



Action on Child
Early and Forced Marriage



WUNRN
WOMEN'S UN REPORT NETWORK



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Widows in Crisis and Conflict

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PANEL PARTICIPANTS:

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Ms. Esther Eghobamien-Mshelia, UN CEDAW Committee Member from Nigeria (Statement)

Ms. Margaret Owen, Barrister, Founder & Director, Widows for Peace Through Democracy, Widows Advocacy at CEDAW, Beijing + 25 Review and UN Commission on the Status of Women

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Dr. Lori A. Post, Northwestern University Medical School, Researcher on Widows in Africa

Ms. Roseline Orwa, Founder, Rona Foundation Kenya, Video Testimonial on Harmful Traditional Practices in Widowhood

Moderator: **Ms. Lois A. Herman**, Managing Director WUNRN, Women's UN Report Network



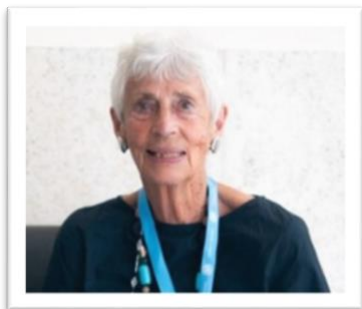
From left to right: Mohinder Watson, Caroline Ouaffo Wafang, Lois Herman, Margaret Owen, Lori Post.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

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Introduction by Margaret Owen, OBE, UK Barrister and Director, Widows for Peace Through Democracy (WPD)



Margaret Owen

Margaret Owen is a UK Barrister and Director of Widows for Peace Through Democracy. She has been advocating for widows' rights since 1993 and set up the first international workshop on widows during the Beijing Conference in 1995. She has attended all four of the Women's World Conferences.

After advocating for widows' human rights for over 25 years, it is disappointing to say that their voices remain unheard in the international arena. During this time, the number of widows of all ages, and of half-widows (wives of the missing or forcibly disappeared), has increased dramatically due to the proliferation of armed conflict, revolutions, extremism, terrorism, natural disasters, HIV/AIDS, and child marriage. It is therefore imperative that human

rights abuses against widows are exposed and that governments and other stakeholders use all available means taken to eradicate them.

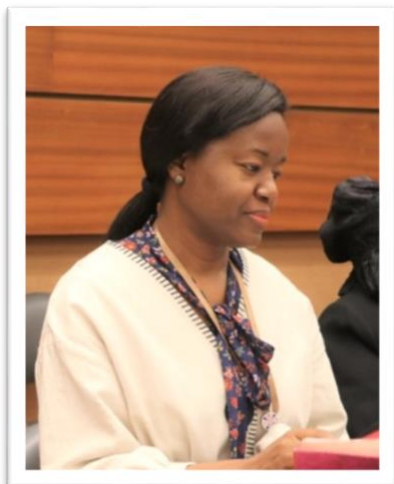
Concrete action is greatly needed to improve the lives of widows, including the commissioning of a UN report on Widowhood in Conflict, similar to the Graca Machel report on Children in Conflict. Based on this research and documentation, the UN should appoint a Special Representative on Widowhood to address this major issue for widows, their families and society. Ultimately, we are advocating for a Human Rights Council resolution on widowhood, based on the principles set out in the WPD charter.

The UN Security Council should also develop a new Resolution to ensure that the revisions of the Resolution 1325 National Action Plans include widows in their targets and indicators, developed in collaboration with widows' associations. Regarding the rights of half-widows, the UN Security Council must exhort Member States to sign, ratify, and implement the International Covenant for the Protection of People Subject to Enforced Disappearance (IPPED).

The CEDAW committee should develop a General Recommendation on widowhood discrimination and actively work to prevent violations of widows' rights and the continuation of harmful traditional practices. To this end, the UNSCR and CEDAW must require Member States to criminalise all acts that deprive widows of their rights. There should be a universal requirement for the compulsory registration of births, marriages, deaths and land titles in the names of both husband and wife. Finally, funding is essential to enable widows to come together, create their own associations, have a collective voice to articulate their needs, share their experiences, and contribute to decision-making bodies, national and local governments, and peace talks around the world.

While recognizing the progress made by the international community in addressing gender equality, we call for a more nuanced and targeted approach to foreign aid policies that identifies widows not exclusively as victims but also as key agents of change and ensures that their crucial social and economic roles are recognised and supported in the achievement of the SDGs, the 2030 Agenda, and the Beijing +25 review.

Widows in Crisis and Conflict by Ms. Caroline Ouaffo Wafang, Advisor on Women's Rights, Women's Human Rights and Gender Section, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva



Caroline Ouaffo Wafang

One of the greatest challenges in post-conflict contexts is the forgotten widows of war. In any conflict, there will be almost as many widows left behind as the total number of deaths, and most will live in remote areas with limited access to resources. For instance, Sri Lanka has an estimated 90,000 war widows, young and old from all sides of the conflict—all of them struggling to survive. Widows of all ages are adversely affected by stigmatization, extreme poverty, marginalization, harmful practices (e.g. harmful traditional practices, child marriage), and violations of their human rights and dignity.

The situation of widows is further aggravated by the compounded effects of underlying gender inequalities and social gender norms. Because of patriarchal structures in which women entirely depend on their husbands for sustenance, there is no social protection system and no money to provide for their families, education, or land for many widows.

Widows in crisis and conflict face a number of unique and overlapping challenges:

- Crisis and conflict settings present particular challenges with regard to widows' employment and reintegration. They encounter a widespread breakdown of services, resulting in food insecurity, inadequate shelter, property protections, and lack of access to water. Whether they suffer from a disability, old age, or lack of family support, widows and female-headed households are especially vulnerable to increased economic hardship owing to their disadvantaged situation, and often lack employment and the means and opportunities for economic survival.
- Discrimination may be compounded in rural areas where older or young widowed women may suffer stigmatization and isolation, which expose them to greater risks of ill-treatment. In addition, rural women living in conflict-affected areas face security concerns and further obstacles in enjoying their rights.
- Equal access to property, as guaranteed by article 16 (1)(h) CEDAW, is particularly critical in post-conflict situations, given that housing and land are crucial to recovery efforts, in particular for women in female-headed households. Women's limited and unequal access to property becomes particularly damaging in post-conflict situations, especially when displaced women who have lost husbands or close male relatives return to their homes to find that they have no legal title to their land and, as a result, no means of earning a livelihood.
- The stigma of widowhood and their ostracisation from community life permits widespread corruption that often leaves widows landless and unable to support their children. Many are forced to migrate in search of work or struggle for survival on the margins of their communities. Even women who do retain some access to land face other challenges as they know they could be chased off their property at any time, and the size of the plots allocated to them is often insufficient to support their needs. For instance, a report by UN Women shows that local officials in Ghana routinely deny widows access to their husband's land, opting to sell it at auction or give the title to male relatives.

- Fear of intimidation and reprisals from community members are aggravated by discriminatory norms and practices in many cultures. For example, widows may be barred from living on their own or starting a business because they no longer have a husband to permit their freedom of movement. Some reports suggest that bribing traditional leaders or marrying a relative of her deceased husband can be the only means of continuing to provide food for her children.
- The social protection system is often very weak or non-existent, and there is little in the way of government assistance. If widow's pensions are provided, the recipients may face discrimination which prohibits them from accessing their benefits. Pensions may also be limited to war widows from the winning side post-conflict.
- Many suffer from violence and discrimination by their families in relation to the widow's inheritance.
- Widows also experience gender-based violence and violations of their sexual and reproductive rights.

In summary, women and girls in crisis and post-crisis situations are rarely able to seek effective and gender-responsive remedies, including reparations, for violations of their rights due to the disintegrating judicial systems and social protections. The situation is sometimes so dire that some feel that it would have been better to be killed during the war instead of dealing with the misery and uncertainty that they now face. In addition, corruption, discrimination against migrant and refugee populations in host countries, fear of reprisals against their families or themselves, and the stigma associated with their widow status function as barriers against women and girls to seeking remedies and justice. And finally, the diversity of widows across social, economic, ethnic, refugee/migrant, and age groups means that widows will often face different challenges because of their intersecting identities.

What can States and other stakeholders do?

- Ensure that economic recovery strategies promote gender equality as a necessary precondition for a sustainable post-conflict economy and target widows working in both the formal and informal employment sectors; design specific interventions to leverage opportunities for women's economic empowerment, in particular for women in rural areas and other disadvantaged groups of women; ensure that women are involved in the design of those strategies and programmes and in their monitoring; and effectively address all barriers to women's equitable participation in such programmes.
- Eliminate all forms of discrimination against disadvantaged and marginalized groups of women, including rural women, women who are indigenous, Afro-descendent, or part of an ethnic and religious minority, heads of household, peasants, pastoralists, fisherfolk, landless, and disabled women.
- Ensure that all widows, especially those facing intersecting discriminations, have access to social services and adequate social protection, as well as economic resources, to empower them to live a dignified life.
- Combat discriminatory stereotypes, especially those that compromise the equal rights of widows to land, water and other natural resources, in collaboration with traditional leaders and civil society.
- Ensure accountability does not only focus on the punishment for the perpetrators but also on restoring the dignity and rights of those who have suffered violations.

Why Widowhood is an Important Issue by Margaret Owen, OBE, Director Widows for Peace through Democracy (WPD)



Margaret Owen

Widowhood is a scandalously-neglected, cross-cutting, challenging, and intersectional issue, especially in developing and conflict-afflicted countries hitherto neglected by the international community, the UN, and governments but which now needs to be urgently prioritized on the international agenda.

The lives of widows of all ages are determined not by international or domestic laws but by the patriarchal and misogynist traditional codes and discriminatory interpretations of religion. For years, we have seen examples of the extreme discrimination and abuse faced by widows, such as denial of inheritance, land and property rights; HTPs in mourning and burial rites; appalling sexual violence; modern-day slavery and human trafficking; accusations of witchcraft; “chasing off” and “property grabbing”; and stigma and persecution within the family, in the community and by the State that permits such violent practices. Such

treatment of widows makes them and their children the very poorest of the poor, the least counted and heard but the most vulnerable. Furthermore, widowhood impacts irrevocably and brutally on the next generation affecting the whole of society and its future and indeed our whole world.

Widowhood needs to be addressed at international, regional, national and local levels, in the context of the Beijing +25 review, the SDGs, and the 2030 Agenda, and within the WPS UNSCR 1325 + framework. It should be high among the concerns of all those working to eliminate VAWG, to protect the rights of children in armed conflict, and to promote truth, reconciliation and sustainable peace agreements based on equality, freedom and democracy around the world. Widowhood is a root cause of expanding and increasing poverty and inequality and sows the seeds of future conflicts.

The status of widows must no longer be regarded as a marginal women’s issue but one that must be addressed by policy-makers at the highest levels, both at the UN and among all its member states. If we want to see a world order based on human rights, equality, and peace, the needs and plight of widows of all ages cannot be ignored.

It is a quarter of a century since WPD held our very first international workshop on widowhood in Beijing during the 4th World Women’s Conference. Yet, in spite of all our efforts and those of our partner widows’ groups around the world, widowhood remains absent from the international agenda and CSW Agreed Conclusions.

The consequences of this failure to address the status of widows will affect all of society and frustrate other efforts to reduce poverty and inequality and the resulting conflicts, revolutions, civil war, terrorism and crime. Widowhood drives early marriage resulting in child widowhood, provides easy targets for traffickers, causes unaccompanied child migration and asylum seekers and street children, and provides ready recruits for child soldiery. In refugee and IDP camps, widows and their children are at great risk as they struggle to survive, find food, and manage the bureaucratic hurdles to resettlement.

Never before have we seen such an unprecedented increase, indeed an explosion, in the numbers of widows of all ages, and of half-widows (wives of the missing and forcibly disappeared), caused by armed conflict, revolutions, fundamental extremism, terrorism, HIV and AIDS, and natural disasters.

Women are widowed every day by the wars in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and more. Moreover, widows and half-widows continue to suffer extreme poverty, with no restorative justice, social protection, or empowerment, long after conflicts have ended (e.g. Columbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Nepal, Angola, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka).

The dearth of reliable statistics on widows is a major barrier to enlisting the support of governments to address widowhood as a priority issue, and the few statistics available offer a grim picture of the plight of widows. It is estimated that in Afghanistan there are over two million widows of whom 94% are illiterate and 90% are mothers to three to eight children. Over 60,000 widows beg on the streets of Kabul. They wallow in extreme deprivation, stigma, and are vulnerable to violence. Their low status has a brutal impact on their children, especially their daughters. 40% suffer from mental illness, and suicide is not uncommon. In Columbia, there are an estimated 86,000 missing men, the highest in any country in the world. In Turkey, the Saturday mothers still seek information on the fate of their missing husbands and sons, abducted in the troubles of the 1980s.



Margaret Owen with Kurdish half-widows, the Saturday mothers

After years of ongoing war in Syria, the death toll has reached over one million with up to 100,000 disappearances under Assad and ISIS. Syrian widows of all ages and half-widows from different ethnicities and religions (including Kurds, Assyrian Christians, Arabs, and Turkmen) struggle with displacement with many surviving in IDP and refugee camps (e.g. in Rojava) or as refugees in Lebanon, Turkey, KRG, and Egypt. There, they struggle to survive and find work to feed their children; many leave children behind as they search for paid employment. Their perilous situation drives them to give away their daughters to early marriage, temporary marriage, and sex work traffickers.

It is also estimated that every village of Kashmir is home to at least twenty war widows after two decades of conflict with India. In addition to the extra judicial killings, huge numbers of abductions have created thousands of half-widows, whose lives are often more wretched than that of widows.



Margaret Owen meeting with Kurdish soldiers

In Iraq, there are at least three million widows and five million orphaned children afflicted by war and ISIS acts of terror since 2003. They receive no support from the government nor international organisations. In the Amiryat al-Fallujah displacement camp in Anbar, the widows live in tents with no support and no idea of what their future holds. Marriage markets give away widows' daughters to temporary marriages to men visiting from the Gulf States, and the same is happening now at the Turkey-Syria border and in Sri Lanka. Ten years since conflict ended in Sri Lanka, there is still no justice for the over 100,000 Tamil widows and over 30,000 wives of the missing.

As in Kashmir, half widows who attempt to obtain information about the fate of missing husbands are threatened, harassed, sexually abused, or even abducted to serve in military brothels. There is no accountability, no truth, no reconciliation, and no justice.

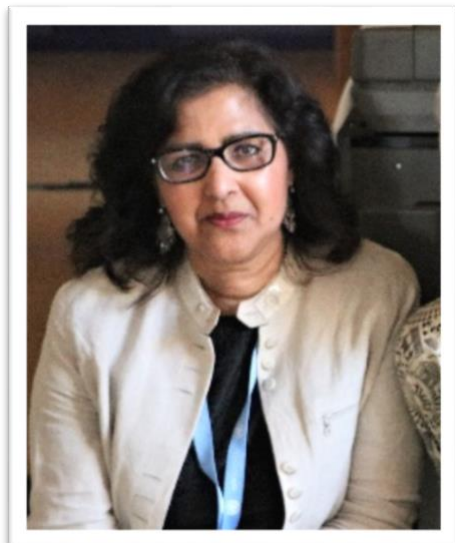
In Bangladesh, many of the Rohingya refugees are widows. Of the 687,000 who fled the killings in Myanmar, over 31,000 are widows or wives of the missing. AL-HOW is known as the widows' camp in which widows have created their own "no-men zone." Like all widow refugees, they struggle with concerns about shelter, food, safety of their children, and protection from sexual violence. They do not wish to return to Myanmar but fear deportation from Bangladesh.

There is little research correlating the poor status of widows with child soldiery, child marriage, child widowhood, and unaccompanied child migration, and only one of the countries mentioned (Nepal) has a National Action Plan on 1325 which mentions widows. Despite the improved representation of women in peace talks around the world, the voices of widows are not heard, and years after conflicts are officially over, they still await justice, compensation, and reparations. Widows are in crisis the world over. It is imperative that we take action to prioritise them on the UN and international agendas.



Margaret Owen, OBE, lawyer, Patron of Peace in Kurdistan, and Director of Widows Through Peace and Democracy went on a hunger strike in solidarity with Kurdish hunger strikers across Europe, calling for an end to the unlawful prison conditions of Abdullah Ocalan, the jailed Kurdish leader. Margaret has been a passionate advocate for Kurdish rights for many years.

Widows of All Ages in Conflict and Crisis and the Beijing +25 UNECE Review by Mohinder Watson, Founder Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Geneva UN Main Representative, International Council of Women



Mohinder Watson

The commonly accepted definition of a widow is quite simple—a woman whose spouse has died, and she has not remarried. However, behind this definition lies a grieving woman or a girl child for whom this definition will have complex, enduring and painful consequences, changing family dynamics and the widow's status and place in society forever. Her life is immediately thrown into crisis whether in peacetime or conflict. She must now learn to cope with uncertainty, economic hardship, and rejection as an unwanted burden on the family and society. Furthermore, as widows can be of all ages, this experience will be shared by young girls, some only 5 years old.

Below right is a picture of Suman, a girl from an Indian village who was married at the age of 4 and widowed a year later at the age of 5. She was married to an eight-year-old boy who suddenly died, leaving her a child widow. Suman's story is not unique, and millions of girls like her are widowed as children in conflicts and in peacetime.

Widows in Afghanistan

The decades-long conflict in Afghanistan has resulted in many widows of all ages.

It is estimated that:

- There are around 2 million war widows in Afghanistan, with over 50,000 in Kabul alone;
- The typical widow is aged 35, over 90% of widows are illiterate and already mothers to several children;
- Many lack economic means to provide for their children, and hence lose child custody to their deceased husband's family;
- Although war widows are entitled to a government pension, most do not know how to claim this;
- Around 32% of widows suffer mental problems, with some seeing suicide as the only way out;
- Over 25% of Afghanistan's widows experienced violence, mostly at the hands of their husband's family;
- As early marriage is still common in Afghanistan, girls as young as 15 are widowed.



*Suman, a five-year-old child widow.
Source: India Today Magazine, Photo: TV*

Globally the number of widows is rising. The increasing numbers of armed conflicts have led to large number of military and civilian casualties which have left many women and girls widowed. In the five-year period between 2010 and 2015, the 9% increase in the number of widows was attributed mainly to conflict. Statistics show that 1 in 5 women of marital age in Afghanistan and Ukraine are in fact widows.

Widows' suffering is multi-dimensional.

- Widows suffer a range of social, economic, and cultural challenges;
- They will often experience poverty, leaving many unable to provide for their children and hence lose custody over them to their deceased husband's family;
- As most widows are illiterate and lack the necessary experience and skills to earn a living for themselves and their children, they struggle to survive;
- Upon losing their husband, many widows will also lose their social identity as this was usually conferred through her husband, as women do not have their own identity in e.g. Afghanistan, Nepal;
- Many widows suffer social exclusion and live in the margins of society, often painfully rejected by their own families and communities;
- Many will be denied inheritance and land rights due to lack of education and resources to claim their rights or because of violence and threats of violence from the husband's family;
- In some cultures, widows will be forced to observe harmful mourning rituals such as forced sex with strangers or levirate unions.

Widowhood is both a personal and a social crisis.

The issue of widowhood has many far-reaching effects and implications for society as a whole.

- Destitute widows may have to pull their daughters out of school for early or child marriages or to send them to work to earn a living. In both cases, this deprives girls of an education and skills which could support them in later life.
- Extreme poverty may force widows to sell their daughters to traffickers or into prostitution thus perpetuating the illegal network of criminal gangs which have become ever more globalised and powerful.
- Widows' children may be more vulnerable to becoming child labourers, child soldiers or being radicalised, all of which have negative consequences for the children concerned and society as a whole.

These and other factors perpetuate an intergenerational cycle of poverty for widows and their children, meaning that widowhood has significant negative consequences for the next generation in terms of their human rights, gender equality, and social and economic development and will ultimately affect future global peace and security.

Beijing +25 review process 2019-2020

Currently, the world is engaged in the Beijing +25 review process to assess the progress made in women's human rights, gender equality, and development since 1995. However, widows were not included as one of the twelve critical areas of concern established by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and therefore are often overlooked in the 5 yearly reviews. Out of 36 national reports reviewed in the UNECE area, only Belarus and Ukraine mentioned widows. But although widows were not mentioned as one of the critical areas of concern, the Beijing + 25 review process is nonetheless an opportune moment to advocate for widows on the UN and global agendas.

We can and must do more for widows.

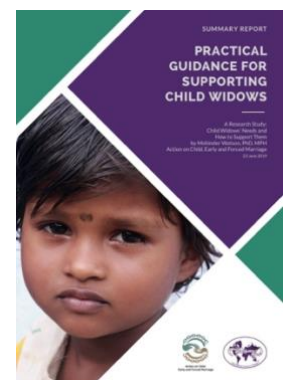
- Widows must be educated about their human rights and helped to realise and claim them;
- Widows' needs must be listened to and they should be supported in forming collectives for mutual support and to pressure governments for change, as has successfully been achieved in Nepal;
- Widows must be accepted as individuals with their own social identity, and not merely as dependents of their husbands, and they must be empowered to live independent lives outside of marriage;
- The societal narrative on widows needs to change in order to recognize widows as valued members of society, heads of households, and wealths of accumulated knowledge, strength, language, culture, and skills which they can transfer to the next generation, rather than as bad omens, witches, and whores.
- The millions of young widows must have access to education, vocational skills training, micro-credit programs, and self-development skills training to help them to become financially independent;
- More resources should be invested to research exactly how many widows there are, document where they live, and what they most need so that policies can be formulated and targeted to better serve widows of all ages from all backgrounds and in all places.

Key Take Home Messages:

- It is a harsh reality that most married women today will one day become a widow.
- Hundreds of millions of widows of all ages face hardship in peacetime and conflict, in developed and developing countries, as often they have little or no social protection and support. They suffer silently and are largely ignored by the rest of the world. This **MUST** change.
- Widowhood is an urgent human rights, development, and social tragedy that must be addressed, and the Beijing +25 review is an opportune moment to do this. Much more can and should be done.
- Widowhood has profound negative consequences on society and global peace and security and must be recognised as a social development issue and addressed with UN involvement, leadership and resources.
- Such changes require UN-wide support, starting with a commission on widows in conflict and the appointment of an Independent Expert to officially investigate the lived realities of widows of all ages in all countries and to find pragmatic solutions. We need all UN entities and human rights and development mechanisms to monitor and address widows' concerns. Ultimately, we would like to see an HRC resolution on widowhood.

*More information on child widows can be found on the Action on Child, Early and
Forced Marriage website at*

<http://actiononchildearlyandforcedmarriage.org/publications/>



Video Testimony on Harmful Traditional Practices by Ms. Roseline Orwa, Founder, Rona Foundation, Kenya



Roseline Orwa

Link to video testimony:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EZmG9Spwg8VAJkmnLBGH5CilgOXHu gxW/view?ts=5af55a12>

Rosaline Orwa, who was herself widowed at the age of 32, described how she encountered stigma, ostracization, and abuse when she became a widow without children in a country where a woman's value is measured by her children. After her husband's death, she began to advocate for widows' rights, breaking the silence about the harmful traditional practices which affect four million widows in Kenya. She started championing widows' rights, especially for those in rural areas who are the most vulnerable and often suffer widow cleansing, a ritual in which they must have sex with another man to cleanse the body of death and bad luck. The social exclusion of widows is a reality that goes unchallenged, leaving widows to believe they have no agency over their lives. They remain forgotten and ignored, but no widow should be left behind. Widows are important partners in development and economic and social progress, and they need to be cared for, empowered, and accepted, but this work cannot be left to underfunded NGOs alone.

Chair's Summary and Remarks by Lois A. Herman, Managing Director WUNRN



Lois A. Herman

Why are the widows of this world so tragically being left behind? There are an estimated 300 million widows worldwide, responsible for some 540 million children. In this complex, volatile, and patriarchal world, widows suffer compounded and protracted discrimination, violence, rights abuses, neglect, marginalization, and isolation. Human rights violations and abuses of widows noted in the Widows in Crisis and Conflict Panel included denial of inheritance rights, extreme poverty, illiteracy, inadequate health care, societal marginalization, family exclusion.

This Panel addressed the exponential increase in the numbers of widows due to conflicts, natural disasters, diseases, extreme poverty, migration and displacement, child and forced marriages, climate issues, and crime. This Panel calls for government policies and programs that support the specific needs of widows and their children. Panel presentations ranged from officials from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN CEDAW Committee to a grassroots video testimonial from Kenya describing the harmful traditional practices that many widows endure.

Existing frameworks have not addressed the plight of widows as a serious and often suffering population segment, there is a significant need for more research and statistics to drive policy, widows-centric services, support programs and training. It is time to make widows matter! Widows must not be left behind and be understood not only as victims, but as women agents of change and development.

The participants in this UN Human Rights Council Session 42 Panel and others are seriously committed to sustained advocacy and action for widows of all ages, around the world. Indeed, every married woman or girl, is just one heartbeat away from being a widow.

Others involved in the panel included Dr. Lori A. Post, Northwestern University Medical School, Researcher on African Widows, and CEDAW Committee member Ms. Esther Eghobmien Mshelia (statement).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

For more information on the organizations mentioned in this report or the plight of widows in crisis and conflict around the world, please see the following list of resources.

Organization Websites

Action on Child Early and Forced Marriage, <http://actiononchildearlyandforcedmarriage.org/>

International Council of Women, <http://www.icw-cif.com/>

Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights, Gender and Human Rights Section,
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Women/WRGS/Pages/WRGSIndex.aspx>

The Rona Foundation, <https://www.ronafoundation.co.ke/>

Widows for Peace Through Democracy (WPD), <https://www.widowsforpeace.org>

WUNRN- Women's UN Research Network, <https://wunrn.com/>

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