



Where We Stand Position Paper: Widows

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Position Summary:

- Definitions: a 'widow' is a woman who has lost a spouse by death and has not remarried vs. a 'widower', which is a man who has lost a spouse by death and has not remarried;
- Widows are among the most vulnerable groups of women and girls. They are of all ages, from all kinds of cultural and social backgrounds, and many live in conflict or humanitarian zones, while others live in areas that are prone to climate disasters;
- Women and girls as a group suffer greater disadvantage compared with men and boys in many societies. Widows face even greater setbacks and difficulties, including the possible loss of their children, their homes, possessions or even their lives compared with a partner who has lost his spouse;
- Widows often lack savings and cannot access a pension, inheritance, and social protections, and are therefore subject to extreme poverty. Global evaluations estimate that one in every ten widows live in extreme poverty;
- Widows face societal discrimination whether under the law and/or from cultural/traditional norms. Widows also suffer from stigmatisation and discrimination resulting from negative social and cultural attitudes;
- An integrated, gender-sensitive and human rights-centred approach is crucial in all policy and legislation to protect widows in keeping their human rights outlined in international human rights laws.

Where Things Stand:

Widows are found in all societies and come from all cultural and social backgrounds. According to United Nations (UN) statistics, there are an estimated 258 million widows worldwide – many of them living in extreme poverty. Despite the UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopting Resolution A/76/L.40, on the situation of widows, as well as the increased attention by international institutions to “empowering” women, widows are still being left behind in theory and in practice.

No group has been affected more by the “sin of omission” than women or girls of all ages when faced with their partner’s death, whether elderly and alone, widows of conflict, widows of climate disasters, COVID-19 widows, child widows or young widows with young children to raise as a single parent and sole provider. No woman should lose her children, status, livelihood, or property when her partner dies. Yet millions of



widows face persistent loss, abuse, discrimination, disinheritance, and destitution. Moreover, in many countries, women and girls do not possess a marriage or birth certificate which makes it more difficult to obtain social benefits, guardianship over their children, and other social or public services. In addition, some women are forced to remarry, while others, in more extreme cases, are forced to move into prostitution to survive.

For many women around the world, the devastating loss of a partner is magnified by a long-term struggle for their basic human rights and dignity. Despite having specific needs, widows have historically been left unseen, unsupported and unmeasured in our societies, and their voices and experiences often remain absent from policies that impact their survival. The challenges widows face are often compounded by other intersecting identities of inequalities.

Special attention must be drawn to the report published by *Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage* (2018), which outlines that at least 1.36 million widows of the approximately 258 million widows in the world were child widows, many of whom are sold by their parents out of poverty.

Another particularly vulnerable group of widows are “half widows”. These are women and girls who are unaware of the whereabouts of their partners and whether they are alive or dead. Finally, sometimes widows end up being left behind, when others (especially younger men) escape as internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees.

While there is now greater recognition of the inhumane behaviour towards women on the deaths of their partners, widows still face an uphill struggle for their voices to be heard and for justice in their lives. Millions of widows and their children are at the forefront of gender discrimination as they face ‘double discrimination’, particularly barriers to their empowerment. They often remain negatively affected by various economic, social, cultural, and political factors, such as lack of access to food, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), inheritance, land tenure, employment and/or livelihood, bank accounts and credit, social safety nets, health care and education; and instead continue to face discriminatory and violent mourning rites and harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage, levirate marriage and prostitution.

Widows suffer sexual abuse and rape and are subject to victim blaming within their own societies for causing the deaths of their husbands. Often, they are stigmatised and ostracised in their communities. Widows in many parts of the world also continue to participate in a disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work. They face increased vulnerability to all forms of sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations and humanitarian emergencies.



Discriminatory laws, policies, customs, traditions and practices still act to restrict widows' equal access to credit and loans. They prevent widows from owning and inheriting land, property and housing, as well as from participating in development processes – in turn contributing to increasing the poverty of widows. In 2024, research revealed that women enjoy less than 66.6 per cent of the legal rights available to men. In addition, 37 countries granted women less than half of the legal rights of men, to the detriment of half a billion women. Property rights of women are still restricted in 76 countries, and the rates of property ownership for women are significantly behind those of men in 41 low- and middle-income countries, with greater differences in rural and high-poverty areas. These customary laws in favour of the boy child often also leave girls in their adulthood with little-to-no assets, making it harder for them to secure collateral if they require a loan.

Without education and training, widows are economically insecure, unable to support themselves or their families, and are more vulnerable to exploitation. They are often forced to make a living by engaging in unpaid or underpaid jobs, such as domestic work.

Where things need to go...

Soroptimist International calls for the urgent need for this neglected group to be brought to the forefront of the UN Agenda in order for the international community to ensure that all widows and their children are becoming acknowledged.

Soroptimist International joins the UN in its concern regarding the increased vulnerability of widows to all forms of violence and discrimination in all contexts and humanitarian emergencies.

Soroptimist International recognises the need to ensure that all widows have equal access to the full range of social services, social protection and/or social security measures, equal access to – and control of – economic resources and their empowerment through access to financial and infrastructure services. Special focus should be given to support all widows of all identities in all situations.

Soroptimist International urges that all widows be granted greater legal protection under all relevant UN human rights instruments and in all settings. National laws should be implemented and harmonised with international standards to protect widows' human rights. Compulsory birth and marriage registration systems and widows' pensions must also be introduced. In addition, the marginalisation, abuse and violence widows suffer in some societies, including sexual abuse and harassment or forced remarriage, must be addressed, including by tackling the norms that are used to justify such discriminatory cultural practices and violence.



Soroptimist International urges all UN Member States to reduce the suffering that widows endure by raising their status regardless of age, location, legal system (as well as all other identifying factors), and ensure that they are not left behind, as mentioned in the UNGA Resolution A/76/L.40. This will contribute to promoting the full and equal participation of all women and girls in society, which in turn will bring us closer to eradicating poverty and promoting peace around the world.

Fundamental Action:

Soroptimist International calls on all UN Member States to:

- Implement an integrated, gender-sensitive and human rights-centred approach in all policy and legislation to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of widows, as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- Fulfil their obligations, and remove all reservations, under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention Against Torture (CAT), including but not limited to protecting widows from all forms of discrimination and violence and empower them to be recognised and represented as full members of society;
- Raise awareness about the challenges faced by widows and end all forms of cruel, dehumanising, repugnant and discriminatory practices against widows and their children by strengthening national legislation and accountability mechanisms to ensure that all perpetrators are punished, and provide a just restitution for any financial loss that is incurred;
- Remove social and cultural norms, and abolish customary, religious modern laws reinforcing discriminatory practices faced by widows and their children;
- Implement economic reforms, including social protections, to address the rights of all widows regardless of age; and
- Ensure that all laws consider the specific concerns, needs and challenges of all widows and their families.

Additional Action:

- Disaggregated data on all types of widows is essential to inform and generate relevant and robust legislation, policies, and programmes; and



- Take action on 23 June every year, International Widows Day, to raise additional awareness.

Where Soroptimist International Stands:

Soroptimist International works to “educate, empower and enable” women and girls, in all their diversity, around the world. As such, Soroptimist International works to:

- **Educate** at individual, community, and societal levels about acceptable and unacceptable practices, gender equality, and human rights as the single best primary prevention intervention to reduce the negligence of all widows and help them in rebuilding their lives;
- **Empower** all widows to actively participate in society and to take control over their own lives and that of their children and ensure that any and all human rights violations they face are immediately addressed and rectified; and
- **Enable** opportunities for all widows to continue to live their lives as well as that of their children to their fullest potential throughout their life course. This includes enabling them to reintegrate into society by providing social and financial support and opportunities, eliminating all forms of discrimination, physical, sexual, mental and economic violence, and ensuring that the human rights of all widows are respected, including their legal, health and financial rights and preventing the separation of children from their mothers.

Sources:

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