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Statement submitted by Association of War-Affected Women, Gray Panthers, Guild of Service, International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, Mama Zimbi Foundation, National Alliance of Women’s Organizations, Widows Rights International, Widows for Peace through Democracy, Women for Human Rights, Single Women Group and Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 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

Widowhood Issues for the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goal Agenda

The Post-2015 sustainable development agenda promises to “leave nobody behind”, therefore we look forward to seeing widowhood issues sharply and adequately addressed at this 60th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.

Widows were consistently “left behind” in the Beijing Platform for Action, which made no mention of them in any of the 12 action areas. Neither were their needs and roles addressed in the Millennium Development Goals. Even United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, and subsequent Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security are silent on widowhood issues. Initiatives to eliminate sexual violence in conflict have failed to reference the special situation of widows in these contexts, or propose policies to protect them, analyse and respond to the underlying causes of such discrimination and make the perpetrators accountable, whether state or non-state actors, including family members.

Widows suffer many different forms of violence, (physical, psychological, sexual, and torture, as well as killing in the context of witchcraft accusations) due to the stigma of their marital status. Yet, shockingly, these practices received no mention in the 2013 Commission on Status of Women agreed conclusions on eliminating violence to women and girls. The abuse, indignities and exploitation of widows and their daughters in conflict and post-conflict environments demands urgent attention.

Scandalously, the status of widows, twenty years after the Beijing World Women’s Conference, continues to be among the most neglected of all gender and human rights issues.

Yet we widows’ organizations from around the world have been constant and vigorous in our demand, at every session of the Commission on the Status of Women since 1996, for practical actions to prioritize this issue and protect and empower widows, so far without success.

Governments’ and the international community’s failure to address this most important issue is particularly alarming given the huge increases in the numbers of widows of all ages, (including child widows) due to armed conflicts; revolutions; sectarian violence; HIV and AIDs; natural disasters; harmful traditional practices (such as child marriage) and the longer life expectancy of women over men.

Globally the demographic map is changing, with many more people reaching extreme old age, but the majority of older people are women, and many of these are widows.

Widowhood is a root cause of poverty across the generations, since in many countries widows suffer stigma, are the poorest of all poor women, and often experience extreme marginalization, abuse and violence; their lives determined, not by modern laws, but by discriminatory patriarchal interpretations of religion, custom and tradition. The neglect of this issue affects the whole of society and its future, for this poverty and inequality fuels instability and conflict.

Traditional practices deprive them, for example, of rights to shelter, inheritance, land ownership, food security, credit, protection from violence and even access to justice. They may be treated like “chattels”, and forced into remarriage with the dead husband’s brother, or coerced into degrading, violent and life-threatening mourning and burial rites, which may include sexual violence and rape. Few developing countries provide pensions or other forms of social security for widows. They risk seclusion and exploitation as sexual slaves within households, or exclusion and peripatetic lives ostracized by the wider community.

Such extreme discrimination has far-reaching and irrevocable consequences for the lives of the children of widows, especially their daughters. One of the most common “survival” strategies of impoverished widows is to withdraw their children from school, depend on child labour, or to sell or give away their young daughters into early forced child marriage. The daughters of widows are particularly vulnerable to child marriage and to sexual exploitation by traffickers. Widows themselves may be forced into begging and prostitution in order to survive and feed their children. Actions to increase school enrolment need to identify and address the reasons why so many girl children are withdrawn from school, such as the poverty of widowed mothers.

Illustrating the depth of the stigma experienced by widows are the words often used to describe them in the vernacular: “witch, sorceress, whore, prostitute”. Article 5 of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women requires member states to “use all available means” to modify social attitudes, but no government has been so far reprimanded for failure to implement this article.

In the context of armed conflicts and civil war, many women find themselves as “half-widows”, wives of the forcibly disappeared or “missing”. They are unable to rebuild their lives, as their legal status is so equivocal. Today, in the Middle East, ISIS is creating thousands of new widows including abducted Jihadi brides kidnapped into marriage with ISIS fighters, who then are killed or have disappeared. The Syrian regime has also created many new widows through its barrel bombing and other indiscriminate violence. Sri Lanka hosts the largest number of “missing” people, in the world, after Iraq and Syria, numbering over 5,676 individuals, leaving some 4,000 Tamil women not knowing the fate of their husbands, as well as some 89,000 Tamil war widows in the north and east of the country. Furthermore, widows and their children predominate in refugee and Internally Displaced Persons’ camps and face particular problems accessing services and support.

Rape is now a common feature and weapon of war. In conflict situations men and boys are killed and women and girls are raped. Widow survivors of genocides and massacres are potential key witnesses at war crimes trials, but those brave enough to give testimonies at war crimes tribunals require special protection and the assurance that they will receive adequate compensation and restorative justice. National Action Plans for the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and other United Nations resolutions relevant to women, peace and security, need to accommodate the widowhood issues in their targets and indicators.

Also in developed countries, widows, especially the elderly, may face relative poverty, isolation and neglect as austerity cuts reduce the value of their pensions, and social care is reduced and costs rise. Elderly widows are also vulnerable to violence, psychological as well as physical.

In both developed and developing countries, those at peace and those at war, it is essential that the gap in statistics is filled. Data collections must include information on numbers, ages, social support systems, coping strategies, of widows. Marital status should be added to the criteria to be used, along with age and gender.

Innovative methodologies have been developed to gather this information, through the engagement of widows' organisations themselves to "map and profile" the widows in their communities. There is much best practice to be shared, for example, the work undertaken by the Nepal Women for Human Rights, single women group.

It is vital that strategies to implement the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals accommodate actions to reduce the poverty of widows, empower them economically and legally and eliminate the violence they suffer from. Stronger policies are needed to ensure their equality, dignity and empowerment.

Widows should never be seen exclusively as passive victims of discrimination, but as key players in sustainable development, as crucial agents for peace in their communities and countries as a whole, and who need support so as to articulate their demands, describe their roles, and play their part in decision making at all levels.

Finally, in this Statement, we repeat our appeal to the United Nations Secretary-General, given the huge numbers of widows and wives of the disappeared in so many regions to:

- Appoint a United Nations Special Representative on widowhood
- Approve the drafting of a United Nations Resolution on widowhood
- Commission a special report on "widowhood in armed conflict"
- Support a special desk dedicated to widowhood issues at UN-Women
- Select widowhood as the "Emerging Issue" for future sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women
- Ensure that "marital status" is added to "gender and age" in the disaggregation of statistics.
