

PREPARED FOR BEIJING PLUS 25 MEETING HELD IN GENEVA OCTOBER 2019

FACT SHEET WIDOWHOOD IN THE UNECE REGION

Across the UNECE region the number of widows is rising dramatically due to wars and conflicts, diseases, migration and displacement, child marriages, natural disasters, climate change and people living longer. The suffering of widows is multi-dimensional; exacerbated and caused by extreme poverty, ageism, violence and abuse, marginalisation and stigmatization, and harmful practices that violate widows human rights, survival and dignity. Widowhood is one of the most neglected of human rights issues.

Nevertheless only two of the 36 UNECE National Reports on Beijing plus 25 review mentioned widows: Belarus and the Ukraine.

In Ukraine there are about 300,000 widows, mostly older, who live in small villages in Ukraine. In these villages there is no doctor, or pharmacy, and the widows right to health care is being denied. Volunteer groups are being set up to communicate with family doctors and provide care. This experience is useful for other countries but should not detract from state obligations to respond to the rights of widows of all ages. See video: <https://youtu.be/IZUb6pimFB0>

Across the UNECE region there is a dearth of up to date statistics on widowhood, which denies the issue visibility and serves to disenfranchise widows from the essential services and legal support they have a right to. It is, therefore, imperative that the cross-cutting, intersectional widowhood issue and the status of the millions of bereaved women of all ages, religions and ethnicities living in our region be urgently addressed and good practices exchanged by the countries of the UNECE region.

Widows were not mentioned in the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) and have been referred to only once in the 24 post-Beijing CSW Agreed Conclusions. Widows for Peace and Democracy (WPD) and its partners considers the Beijing +25 review process a unique opportunity to lift the blanket of invisibility on the cross-cutting, intersectional issue of widowhood, which has remained largely ignored in the ECE region.

Within the UNECE countries there is an assumption that widows are mainly older women who are cared for by their families and enjoy adequate pensions. Older women are suffering because of austerity cuts and political instability which, in some countries, have reduced the value of pensions, cut essential services and left many widows isolated, unable to collect pensions and economically and socially vulnerable. In addition there is a growing phenomena of young women subject to early and forced marriage who are widowed at a young age. Moreover, with the unprecedented movement of people, many UNECE countries today accommodate large numbers of migrant women refugees, IDPs and asylum seekers, among whom are widows of all ages, including child widows.

Widowed migrants and their daughters may be particularly vulnerable in these countries to economic and sexual exploitation, trafficking, NST and low paid work as domestic workers. Some also are exploited in informal, non-regulated work. In conflict zones, widows may end up as beggars, prostitutes or sequential wives in polygamous marriages in order to support their children and survive.

Migrant widows in the region may lack official documentation, and thus receive minimal support in their UNECE destination countries. They may also face cultural and bureaucratic barriers to access social protection and essential services because they lack the required documentation, literacy and language skills.

25 years after the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, it is time to end the stigma, stereotypes and marginalization of widows of all ages, everywhere, including the UNECE Region. Widowhood is a cross cutting issue and intersects in substance with all of the 12 points of the Beijing call for action. For the purposes of the CSO meeting widows have been included in the fact sheets of Violence against women and girls; Older Women; Structural economic barriers and Human Trafficking and NST.

WHAT IS NEEDED

Essential for action is the political and public will to address the human rights, concerns and call for social justice of widows. We are in touch with Governments, Special Rapporteurs and UN Mechanisms to generate interest and catalyze initiatives to address widows' human rights. In a world fixated on youth, health, beauty, patriarchy, life and vitality, money, power and privilege, widows are often "left behind."

Specific recommendations are

- Birth and marriage legal documentation for all women
- Records of husbands' deaths
- Women's land and property inheritance rights for all women
- An Independent Expert to catalyze government engagement and policies.
- A mapping exercise to establish the numbers of widows and to document their needs in each ECE country in order to drive policy formulation.
- UN CEDAW Committee General Recommendation on widows, a UN Human Rights Council Resolution on Widows and a UN Independent Expert on Widows

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Link to the Widows Statement for CSW64
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1U8LPnqsFNK2W-n2CskpKG6A9OASXiv9L/view?usp=sharing>

