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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 Global Fund for Widows, Guild of Service, International Council of Women, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, Make Mothers Matter, National Alliance of Women’s Organizations, Soroptimist International, The Tandem Project, Widows for Peace through Democracy, Widows Rights International, Women for Human Rights, single women group, and World Federation of Ukrainian Women’s Organizations, 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.

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## Statement

### **Taking action on invisibility of widowhood in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and at sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women**

This statement is submitted jointly by global organisations working on widowhood, an issue that deserves immediate attention for the reasons laid out below. We hope that this sixty fourth session on the Commission on the Status of Women and Member States will take action on the issues outlined so that widows will no longer “be left behind” but will enjoy equality and their full human rights.

We note with regret that the status of widows of all ages, despite the exponential increase in their numbers in recent years, experience the extreme systematic discrimination, stigma, and exclusion in many countries, and has been relatively ignored by successive sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women meeting following the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

Widowhood remains one of the most neglected of all gender and human rights issues. It has serious implications not just for the widows themselves, but also for their children and the whole of society and its future.

This sixty fourth session provides a new opportunity to ensure the challenging cross-cutting intersectional issues of widowhood are prioritised on the international agenda.

This is urgent because widows were not mentioned in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action although each of its twelve critical areas of concern has relevance to their low status and widowhood issues have been barely referenced in the Commission on the Status of Women Agreed Conclusions which review the achievements of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and identify gaps in areas of concern.

This invisibility has occurred in spite of the many non-government organizations written and oral statements on widowhood delivered annually to the Commission on the Status of Women since the 1995 Beijing World Conference of Women, and the efforts made by several Member States to get widowhood included in the final texts.

#### **Why widowhood is an issue affecting all of society and its future**

Impoverished widowhood is a key driver of taking girls out of school, and into early child marriage, creating increasing numbers of child widows whose suffering is extreme, affecting their physical and mental health for the rest of their lives. Widows of all ages, simply because of their marital status, are victims of diverse, specific, and often degrading and life-threatening forms of abuse, discrimination, and violence that impacts irrevocably on the lives of their children.

The enforced poverty of widows, caused by the denial of inheritance, property rights, who struggle to survive without pensions or social protection, and who are often displaced and made homeless, deprives their children of their basic rights and hopes for a decent life.

Widowhood poverty causes unaccompanied child migration, forces children to live on the streets, and increases their vulnerability to many forms of economic and sexual exploitation, child labour, modern day slavery, child soldiery and makes them easy targets for recruitment into crime and terrorism.

The demonization of widowhood must be recognised as a root cause of increasing poverty and inequalities across the generations, and these trends foster the social instability and resentments that fuel future conflicts. They frustrate other strategies to ensure sustainable peace, achieve the Social Development Goals, and implement the Security Council Resolution 1325 and its subsequent resolutions on women, peace, and security.

### **Violence in the context of widowhood**

Programmes and projects to eradicate violence against women and girls need to identify and address the particular forms of violence that widows are subject to, which are often hidden from public view, enabling perpetrators to enjoy immunity.

In many countries in Africa and South Asia and beyond widows are subject to many harmful, degrading and life-threatening mourning and burial rites, such as scarification and shaving, ritual cleansing by sex, extreme restrictions on their mobility, diet, hygiene, and dress. Widows suffer physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence. The stigma attached to widowhood is reflected in the synonyms used for widows including “harlot”, “prostitute”, and “witch”. Older widows may be at risk of stoning to death as witches.

A few countries, for example, Ghana, Malawi, and Tanzania have amended their penal codes to make it a crime to coerce widows into harmful and degrading burial practices.

### **Gaps in data although an exponential increase in numbers of widows**

This huge increase in the numbers of widows is due to multiple factors, including armed conflict, revolutions, fundamentalist extremism, harmful traditional practices, HIV/AIDS, natural disasters, the higher life expectancy of women, and the often age disparity between marriage partners.

There is little reliable data but much anecdotal evidence of the rising numbers of widows of all ages particularly in conflict-afflicted countries, for example, Afghanistan, Columbia, Kashmir, Iraq, Nepal, Rwanda Sri Lanka, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Syria, Yemen.

Moreover, in conflict-afflicted countries abductions and forcible disappearances have created many “half-widows”, women who do not know the whereabouts of their missing husbands. The lives of many of these uncounted women are often more wretched than even that of full widows, and their voices also need to be heard at peace tables. They face intimidation and harassment when they attempt to seek information. Without their husband’s death certificate, these half-widows have no access to pensions – where they exist – or any forms of social protection and support. They are left in a limbo status where they are neither widows nor can they marry again.

Many widows of all ages, wives of the missing and their children often end up in camps for those internally displaced or for refugees and are often the last to be resettled.

### **The role of the law**

In many countries, widows’ lives are determined, not by modern laws and international conventions, but by patriarchal interpretations of traditional, religious customary codes that deny widows their basic human rights and access to justice, expose them to economic and sexual exploitations, deny them rights to inheritance, or protection from violence. Widows, especially rural and illiterate often have little or no knowledge of their rights and have no real access to justice because the geographic, bureaucratic, financial and cultural obstacles to their getting a fair

hearing in court are so immense. Fear of violence also often prevent widows from attempting to take their husband's family to court to obtain their rights to property or keep custody of their children.

Among most communities in Sub-Saharan Africa and some rural parts of Afghanistan, young widows are required to be inherited by a brother-in-law. They may be forced to marry a husband's brother or prohibited from remarrying someone of their choice. Wife inheritance has led to the spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa in that an inheritor is likely to be married and may have already had relations with several women. He would then infect his first wife and the widow he has inherited.

However, even widows in developed countries often suffer from non-income poverty, isolated, lacking respect and dignity, and many are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Pensions, where they exist, are often inadequate to support a decent life as their value has been reduced through austerity.

### **Support widows to band together and form their own organisations**

Widows must not be seen exclusively as poor, vulnerable and needy but they should be recognised as key agents of change and peace, responsible for rearing and nurturing the next generation alone as single mothers and playing a crucial role in restoring the social fabric of their communities and their countries.

It is therefore vital that widows are supported to form their own associations, so they can have a collective voice to articulate their needs and describe their crucial economic and social roles as single parents, carers of the elderly, sick, and wounded, as workers and as heads of households. Widows must be represented at peace tables, and in relevant international, regional, national and local decision-making bodies. A model example of this is seen in Women for Human Rights, single women group.

Member States' national action plans to implement Security Council Resolution 1325 should include widows under the relevant targets and indicators and the needs, priorities, and concerns of all the widow survivors of conflict-related rape and sexual slavery must be addressed and ensured of holistic care.

### **What widows need**

Widowhood non-government organizations – international and national – are asking the United Nations to commission a special report on widowhood, appoint a Special Rapporteur on Widowhood in Conflict, for a Human Rights Council resolution on widowhood, and for UN Women to establish a special desk to address the complex and challenging issues outlined in this statement.