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Statement submitted by Association of War-Affected Women, Guild of Service, Mama Zimbi Foundation, Widows for Peace through Democracy and Women for Human Rights, Single Women Group, 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.



Statement

Widowhood issues must be addressed in the context of strategies to achieve the post-2015 Millennium Development Goals

The Women for Human Rights, Single Women Group, a partner of Widows for Peace through Democracy, works to promote the status of widows in Nepal and acts as the secretariat for the South Asian Network for Widows' Empowerment in Development, which is the umbrella for widows' organizations of the six countries in the region.

The Millennium Development Goals agenda provides many challenges for the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. It must now also provide a window of opportunity to lift the blanket of silence on widowhood issues. Regrettably, the existing Millennium Development Goals have failed to improve the status of widows so as to relieve their poverty and marginalization and that of their children. We ask that the "stand-alone" goal on women and girls in the report of the High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, be non-negotiable and that targets be disaggregated by marital status in addition to other criteria.

Never before has the female population, especially in developing and conflict-afflicted countries, contained so many widows of all ages from the child widow to the young widowed mother and the elderly grandmother. Populations across the world are ageing. In elderly populations, women predominate and the majority of them are widows. The numbers of widows are increasing unprecedentedly and daily owing to armed conflict, revolution, sectarian strife and ethnic cleansing, and in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Estimates for some countries suggest that over 60 per cent of all women in those countries are widows or wives of the missing and 70 per cent of the children are dependent on destitute women without male breadwinners.

It is essential that Governments and United Nations agencies focus specifically on the particular situation of widows if the Millennium Development Goals are to have any realistic chance of being reached. The poverty, neglect and invisibility of widows contribute to recycle and expand the poverty trap to embrace all those dependent on them, with irrevocable consequences for society as a whole. None of the major donors or United Nations agencies, including the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), has so far managed adequately to support initiatives to empower widows so that their voices are heard and they influence policies that can protect and empower them.

There is little reliable data on, inter alia, numbers, ages, needs, roles, lifestyles, experience of violence, coping strategies, support systems and aspirations of widows in developing countries, particularly in conflict-afflicted countries. The absence of such information obstructs the planning and implementation of effective actions to improve the living conditions of the widows and their families, as well as their communities' actions, which are crucial to the fulfilment of the Millennium Development Goals. Nonetheless, in Nepal there have been significant advancements in terms of the census data particularly focused on widows. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics of Nepal, 87 per cent of widows cannot read and write, thus increasing the number of dependent and vulnerable

widows. Few other developing countries have counted their widows. Alternative methodologies must be used to fill this gap by having United Nations agencies and Governments work with widows' organizations to gather information from the grass roots on these issues. A global mapping and profiling project should be a crucial first step, followed by legislation and policy changes in every country to improve the status of widows and so reduce this important barrier to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Widowhood is a root cause of poverty.

Violence and stigma in widowhood. Widows are likely to suffer extreme and systematic physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence both within their families and in the outside community. They are often victims of discrimination, stigma and harmful traditional practices, including the branding of widows as witches, degrading and life-threatening mourning and burial rites, and stereotyping them as “inauspicious” and “evil”, which fuels tortures, such as beating, stoning and even murder. Extreme and discriminatory interpretations of religious, traditional and customary codes contribute to such violence and Governments, in spite of reformed laws purporting to protect women from such abuse, are reluctant to intervene in the domestic arena where non-State actors are the perpetrators. In conflict and post-conflict scenarios, this violence is exacerbated.

Regrettably, in spite of huge efforts by widows' organizations to have text on widowhood violence inserted in the outcome document of the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, whose priority theme was “Prevention and elimination of violence against women and girls”, in its final version all references to this type of gender-based violence was omitted.

Access to justice. In so many developing countries the lives of many widows, especially rural ones, are determined by discriminatory interpretations of religion, custom and tradition in spite of the enactment of modern laws that comply with international conventions, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Barriers include illiteracy, bureaucracy, corruption, prejudices of those administering the justice system, as well as affordability. In addition, many widows fear that by attempting to use the courts to obtain remedies, they will provoke further violence.

Impact on the children of widows, especially the girl child. The poverty, marginalization and stigma of widowhood have an irrevocable impact on their dependents. The children of widows are least likely to access education. Widowed mothers are forced to withdraw their children from school and depend on their children's labour, whether as carers of younger siblings, or in exploitation on the streets as beggars (widows' children predominate among street children). The girl child, denied education, is more likely to be given away, sold or trafficked into early forced marriage or prostitution. The Millennium Development Goals frameworks should provide opportunities to ensure the education of all children, irrespective of family circumstances.

Conflict widows. The protection of widows in conflict situations and their participation in peace processes must be enhanced, in conformity with Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#) and other relevant resolutions on women, peace and security. For example, there are uncounted numbers of widows and wives of the “disappeared” who, because of the conflict, lose all their fundamental rights and freedoms, and who need representation in peace processes. We applaud the endorsement by 122 Member States of the Declaration of Commitment to End

Sexual Violence in Conflict and hope that this initiative, together with the gender-related Security Council resolutions, will be promoted in the post-2015 development goals so as protect widows from violations of their rights.

Widows and wives of the missing constitute a large part of refugees and internally displaced persons worldwide and are often the last to be resettled. Widows who claim asylum on grounds of persecution because of their marital status, who may also be rape victims in conflict zones, often face insuperable problems in gaining refuge.

Inheritance, land and property rights. Widows, in spite of modern legislation ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, continue to be denied inheritance in many countries. They may be treated as chattels, part of the estate and “inherited” by a husband’s brother or cousin. Lack of land rights, “chasing-off” and property grabbing are common occurrences in many regions of Africa, South Asia and the Middle East. The Millennium Development Goals framework references inheritance and land issues, which are so relevant to the status of widows.

Impact of the global recession and financial systems on widows. Few developing countries can afford to provide social security for widows and, in general, in cases where this is available, a needs-based approach rather than a rights-based one is followed. In developed countries, owing to the recession, many elderly widows dependent on state pensions are also living in relative poverty as the cost of living rises. Where a pension system does exist, as in India, widows often face difficulties in accessing their pensions because of bureaucracy, corruption and their illiteracy, which facilitates the seizure of their benefits by male relatives. Younger widows are vulnerable to economic exploitation including domestic as well as sexual slavery. Widows require training for employment in order to survive and raise their children and are often vulnerable to being trafficked as domestic servants in countries where they lose all their rights.

Role of UN-Women. In order for the Millennium Development Goals framework to be implemented so as to accommodate the issues of widowhood, widows need to have the direct and focused support of UN-Women. We would like to see Member States provide support to UN-Women in the establishment of a special section at Headquarters and in their regional offices that assists widows to “band together”, forming their own associations and organizations, so that they have a collective voice to inform and influence policies with a view to implementing the Millennium Development Goals and further identify the targets.

Finally, in this statement, we repeat our appeal to the Secretary-General, given the huge numbers of widows and wives of the disappeared in so many regions, to appoint a United Nations representative on widowhood.
