



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
13 December 2020

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-fifth session

15–26 March 2021

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 Women for Human Rights, single women group, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Women for Human Rights single women's group and its many partners, including our international umbrella organisation Widows for Peace through Democracy (WPD), welcome this opportunity to address the 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), on the subject of widowhood, in this most difficult of all times.

The priority theme of 'women's full and effective participation in decision-making in public life', as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls has particular relevance to the status of widows, of all ages, as well as the millions of "half-widows" (wives of the missing and forcibly disappeared).

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on the issues of widows. It has created tens of thousands of new widows of all ages, as mortality from the virus tends to be higher for men than for women. Numbers will rise in all countries as the coronavirus and its related effects on health, employment and economic stability continue to rage around the world.

Widows, recently described by UN-Women as 'largely unseen, unsupported and unmeasured in our societies' are among the very poorest of the poor. Yet the voices of widows are not heard internationally, regionally, nationally and locally in many countries. Widows are rarely represented in key meetings of decision-making bodies, whether international, regional or national. Their issues have not been taken account of by successive sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women meeting following the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, and now in the policy and programme responses to the global pandemic of COVID-19.

Their visibility, voice and contributions are essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the underlying premise of Agenda 2030, which is the realization of human rights for all, in all countries.

Some Facts

The poverty, powerlessness and stigma of widowhood is a key driver of taking girls out of school into early marriage. Widows cannot afford the opportunity costs of keeping girls in school resulting in child marriage to much older men. Child widows, who have not had the right to education, carry all the stigma and discrimination suffered by widows generally and are most at risk for sexual exploitation at the hands of traffickers. The sons of widows, also deprived of education, are denied the right to access decent employment, and may be easily recruited into crime, even terrorism.

The impact of marginalized widowhood on their dependent children increases the inequalities and resentments that fuel future conflicts and frustrate other efforts to secure sustainable peace, the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Agenda 2030, the full implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, and the achievement of the UN SCR Women Peace and Security Resolutions, 1325 and its subsequent ones.

Climate change and global warming is also impacting disproportionately on widows' issues over land ownership and food security. Chased from their husband's homestead by his relatives, they are food insecure, often left with the most arid or infertile land and vulnerable to floods, drought, and locust infestation.

The impact on widows due to conflict, Poverty, isolation and now COVID lockdowns, violence, lack of income, fear and depression are already experienced by

many widows who also, in the current emergency, face barriers in accessing health care, food, income, protection and support.

Widows' poverty is further exacerbated by the drying up of remittances sent by overseas sons to widowed mothers, to support them and their younger children. Sons, losing their jobs, in the cities or overseas, are returning to their widowed mothers' homes, imposing a further burden on these households already near starvation in many regions. The GDP of Nepal and many South Asian countries is highly affected by the loss of jobs and jobless citizens returning home because of COVID-19.

In relation to countries experiencing humanitarian crisis there is practically no participation of widows in impact assessment and decision-making. Despite the virus fatally affecting more men than women the voices and faces of widows are not to be heard and seen.

Recent data and case material collected by Widows for Peace through Democracy from countries including Afghanistan, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Syria, Iraq and Iran, illustrate how conflict-afflicted widows and half-widows experience extreme marginalization and are not represented in key decision-making fora. In armed conflicts, men and boys are killed or disappeared, leaving women as widows or half-widows, who are then often victims of sexual violence, sexual slavery and rape, as well as displacement. Even within Nepal too, after the peace agreement and in the transitional justice process, the rights and needs of 'conflict widows' have not been addressed properly within government programmes.

Data gathering on widows and half widows is inadequate. Policy making should be based on disaggregated data and on evidence, but information on widows is not systematically collected and analysed. Even in the midst of the Covid pandemic numbers of widows and their economic and social status is not being collected in a systematic way.

Resolution 1325 and the subsequent nine resolutions require member states to ensure that women are at peace tables, and that National Action Plans (NAPs) contain actions that will further empower women to be heard at national agenda and the means for transformation globally. But it is rare that widows are invited to participate in meetings, nor in post conflict decision making on constitutional and law reforms.

Call for action

We women's NGOS, working with and on behalf of widows of all ages ever since the Beijing Fourth World Women's Conference twenty six years ago, through our annual written and oral statements, for the CSW, have been calling for governments, the United Nations in all its entities and the international community to recognize and address the appalling discrimination, abuse, violence, and deprivation of widows' basic human rights that so many experience in many countries across the world.

We continue to call for widowhood to be prioritized on the CSW agenda, for it is a root cause of expanding and extending poverty across the generations, and frustrates other efforts to develop a stable, peaceful and just democratic society.

We ask again that in this most crucial CSW session, you will read our statement, and respond to our recommendations.

Recommendations

For Member States

Criminalise and take action to prevent violations of widows' human rights, for example levirate, "widow-inheritance" by a dead husband's brother or husband, "ritual cleansing by sex", stoning of widows as witches, and other forms of torture must be criminalized and widows given legislative protection from harmful traditional practices (HTPs).

Extend legal advice and social protection to widows denied inheritance rights, of harmful traditional practices enshrined in mourning and burial rites, chased off from their homesteads and made even more vulnerable to gender-based violence including physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence.

Ensure widows are supported to overcome stigma and prejudice and the many cultural, financial, and logistic barriers to accessing justice systems, especially if they are located in rural areas and are illiterate.

Covid-19 has exacerbated violence and additional economic burdens as widows do not have employment opportunities, and lack access to their right to social protection, necessary to cope with the impacts of the pandemic.

Take action and bring about reform to protect and promote the rights of widows, and all rural women and girls, to land and land tenure security and ensure their equal access to and control over productive resources and assets, natural resources, financial services and appropriate technology.

Give voice and participation to widows, extend access for their training and capacity building, so they can be take their place as elected or appointed citizens serving in national, district governments and on local councils.

For United Nations and CEDAW

Establish a UN Expert on Widows.

Commission a special report on widowhood supported by UN Women and the Office of the Commission of Human Rights to address the issues of this statement.

CEDAW to develop and adopt a General Recommendation on Widows.

Office of the Commission of Human Rights to implement a Human Rights Recommendation on Widows.

The statement is endorsed by:

Global Fund for Widows

Guild of Service

International Federation of Business and Professional Women

Make Mothers Matter

National Alliance of Women's Organisations

International Council of Women

Soroptimist International

Tandem Project, The

World Federation of Ukrainian Women's Organizations