

WIDOWS

Lead

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Structural barriers, negative trends and progress on implementing the Beijing Platform for Action

WIDOWHOOD issues have relevance to every one of the twelve action areas of the BPfA, although widows are not mentioned in the Plan, and regrettably have been rarely referenced in the many years of CSW Agreed Conclusions regarding its implementation. This invisibility must stop. Widowhood is one of the most neglected of all human rights and gender issues.

Widows for Peace and Democracy (WPD) and its partners considers the Beijing +25 review process a unique opportunity to lift this blanket of invisibility on the cross-cutting, intersectional issues of widowhood, which have remained largely ignored in the ECE region. It is imperative that this 64th CSW review of implementation of the BPfA identifies and addresses the huge gaps in policies that leave so many uncounted millions of women and girls, such as widows of all ages and their children, truly "left behind" and vulnerable to diverse forms of extreme discrimination, violence and abuse.

Widows of all ages and wives of the missing or forcibly disappeared (half-widows) are the fastest growing group among the diverse and various sub-sects of women. Their exponential increase is due to a number of factors, including armed conflicts; revolutions; migration, death of male migrants in flight; natural disasters; the rise of fundamental extremism; harmful traditional practices such as child marriage to older men and the common age differences between marriage partners; HIV and AIDs; and the longer life expectancy of women over men, often due to men's deaths through violence, industrial accidents, and alcoholism.

These bereaved women and their children are often among the very poorest of the poor. They may also experience, especially if they are mothers of many children, or are older women, in migrant communities, disabled, displaced, in refugee and IDP communities, the non-income poverty of isolation, loneliness, lack of respect and stigma leading to depression, ill health, even suicide.

The suffering of widows is multi-dimensional; exacerbated and caused by extreme poverty, ageism, violence and abuse, marginalisation and stigmatization. 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. (1)

In Belarus, to relieve widows' poverty and isolation, the governments supports a scheme for families to "adopt" a widow, providing her with the companionship and support that she so needs to be able to live a decent life.

Gap in data collection and national statistics

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.

Documentation is essential

Birth certificates make girls visible to the State. Birth, marriage, and husbands' death certificates make widows visible not just to the State but to civil society and to the UN. Such documentation enables widows to have access to essential services such as shelter, health, education, social protection, pensions, and most importantly, access to justice. The disaggregation of data must include "marital status".

Erroneous attitudes, stereotyping of widows

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. However, 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 to violence and abuse, within their families, in the community and in institutional care . But today there is the growing phenomena of young women subject to early and forced marriage who are widowed at a young age.

Conflict afflicted widows

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 many widows of all ages, including child widows. Many come from countries where widows are routinely demonised and denied their rights, and are subject to harmful traditional practices.. Some of these practices still prevail, though hidden in their host country to which they have migrated far from their homelands, and are unable to seek remedies or escape from such violence out of fear.

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. Lack of adequate documentation, language skills, ability to describe traumatic events that led to their needing to seek refuge in ECE countries, fear of the stigma of citing sexual violence and rape, prevents many widows from obtaining the asylum they are entitled to.

Best practice in the asylum policies relating to women and girls, is the Canadian Immigration bureau's policy to seek information on the status of widows in a particular country from WPD through its NGO partner network of widows associations who can verify the widow applicant's account of harmful traditional practices she has experienced, or is threatened with.

In conflict and post conflict zones (such as Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo) widows may end up as beggars, prostitutes or sequential wives in polygamous marriages in order to support their children and survive. Years after conflicts have officially ceased widows who have survived horrific events, seen their husbands and children killed, been victims of rape, still wait to get justice, and reparations, or see their persecutors made accountable for their crimes against humanity and war crimes.

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 in the UNECE Region.



Recommendations beyond Beijing+25

- Birth, marriage legal documentation for all women.
- Records of husbands' deaths and disappearances.
- Women to be listed jointly with their husbands on property titles.
- Inheritance, land and property rights must be enshrined in law and all available means must be used to ensure real implementation, so that widows can surmount the barriers caused by corruption, bureaucracy, illiteracy, cost and locality barriers to accessing restorative justice.
- National Action Plans (NAPs) to implement UN SCR 1325 and subsequent WPS resolutions must include widows in their targets and indicators, and require widows' representatives to be at the peace tables.
- Widows should be supported to form their own associations, with funding, and training in capacity-building so they can collectively articulate their needs, and describe their key social and economic roles as sole parents, as breadwinners, farmers, workers, and care-givers.
- Governments should work with widows associations to map and profile widows and wives of the missing, providing numbers, ages, their survival and coping strategies, and gathering information on their needs, roles and hopes.
- UN CEDAW Committee should develop a General Recommendation (GR) on widows, a UN Human Rights Council Resolution on Widows and a UN Independent Expert on Widows
- UN Women should open a special desk to address the cross cutting intersectional issues of widowhood
- The UN should commission a special report on Widows in Conflict, Post Conflict, and Displacement
- The UN should appoint a UN SR on widowhood

Useful sources

(1) <https://youtu.be/IZUb6pimFB0>

Further information

- Margaret Owen - director.wpd@gmail.com; www.widowsforpeace.org
- Link to the Widows Statement for CSW64
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1U8LPnqsFNK2W-n2CskpKG6A9OASXiv9L/view?usp=sharing>