

SUMMARY REPORT

# PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR SUPPORTING CHILD WIDOWS

A Research Study:  
Child Widows' Needs and  
How to Support Them  
by Mohinder Watson, PhD, MPH  
Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage  
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Action on Child  
Early and Forced Marriage





Mohinder Watson, PhD, MPH. Founder, Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage (ACE&FM), Geneva, and Main UN Geneva Representative, International Council of Women.

This document is available at: [Actiononchildearlyandforcedmarriage.org](http://Actiononchildearlyandforcedmarriage.org)  
Email contact: [actiononchildmarriage@gmail.com](mailto:actiononchildmarriage@gmail.com)

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The full report, including references, is available at: [www.actiononchildearlyandforcedmarriage.org](http://www.actiononchildearlyandforcedmarriage.org)

The following acronyms will be used throughout this summary report:

ACE&FM Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage

CEDAW Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women

CRC Convention on the Rights of the Child

HRC the Human Rights Council

ICCPR the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

ICESR the International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights

SDGs Sustainable Development Goals

SR Special Rapporteur

UPR Universal Periodic Review

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Child widows—young girls who have suffered both child marriage and widowhood before the age of eighteen—are a neglected group of vulnerable children. They have experienced multiple violations of their human rights from their premature and unlawful marriage to the compounding effects of widowhood, poverty, illiteracy, youth, and lack of education. Mostly, they lack access to justice and are unable to claim their inheritance as they are unknowledgeable about the law or manipulated by others. Upon the death of their husbands, many are evicted from their homes and left destitute, some bound by cultural traditions never to remarry.

Currently, there is scant research on the over 1.36 million child widows living in many countries around the world. Moreover, their existence is not recognized by the international community or the UN, and there is no widely-accepted policy document offering guidance on how to support them. Given this background, Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage (ACE&FM) conducted a survey to determine the general level of awareness of the plight of child widows, their needs and how to support them, among stakeholders working on women’s and girls’ human rights and development as well as UN agencies, faith-based organisations, human rights experts, grassroots and international NGOs, researchers and government officials. This report is the first attempt to systematically gather information on child widows’ needs and how to best support them. As children with little or no education, skills or financial means, it is difficult for them to improve their life opportunities without community support, so it is essential for the international community to find the best ways to support them.

The findings indicate that some stakeholders had little or no knowledge of the existence of child widows whilst others were aware of them through their organisation’s work or from personal experience. Knowledgeable stakeholders indicated that child widows have both short and long-term needs ranging from safety, food, shelter and clothing, to re-integration into society through education and vocational training. Furthermore, they require greater social acceptance, companionship, spiritual guidance and emotional support, a sense of belonging to a family and community, freedom from discrimination and violence, and finally to find their voice, reclaim their childhood and exercise their rights. The research indicates that child widows exist at least in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burundi, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, India, Kashmir, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Nepal, Rwanda, Sudan, Syria and Uganda. They are also likely to be found in communities wherever child marriage occurs.

The rights of child widows are often overlooked and ignored despite various human rights accords and international agreements. All governments which have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) are obliged to meet child widows’ needs for justice, education, play, health care, psychological support, reproductive health services, social security and legal assistance (to claim their inheritance or access services). Although the CRC affords children wide ranging protection, when girls marry early, regardless of their age, they are often considered to have attained majority and thus may lose protection under the CRC. Therefore, it is imperative that all UN Treaty Bodies protect child widows’ rights and ensure they are protected. When given the right support, a child widow can become a powerful catalyst for change, bringing immense benefits to her community and altering her own life journey from child bride and child widow to discovering her own identity, realising her own potential and reclaiming her childhood.

**Report author: Mohinder Watson, PhD MPH, Founder, Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage and UN Geneva Main Representative International Council of Women (ICW-CIF)**

# METHODOLOGY

## Research background

Currently, there is no policy document to provide practical guidance on how to support child widows, greatly hindering international efforts to support this vulnerable group.

Thus ACE&FM conducted research to fill this void by determining the general level of awareness of the plight of child widows and to gather information from stakeholders on the needs of child widows and how to support them.

## Research aims

1. To determine if stakeholders working on areas such as child marriage prevention, widowhood, women's and children's health, human rights and development, researchers, and religious groups were aware of child widows; and
2. From stakeholders' knowledge of child widows, assess the needs of child widows and understand how to best support them with a view towards producing for the first time a policy document providing practical guidance for supporting child widows at the international, national, and local levels.

## Research methods

85 questionnaires were distributed by email to stakeholders which included some who were knowledgeable about child widows and others who might be aware of them through their related work on adult widows, child marriage prevention, women's and children's human rights as well as researchers and religious groups, etc.

Information was received from 42 questionnaires representing 22 countries:

Afghanistan, Belgium, Cameroon, Canada, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, France, Ghana, India, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Nepal, Nigeria, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, and the UK. Further data was received from Cameroon, Canada, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Nigeria, the Philippines, Spain, Trinidad and Tobago and Uganda, through an abbreviated questionnaire posted on the World Pulse website, a platform designed to connect social activists around the globe. Participating organisations are listed in Appendix on page 15. Organisations which chose to remain anonymous are not listed.

# SUMMARISED RESEARCH FINDINGS

THE FOLLOWING TABLES PRESENT THE KEY FINDINGS FROM THE STAKEHOLDERS' RESPONSES, FOLLOWED BY THE AUTHOR'S OWN COMMENTS.

## WHAT ARE THE NEEDS OF CHILD WIDOWS?

Main themes	Sub-themes
Acknowledgement and awareness of their existence and diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child widows need acknowledgement of their existence by society. They must be recognized as a vulnerable group, be heard and given opportunities to express their needs so that they no longer suffer in silence.</li> <li>Child widows are not a homogeneous group but can be of different ages, nationalities and from different life circumstances. Nepal has many 'virgin widows' (kumari vidhava) who were married very young and whose husbands died even before they were old enough to live with them; there are also older child widows (vaikalayas), but in both cases their status as widows means they must observe certain mourning rituals.</li> <li>Young girls who elope for a 'love marriage' without parental consent, face even greater hardship and stigma if their husband dies as their families will often reject them.</li> <li>Similarly, some young Boko Haram child widows who were forced to marry soldiers are rejected by their communities, especially if they have children fathered by Boko Haram fighters. Child and young widows of Taliban and ISIS fighters may also be rejected or be unable to return home due to national security issues.</li> </ul>
Basic survival needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child widows need safety, food, shelter, clothing, health services and care.</li> </ul>
Economic empowerment and financial assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In the short-term, child widows need financial assistance to survive (since they were likely totally dependent on their husbands), especially if they are pregnant or already mothers.</li> <li>In the longer term, they need livelihood skills training, employment and entrepreneurship opportunities to enable them to become financially independent.</li> </ul>
Social protection measures to address poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Poverty must be addressed as a root cause of child marriage.</li> <li>Poor families who are at risk of marrying their daughters while still children should be given financial assistance.</li> <li>Child mothers in particular require social protection and financial support in order to end the cycle of poverty and child marriage.</li> </ul>
Protection under the law and legal assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child widows have rights under the law which must be respected and upheld.</li> <li>They need justice, including legal protection and the opportunity to hold abusers accountable.</li> <li>They need legal assistance to obtain vital documents (e.g. birth certificates, marriage licenses, etc.) to claim their inheritance, assert property rights or access services.</li> </ul>
Access to healthcare services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child widows need access to healthcare services for themselves and their children, including psychological and emotional counselling.</li> <li>Health education must be accessible, adolescent-friendly and non-judgmental and cover topics such as personal and child hygiene and sexual and reproductive health and services (HIV risks, safe sex, contraceptive use, etc.).</li> </ul>

Main themes	Sub-themes
Support for child mothers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child mothers need support with parenting skills and information on raising a child including their physical, emotional, social and intellectual development.</li> <li>• Financial assistance for mothers and their children.</li> <li>• Education on childcare including nutrition, development, childhood diseases, vaccinations, etc.</li> <li>• Childcare facilities to allow adolescent mothers to return to school, acquire vocational skills or go to work.</li> </ul>
Personal development skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child widows need personal development skills training such as confidence building, negotiation skills to exercise agency, assertiveness training to voice their needs, and literacy skills to manage their finances and make informed decisions about their future.</li> </ul>
Recreational facilities and the right to play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The right to play is a fundamental right which must be met as it is a crucial aspect of child development. Hence, child widows should be separated from adult widows for some activities as their needs are different.</li> <li>• Child widows need recreational facilities where they can be free to play as children and reclaim their childhood, instead of being expected to behave as wives, mothers and widows in every situation.</li> </ul>
Peer support in safe spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child widows require peer support and thus need places to meet other young girls in a safe, free and comfortable environment to share their experiences, form friendships, and build resilience.</li> </ul>
Education-related needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunities to complete their education in order to obtain paid employment and achieve independence.</li> <li>• Some child widows may need vocational training rather than formal schooling.</li> <li>• Scholarships and stipends to fund their education.</li> <li>• Inclusive school admittance policies which do not discriminate against married, widowed, pregnant, divorced or abandoned girls.</li> <li>• Positive discrimination policies in schools and training colleges to give child widows priority and reserve special places for them to enable them to catch up with their education.</li> <li>• Human rights education to understand and exercise their rights as girls, mothers and widows.</li> </ul>
Protection from all forms of violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child widows need protection from all forms of violence, including but not limited to physical and mental, domestic violence committed by their families, sexual or gender-based violence or economic exploitation such as trafficking or prostitution.</li> <li>• Protection from social discrimination, stigma and abuse from in-laws as they are often labelled a bad omen, a curse on the family, blamed for their husband's death and excluded from family, cultural and religious ceremonies.</li> <li>• Protection from harmful traditional practices such as child marriage and mourning rituals which damage their health and infringe upon their human rights.</li> </ul>
Social acceptance and integration in society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child widows need to be integrated into society and given opportunities for education and employment. Their rehabilitation should be without discrimination or exploitation.</li> <li>• They must be allowed to live their lives with dignity, free from stigma, discrimination and violence. They need a sense of belonging to a family and community with care and love.</li> </ul>
Support centres for child widows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child widows would benefit from one-stop service centres where all their needs could be met under one roof e.g. skills training, education, shelter, healthcare and legal help.</li> </ul>
Spiritual guidance for healing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some child widows will need pastoral care and guidance as they may struggle to understand and cope with their husband's death. They may need healing support and to be accompanied on this difficult journey. Church groups are often well placed to provide such assistance.</li> </ul>
Government responsibility and accountability for child widows services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local and national governments should provide coordinated services for child widows with clear lines of responsibility.</li> <li>• Governments should not expect NGOs to carry the sole burden of care.</li> <li>• Governments should coordinate efforts with local communities such as church groups to help to provide more holistic care, including spiritual support.</li> </ul>
Research on child widows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research on child widows is needed to document their locations, ages, numbers, circumstances of their marriage, including identifying which actors were involved. This can help provide much needed evidence for global policy development and help galvanise action to support this neglected group.</li> </ul>

*The findings highlight that child widows need acknowledgement of their existence and their human rights. They need essentials such as food, clothing, healthcare and financial assistance. They also need education, economic empowerment, legal protection, access to health care services, support for their children, personal development skills, recreational facilities to enjoy the right to play, peer support in safe spaces, protection from all forms of violence, social acceptance and integration and pastoral/spiritual care. Research on child widows is also needed as well as government commitment to meet their obligations.*

## **HOW CAN CHILD WIDOWS' NEEDS BE MET AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL?**

- Frame child widowhood as a negative consequence of child marriage and thus a violation of girls' human rights and a denial of their childhood.
- Harmonise, ratify and implement all UN instruments to protect girls from early marriage and other forms of violence against women and girls.
- Criminalise all individuals involved in marrying girls early and ban child marriage in all countries.
- Include child widows in all UN instruments e.g. CRC and CEDAW, and the Beijing Platform for Action and UN Security Council Resolutions 1320 and 1825.
- Enforce child widows' rights through regional, international and intergovernmental bodies.
- Ensure that governments adopt suitable policies to address child widows.
- Raise awareness of the plight of child widows (including girls in conflict situations) within UN agencies, e.g. UNICEF and UN Women.
- UN Women should urge governments to work with their national NGOs to make child widows' voices heard, listen to their needs and help them to rebuild their lives. It should also establish a desk dedicated to widowhood.
- Include child widows on the agenda of all international and regional organisations such as the United Nations, the African Union, the European Union and others.
- Encourage CEDAW to develop a General Recommendation on widowhood so that reporting governments can be questioned, and progress monitored.
- Provide resources for community-based organisations dealing with child widows.
- International donor funding to address the needs of child widows and to prevent child marriage.
- Gather disaggregated data on child widows, such as their number, ages and location to map their prevalence and better understand their unique experiences and the societies in which they live.
- Enlist the support of all relevant UN Special Rapporteurs (SR), e.g. the SR on Violence Against Women, the Special envoy on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict, the committees of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights (ICESR), the Human Rights Council (HRC), and include in the SDG agenda.
- Enforce stricter sanctions on governments which do not protect girls/women.
- Recognise the principle of widows of all ages.
- Eradicate poverty as a key driver of child marriage.

*The findings suggest that more needs to be done at the international level to address child widows such as strengthening legal systems (including all Treaty Bodies and other human rights mechanisms), enforcing international law, recognizing child widows on the UN agenda, providing dedicated funding to address child widows, collecting disaggregated data and addressing child marriage, including criminalizing all actors.*

## HOW CAN CHILD WIDOWS' NEEDS BE MET AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL?

- National governments should implement and enforce laws against child marriage.
- Establish the minimum age of marriage as 18 and prosecute the perpetrators of child marriage.
- Introduce and enforce laws to address the needs of child widows and to protect their human right, including access to justice.
- Amend all discriminatory laws against widows and child widows, especially concerning inheritance, property rights and remarriage.
- Include the issue of child widows and child marriage in national action plans. Draft policies to meet child widows needs and report progress to the CRC, CEDAW and other human rights Treaty Bodies.
- Allocate funding in annual national budgets for dedicated services to meet child widows' needs.
- Collect statistical data on child widows through research studies, surveys and national censuses.
- Listen to child widows and their needs and help them to rebuild their lives.
- Organise community-based advocacy and awareness campaigns on child widows throughout the country including raising awareness in schools, colleges, universities and churches, etc.
- Ban all harmful traditional practices such as child marriage, levirate unions, polygamy and harmful mourning rituals.
- Eradicate poverty as a major driver of child marriage.
- Provide free and compulsory education for all girls, monitor school attendance closely and immediately follow up any school dropouts.
- Implement non-discriminatory re-admission policies for mothers, widows, wives, and pregnant women and girls.
- Provide and strengthen affordable compulsory civil registration systems (marriage, birth and death registration systems).
- Introduce positive discrimination policies for child widows' education such as reserving special places for them in educational and professional institutions to give them priority access to the education they missed earlier in their lives.
- Share best practices such as the positive example set by Malawi which criminalises harmful traditional practices, including mourning and burial rites.

*The findings suggest that, at national level, most of the measures involve legal reforms on child marriage and widow inheritance. Child widows should be provided with education; awareness of their plight should be raised through national campaigns; governments should include and fund services for child widows as part of their national action plan; harmful traditional practices should be addressed; the sharing of best practices should be encouraged; poverty eradication should be prioritised; and disaggregated data should be collected to inform policy change and reform.*

# PRACTICAL GUIDANCE

## HOW CAN CHILD WIDOWS' NEEDS BE MET AT THE LOCAL LEVEL?

<p>Acknowledge the existence of child widows and their rights and needs</p> <p>Conduct research</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recognize that child widows exist but are not yet acknowledged as a distinct group in need of support.</li> <li>2. Recognise them as rights holders, provide access to child- friendly justice, and raise awareness of their human rights through local and national campaigns.</li> <li>3. Recognise that they are not a homogeneous group and include girls who have eloped in love marriages, virgin widows, Boko Haram, ISIS and Taliban widows, etc.</li> <li>4. Create platforms to hear child widows' voices so that they do not suffer silently in the margins of society.</li> <li>5. Conduct research to collect local and national data on child widows.</li> </ol>
<p>Meet their basic needs through dedicated one-stop centres</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Create one-stop centres where child widows can access all services in one place (health-care services including sexual and reproductive health, legal, psychological, emotional and spiritual support).</li> <li>2. Create spaces where they can be allowed to behave as children and also taught to balance their childhood needs for recreational play with their adult responsibilities of being young mothers. Ensure they are separated from adult women sometimes to avoid being treated as adults.</li> <li>3. Meet child widows' basic needs for safety, food, shelter and clothing.</li> <li>4. Provide legal assistance to obtain vital documents, e.g. birth registration certificates for them and their children, marriage certificates, and documents required to claim their inheritance and custody rights.</li> </ol>
<p>Provide flexible education systems</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Offer flexible educational opportunities to give child widows a second chance to acquire formal schooling or vocational training e.g. morning or afternoon classes.</li> <li>2. Ensure inclusive education policies that do not discriminate against married, divorced, pregnant or widowed girls and provide childcare facilities for those with children to enable mothers to attend school.</li> <li>3. Provide child widows with basic human rights education.</li> <li>4. Teach child mothers parenting skills (child nutrition, childhood diseases and hygiene practices) and help them to understand their responsibility for supporting the physical, emotional, social and intellectual development of their child.</li> <li>5. Ensure child widows' education genuinely empowers them to make their own decisions and is not only viewed as a way to delay marriage.</li> </ol>
<p>Empower child widows including economic empowerment</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Offer child widows economic empowerment through vocational skills training to improve their employment prospects.</li> <li>2. Teach them life skills: confidence building, assertiveness training, negotiation skills, critical thinking, financial literacy, etc.</li> <li>3. Create opportunities for child widows to meet peers, exchange experiences, voice their concerns, acquire resilience, build a support network so they can learn to assert their agency and claim their rights.</li> <li>4. Encourage girls to become financially independent and not rely solely on marriage for their livelihood.</li> </ol>

Mobilise local communities to stop child marriage	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Criminalise early marriage and ban harmful traditional practices.</li> <li>2. Use all communication channels to change social attitudes by explaining the serious human rights consequences of child marriage as a crime and a form of violence against women.</li> <li>3. Provide economic support to poor families at risk of marrying girls early.</li> <li>4. Make it mandatory for schools and health agencies to report any girls at risk of marriage.</li> <li>5. Make it easy to report child marriages.</li> <li>6. Convene local committees to stop child marriage by influencing parents, village elders, religious leaders and other influencers.</li> </ol>
Integrate child widows into society in a holistic way	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ensure that solutions for child widows are community-driven and include consultations with child widows themselves whose needs and welfare must be central in any interventions.</li> <li>2. All stakeholders must be involved—religious and community leaders, village chiefs, religious groups, parliamentarians, NGOs, healthcare workers, teachers and local government (e.g. health, child welfare, etc.).</li> <li>3. Meet all their needs (mental, physical, spiritual, legal and economic), protect them and their children from violence and establish a sense of belonging.</li> <li>4. Ensure services are coordinated and collaborative and not duplicated and competitive.</li> <li>5. Accompany child widows on their healing journey as it is a process requiring support over time.</li> <li>6. Encourage social acceptance and remove stigma, discrimination and harmful traditional practices.</li> </ol>
Funding, monitoring, evaluation and accountability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Long-term adequate and sustainable resources must be provided to deliver essential services for child widows.</li> <li>2. Monitoring and evaluation must be built into service delivery systems as well as clear objectives, responsibility and accountability.</li> </ol>

*The findings in this study demonstrate the importance for local communities to acknowledge the existence of child widows and recognise and uphold their rights and dignity. Their needs may include food, shelter, clothing, health care (including sexual and reproductive health), financial support, reintegration into society, opportunities for education or employment, vocational or entrepreneurship skills, life skills training, human rights education and parenting skills for those with children. It is also vital for them to have access to justice which they are often denied.*

*Child widows need to feel a sense of belonging as well as have access to many types of support, including mental, economic, health and legal assistance to claim their inheritance. Legal assistance may be necessary to access civil registration documents for themselves and their children such as birth, marriage and death certificates, rights to property, custody, etc. Their spiritual care is also important as religious beliefs form an important part of many people's lives and influence their mental and physical well-being.*

*As child widowhood is a direct consequence of child marriage, efforts must be increased to stop the practice through mobilizing local communities to organize campaigns against child marriage. Child marriage should be criminalized, and social protection offered to poor families at risk of marrying their daughters early.*

# DISCUSSION

## A HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH TO PROTECT CHILD WIDOWS

It is vital to address the issue of child widowhood within a human rights framework to ensure that child widows' rights are protected. While the CRC is the most universally ratified UN treaty aimed at protecting children, child widows suffer multiple human rights violations. Many child widows will have been married as young children before they were mature enough to give consent to marriage. Some will have been forced into sex and given birth before they are psychologically mature enough to cope and before their body is biologically ready to bear children. They may also be expected to observe harmful mourning and other traditions such as wife inheritance. Such practices deny child widows their right to choose their spousal partner and have consensual sex, and they deny them any control over their own lives and bodies. Upon widowhood and with little access to justice, they are often evicted from their homes with some resorting to prostitution or begging to survive and are exposed to a greater risk of human trafficking.

Child widows' vulnerability is increased by their young age, the lack of access to child-friendly justice, and their inability to adequately defend themselves as the balance of power rests in favour of adults. It is assumed that adults always know what is in their best interest, viewing children as adults-in-waiting not capable of making their own decisions. They have little opportunity to voice their concerns and are unable to speak out against their relatives about the denial of their inheritance for fear of retaliation. Any disputes are dealt with at local level rather than in the courts, meaning it is village elders who decide their fate. Due to the deeply entrenched beliefs and practices in rural communities, child widows often face stigmatization and discrimination in these proceedings as well as in their larger communities. Thus, whilst still children, child widows have to cope with many violations of their rights as well as being burdened with the adult responsibilities which accompany marriage, motherhood, wifedom and then widowhood, which can have a devastating effect on their mental and physical health.

The preamble to the CRC recalls the special care and assistance that children are entitled to, and the Declaration of the Rights of the Child states that "the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care including appropriate legal protection." Article 1 of the CRC states that "for the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier." This qualification undermines child widows' rights under the CRC as usually once married, girls are considered to have attained majority and are treated as adults. This means they may no longer be granted protection from all forms of discrimination (Article 2), the principle of the best interest of the child (Article 3), the right to be heard in judicial proceedings (Article 12) protection against all forms of physical or mental violence, injury, neglect, maltreatment or exploitation including sexual abuse (Article 19), the right to health, access to health care services and protection against traditional practices detrimental to the health of children (Article 24), the right to material assistance with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing (Article 27.3), the right to education (Article 28), the right to play and participate in cultural life (Article 31), right to protection from all forms of sexual exploitation, torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Article 37) and they may lose out on measures to promote their physical and psychological recovery and the social integration of a child victim of neglect, exploitation, abuse or armed conflicts (Article 39).

Despite the multiple forms of discrimination, violence and abuse child widows face, their rights and needs are insufficiently addressed in important policy-setting documents such as the SDGs which espouse inclusivity through the principle of “leave no one behind.” Many of the SDGs directly affect child widows (e.g. eradication of poverty, food security, shelter, education, health and well-being, etc.), yet child widows are never mentioned. Neither are child widows mentioned in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and there is only limited reference to them in CEDAW although there is a joint recommendation between the CRC and CEDAW which would broadly cover them.

Given that once girls are married, regardless of their age, they are often considered to have attained majority and may lose their protection as children under the CRC, it is imperative that all UN Treaty Bodies, committees and relevant SRs are made aware of the plight of child widows and take an active role in protecting their rights.

Finally, as child widowhood is a consequence of child marriage, it is essential to criminalize child marriage in every country and community and actively prosecute the adult men who marry children and parents who marry their children underage. There is a need to educate all stakeholders including men and boys, women, parents, community and religious leaders, tribal chiefs, lawmakers and other influencers in communities about the challenges child wives and child widows face.

This report is the first attempt to systematically gather information on child widows’ needs and how to support this often neglected group of children. Made vulnerable by their young age, gender and widowhood status as well as their lack of education and skills, child widows have remained mostly invisible in their communities and overlooked in UN instruments. From the literature and this report, it is clear that more research on child widows is needed. This report serves as a starting point for advocacy and the development of policies and programs to support child widows around the globe. It is hoped that this practical guidance for supporting child widows within a human rights framework will help galvanize much needed support for child widows at the international, national and local levels.

## GUIDANCE FOR SUPPORTING CHILD WIDOWS

Adopt a human rights based approach involving all UN Treaty Bodies to protect child widows, including the CRC, CEDAW, UPR, the Beijing Platform for Action and the SDGs		
Acknowledge their existence, rights and needs	Ratify, reform & enforce laws to protect child widows. Ensure access to justice	Provide safety, food, shelter, clothing, legal assistance health services and care
Provide flexible and free compulsory education with inclusive school re-entry policies	Offer economic empowerment through vocational and entrepreneurial skills	Protect against all violence and harmful traditional practices
Holistically integrate child widows into society	Government to fund all services, with monitoring, evaluation and accountability	Conduct research and collect disaggregated data
Success will rest on government commitment and financing, meaningful engagement of all stakeholders, sustainable, child-centred, community-driven interventions in a spirit of collaboration while sharing best practices		

## Appendix: Participating Organisations (excluding those which requested to remain anonymous)

Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission  
Cho Ngafor Vocational Foundation, Cameroon  
Common Action for Gender Development, Cameroon  
Community Action, Uganda  
Environment First Charitable Society of Ethiopia  
Faith-based organisation, Democratic Republic of Congo  
Human rights expert, Ghana  
Institute for Global Health, University College, London, UK  
International Alliance of Women, Switzerland  
International human rights expert, Nigeria  
Member of European Parliament, Brussels and Strasbourg  
Methodist Church, Tanzania  
MoMEC Edutainment Centre, Tanzania  
National Council of African Women, South Africa  
National Council of Women, France  
National Council of Women, Tunisia  
National Human Rights Commission, Nepal  
Network for Community Development, Uganda  
Organisation for Women Empowerment, Liberia  
Overseas Development Institute (ODI), UK  
Rona Foundation, Kenya  
Rural Economic Enhancement Programme, Kenya  
Saathi, NGO, Nepal  
Sahiyo, NGO, India  
The Guild of Service, India  
The Humanity for Orphans, Youth and Widows Initiative, Kenya  
Theological College, Malawi  
UN Women, Nepal  
Widows Development Organisation, Nigeria  
Widows for Peace Through Democracy, UK  
Women and Children Legal Research Foundation, Afghanistan  
Women for Human Rights, Single Women's Group, Nepal  
World Council of Churches, Switzerland and several member churches  
World Federation of Methodists and Unity Church Women, Ghana  
World Vision International, Syria

