



RECOMMENDATIONS AGREED AT THE WIDOWS FOR PEACE THROUGH DEMOCRACY (WPD) PARALLEL EVENT ON FRIDAY, MARCH 16TH

UN COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

PRIORITY THEME: WOMEN AND GIRLS LIVING IN RURAL AREAS

“Why Widows Matter for the Achievement of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda”

Baroness Hodgson, C.B.E. chaired this event, with a brief introduction on its scope and objectives by WPD Director, Margaret Owen. Its distinguished panelists and attendees were asked to focus on concrete solutions and best practices to respond effectively to the challenging, cross-cutting, intersectional issues of widowhood that have been ignored for so long at past CSWs, never mentioned in the BPFA, nor, alas, in any of their past Agreed Conclusions.

We know very well the widows' stories from many years of campaigning to get their voices heard at the CSW. These have graphically described discrimination, abuse, and torture through harmful traditional practices, stigma, extreme poverty and specific types of physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence that widows experience due to their marital status.

Therefore the panel's focus was on standard setting and what should be UN Women, governmental and the international community's *practical* responses to eliminate the systematic, widespread violation of widows' human rights that result in their extreme poverty and vulnerability to violence. Also, what concrete steps they need to take to recognize and support widows' key social and economic roles in their families and in the wider community; as sole caregivers of children and other dependents, often economically and sexually exploited in modern day slavery, treated like chattels to be inherited as part of the dead husband's estate; forced to depend on child labor and begging and exploited labor to survive.



Widowhood is also a major contributing factor to intergenerational poverty, as children of widows are often denied, through poverty, education and training leading to their economic and social exploitation. In consequence, millions of young people are denied a decent life, and become a cost to their country, rather than a source of future national prosperity and peace. They risk becoming street children or unaccompanied migrant and asylum seekers. Evidence shows that the children of conflict-afflicted widows are vulnerable to enlistment as child soldiers and even suicide bombers.

Distressingly, our nominated rural widows invited to attend CSW were denied visas. Nevertheless, rural widow Rosaline Orwa, of the Rona Foundation, Kenya, spoke to us on video, and, bravely breaking taboos, described the stigma of widowhood, in particular the ritual cleansing through sex, forced upon widows during mourning and burial rites. She has set up a widows' organization that provides support for widows, training them in income-generating activities and protecting them from violence and is a foster mother to 20 orphans.

Following the panelists, there were impressive comments from the floor, including a description, by Heather Ibrahim-Leathers of the Global Fund for Widows, of micro-credit programs for Egyptian widows. Lois Herman read her own poem "I am a widow".

The general consensus was that, rather than addressing widowhood alongside other marginalized groups as in the LNOB agenda, it would have been far preferable for UN Women to have acknowledged widowhood as a *standalone* issue and to have hosted an event *within the UN Building*, so that government delegates could have attended and learnt from it.

It was suggested that "The 'Accountability ToolKit" recently launched by the "Women Enabled International" could be used for advocacy at the UNto protect the human rights of widows of all ages and that the UN's new mechanism to address the significant gaps in national and international statistics on ageing should be adapted to gather data on widows of *all* ages. We need a *digital signature campaign* to raise awareness on this issue. Now, as the 2030 SDG agenda is developed, is the time.



RECOMMENDATIONS TO UN WOMEN, MEMBER STATES, AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- Recognize that Widowhood is a root cause of poverty and inequality, extending and expanding it across the generations. Therefore this issue must be addressed in all Member States' strategies to achieve all the 17 SDGs. If ignored, its goals to eradicate poverty and hunger, and LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND will not be achieved.
- Establish an Observatory on widowhood issues; create a Depository for widows' stories describing their lives, experiences of violence, survival strategies, support systems, best practices and their hopes.
- Set up a database on widowhood; encourage research, for example, making the correlation between widowhood and the withdrawing of girls from school and early marriage which creates more child widows..
- Violation of widow rights must be recognized as a grave development issue, not only a human rights and gender one, since widowhood is a root cause of poverty and inequality across the generations.
- Governments, backed by UN Women, must support, with appropriate resources, financial and training in capacity building, widows to “band together”, locally and nationally, to form their own organizations, so as to have a collective voice to articulate their needs; describe and get recognition for their roles; participate in decision making at every level, including constitution and law reform; and at peace tables in context of UNSCR 1325.
- The gap in data, (widows are mostly uncounted) and quantitative and qualitative information on widows' lives must be filled through supporting widows' associations to work together with state authorities at the local, district and national level to “map and profile” widows' lives (see best practice from WHR SWG Nepal).
- Eliminate impunity for violations of widows' basic human rights by enforcing accountability through the criminal and civil courts, criminalizing all actions that deprive widows of their inheritance, land rights, custody, and criminalizing HTPs in mourning and burial rites, whether by non-state or state agents and officials (see Malawi additions to their penal law).



- Governments should legislate to ensure that land registrations are held in the wife's name as well as her husband's and that widows are registered in land title automatically on the death of their husband (see India new initiatives), and to criminalize "chasing-off" and witch hunting to grab property.
- UN Women should open a special WIDOWHOOD desk, in acknowledgement of the ever increasing numbers of widows of all ages, from children to elderly grandmothers, due to armed conflict, revolution, religious and sectarian violence, HIV and AIDS, HTPS, and natural disasters. This would give recognition of the neglect of this complex, cross-cutting important gender issue.
- UN Women, in consultation with relevant Member States, NGOs and other stakeholders to host regional Widowhood Conferences in, e.g., West, East, or Southern Africa, in MENA, South Asia and Latin America, in the context of UNSCR 1325, SDGs, and Beijing +20. A possible host nation is Malawi.
- Governments should support a Resolution on WIDOWHOOD for adoption by the Human Rights Council.
- Governments must address widowhood in their strategies to implement the SDGs, in their NAPS for UN SCR 1325, and in their evaluation of the BPFA for Beijing + 20.
- The UN should urge States Parties to recognize that the goals of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Beijing Platform for Action cannot be reached if widows remain an invisible group within the larger, homogenous group of "women".
- We ask the UN SG to appoint a UN Special Rapporteur on WIDOWHOOD.
- We ask the UN to commission a special report "Widows in Conflict and Post-Conflict Environments" (recalling the 1996 GracaMachel UN report on "Children in Armed Conflict"), given the huge increase, due to armed conflict, of widows of all ages and wives of the missing who are denied restorative justice, and who predominate in refugee and IDP camps, the last to be resettled.
- We ask for CEDAW to expedite a General Recommendation (GR) on widowhood, as it has done for Older Women. And to strengthen compliance with Article 5 "Use all available means to modify social attitudes.." since it is community traditional attitudes that see widows as "inauspicious", the "evil eye" that deprive them of access to justice to obtain their human rights to equality and respect.
- We ask UN WOMEN to adopt and recommend the WPD WIDOWS CHARTER for adaptation and accommodation into domestic laws.
- WIDOWHOOD be selected as an "emerging issue" for CSW64.



Subsequent to our meeting, we were deeply disappointed to discover that in the final Agreed Conclusions of CSW62, in spite of intense lobbying, backed by the UK and the EU, the only reference to widows appeared in para 40: “The Commission recognizes the contributions of older rural women, including widowed women...”. This omission will reinforce and not dispel the myth that most widows are elderly, and the associated invisibility of young and child widows.

On our panel were Dr. Eleanor Nwadinobi, WEDO, Nigeria; Hari Kafle, WHR/SWG Nepal; Ferdous Ara Begum, Former member of UN CEDAW Committee and board member of HelpAge International Bangladesh; Meera Khanna, Guild of Service, India; Lois Herman, Women’s UN Report Network.

Many thanks to WPD’s new intern, Cleo Newton, who worked so hard to make this event a success.

Margaret Owen, WPD Director

director.wpd@gmail.com

www.widowsforpeace.org