



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
14 January 2004

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Forty-eighth session

1-12 March 2004

Item 3 (c) (ii) of the provisional agenda*

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: women’s equal participation in conflict prevention, management and conflict resolution and in post-conflict peace-building

Statement submitted by Empowering Widows in Development, a non-governmental organization in special 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 of 25 July 1996.

* * *

* E/CN.6/2004/1.

Armed conflict creates millions of widows and wives of the “disappeared”. In the aftermath of conflict violence often continues, increasing the numbers of bereaved women.

In the reconstruction process these women are so often neglected, their voices are not heard. They have no legal rights. Neither their immediate nor their long-term needs are adequately addressed.

These abandoned women should be crucial players in the reconstruction process, as they bear the sole responsibility for nurturing and raising the young generation. They are the main breadwinners for their children, other orphans, and the sick, wounded, old, frail and traumatised victims of violence and war. They are the very backbone of society and we should empower them.

Homelessness, poverty, vulnerability to violence from many sections of society, including their own male relatives, is the common plight of widows of war. The instability of the aftermath exposes them, whether old or young, to sexual abuse and exploitation from foreign occupying forces, militia and bandits because they are women without men. Years after peace accords have been signed, widows in the Balkans, East Timor, Sri Lanka, Rwanda, Angola and Afghanistan continue to suffer. The plight of the widows of Iraq today should be causing all of us concern.

Justice for these women is not merely an issue of bringing those men responsible for crimes against humanity to courts and tribunals, so that they are incarcerated in prison. The priorities in justice for these widows are for security, protection from violence, enjoyment of the right to education and training for paid work, for adequate shelter, the repair of their ruined homes, for the wherewithal to obtain proper food, health care and clothing.

There is little or no research or data available about these vulnerable women who have so much unused potential for peace and democracy building.

However, from the few studies undertaken on the issues of widowhood in post-conflict situations we know that, in general, war widows are left in extreme poverty, and that this poverty impacts most negatively upon their children. Many are left as refugees or IDPs and returning without a husband brings new problems in traditional societies. Thus, widows’ children are often without schooling, for it is their labour that is required to support the family. Besides, widows’ children may be so badly nourished, ill-clothed and poorly sheltered that, physical and emotional health problems often block their inclusion in education programmes. From Kosovo to Afghanistan, Angola to Bosnia, similar consequences of widowhood in post-conflict can be identified.

In Afghanistan and Iraq young widows and the daughters of widows have been sold into forced marriages, exploited labour, prostitution, and trafficking. Widows, because they have no longer the protection of a male partner, are exposed to rape and other violence. Traditional customs may deny them rights of inheritance or land ownership so that there is no possible escape from their poverty. In Rwanda, widows who were victims of rape during the genocide, continue, nearly a decade later, to face abuse and stigma, and without the most rudimentary health care for lack of funds. Deliberately infected with the AIDS virus when raped, they are routinely singled out for maltreatment and blamed for the spread of the disease, while those who have dared, with great courage, to give evidence to the Arusha Tribunal about the genocide, live in fear of their lives. They have had no protection when they return to their villages. Protection of widow witnesses before, during and after war crimes trials is essential if justice is to be done.

However, not one UN agency or international NGO has, to date, attempted even to count the numbers of widows in a population emerging from conflict. It is estimated that over 40% of adult women in Afghanistan and Iraq are widows. And in Iraq, women continue to be widowed as violence has claimed more than 10,000 Iraq lives since the formal war ended.

Widows have a unique role to play in conflict resolution, management, prevention, and in peace and democracy building. All of them, whatever the side their dead husbands belonged to in the conflict, have a common hope. They hope for peace and stability so as to bring up, house, clothe, feed and educate their children. They wish this next generation to live useful lives contributing to the rebuilding of their communities and society in general. It is imperative that the international community supports their efforts.

In the reconstruction process, widows' voices must be heard, and all efforts should be made to help them build up their own organisations which can represent their needs and articulate their long-term hopes. They must be involved in decision-making at every level, from the national to the village. Reforms in the law and new constitutions must reflect the rights they have under international conventions, in keeping with the Beijing Platform for Action, the Further Actions of 2000 and SCR 1325. Their value as peace builders is measureless.

There are some fine examples of widows, from opposing factions, working together to build the peace. Widows appear best motivated to bridge ethnic divides and unite fragmented communities because they share common concerns.

Given the huge increases in the number of widows of all ages due to conflict, it is time that their roles in conflict resolution and prevention are properly acknowledged. We know that poverty breeds conflict. One of the major root causes of the terrible poverty of millions of children following war is their mothers' widowhood and low status.

We invite this Commission on the Status of Women at its forty-eighth session to ensure that addressing the particular needs and roles of widows in peace building are written into the final documents. Again, we ask (as we have at previous sessions of the CSW) that the status of widows be prioritised as a further "emerging issue" in 2005. And that the UN Secretary-General appoints a Special Rapporteur on the situation of widows in post-conflict reconstruction.