be based on old data and where information was lacking, suggesting that the overall picture still underestimated the reality. And most importantly, this was a snapshot of our knowledge in 2015 and not part of a systemic framework of data gathering and research.

When the United Nations General Assembly returned to the subject of widows for the second time in its history, in Resolution [A/RES/76/252](#) passed on 15 March 2022 – due in no small part to the advocacy and efforts of the Global Fund for Widows – it noted with regret the continuing “absence of high-quality, reliable, timely and disaggregated data and gender statistics on the estimates of widowhood and particular information on the needs and roles of widows, which prevents comprehensive and useful analysis and policy action” – in other words, the underlying sin of omission identified in 2002 remained an obstacle to addressing the plight of widows effectively.

Given the focus of the sixty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, the Loomba Foundation has commissioned and published a new study to evaluate what progress has been made with regard to the status and condition of

widows over the last two decades – since the introduction of International Widows Day in 2005 and its adoption by the United Nations in 2010 – in eleven countries across South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and South America. The study, titled *Not Leaving Widows Behind* and authored by Cambridge University researchers Dr. Saradamoyee Chatterjee and Anushka Sisodia, concluded that while significant progress had been made in certain areas, nevertheless “notwithstanding the increased awareness, International Widows Day has not yet succeeded in significantly transforming the lives of widowed women in these countries”. The authors noted that the study had encountered gaps similar to those seen in the *World Widows Report*, “indicating that, even after two decades of UN recognition, substantial gaps persist... These gaps, combined with an absence of adequate policy measures, underscore the urgent need for a systematic and comprehensive approach to data collection and intervention, both nationally and globally.”

Given the urgency of this issue, we reiterate our call for recognition of widows and female-headed households, urging Member States and the UN to gather and share data to establish a systematic framework for addressing their needs, eradicating discrimination, and driving effective policies.

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