



# Economic and Social Council

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## Commission on the Status of Women

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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 Graduate Women International (GWI), Guild of Service, Global Fund for Widows, Mother’s Union, National Alliance of Women’s Organizations, National Board of Catholic Women of England and Wales, National Council of Women of Canada, Widows Rights International, and Widows for Peace through Democracy, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

### Make widows matter

The COVID-19 pandemic has hugely increased the number of widows worldwide. On-going conflicts continue to take their toll, always increasing the number of widows globally. As we come together at the Commission on the Status of Women, a year after the world began to realise the severity of the situation regarding COVID 19, we must closely examine how societies globally treat surviving spouses and their families following the deaths of husbands.

There remains inadequate data on the numbers of widows in the world. Whilst there have been attempts to measure the situation of widowhood, notably the Loomba Foundation Report on Widows of 2015, that indicated that there were an estimated 285 million widows globally, with little data disaggregated by marital status, the correct figures are inaccurate. In addition the civil society organisations who have accurate grass roots knowledge, are under resourced to obtain all the figures necessary.

Widows Rights International, together with our partners and allies, asks the UN Commission on the Status of Women, to ensure that action is taken by States Parties and UN agencies, to ensure accurate figures are obtained as soon as possible so that the situation of widows can be mapped nationally, regionally and globally.

Although there is insufficient research on this subject, it is well known by agencies working with people experiencing poverty, that widowhood is a contributing factor to poverty. A wealth of case studies highlight this. As a global community we need to ask ourselves why is there disparity between countries on their laws relating to inheritance? Even where laws exist to redress the imbalance of inheritance rights, sociocultural barriers prevent widows from inheriting. What actions can stakeholders take to ensure the law is implemented?

As is the case for women generally, widows experience the results of lack of education, limited marketable skills, cultural barriers, and the need for childcare. For a widow the situation is more challenging without a partner to share the burdens imposed by society. Widows are denied the opportunity of safe and dignified work and are therefore forced to withdraw their children from school, and resort to begging, prostitution, and child labour.

Under pressure, widows often succumb to societal norms and allow their daughters into early and forced child marriage. This inevitably leads to her daughters becoming child widows. Research has shown that sons of widows are more prone to radicalisation.

Widows remain conspicuously absent from UN language. No UN entity has championed widows and yet they are a substantial demographic – across all ages and countries. Addressing the situation of widows would positively impact the implementation of Agenda 2030.

Personal identification, marital records, and children's birth certificates often do not exist for widows. This causes grave challenges for a widow accessing her legal and human rights. The prevalence of unregistered marriages and inadequate, complex, or poorly implemented laws relating to marriage and inheritance contribute directly to these challenges. In conflict situations this vulnerability is exacerbated. Without an identity, a widow's ability to access her rights under state or host country law is almost totally impaired. Children born in captivity lack any legal recognition and are further discriminated against for the crimes of their fathers. If unaddressed, the

intergenerational damage caused by this broken family structure will continue to directly propagate the cycle of conflict and instability.

Women's full and effective participation and decision making in public life cannot be achieved until widows are enabled to gain fiscal certainty. Every year millions of widows fall victim to economic discrimination via disinheritance, social shaming, and harmful traditional practices. Indeed, global poverty can be alleviated by ensuring the human rights of widows.

Harmful stigmatisation rites are visited upon widows worldwide in addition to economic abuse. It appears that the prevalence of these rites has declined in recent years, yet their true scope has been largely underexamined and still scares the lives of millions of women worldwide.

Widows Rights International endorses the request of The Global Fund for Widows, Widows for Peace through Democracy, The Guild of Service, Women for Human Rights- Single Women's Groups, for a three-tiered approach working at the grass roots and through national legislation and international monitoring.

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