



# Economic and Social Council

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## Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-eighth session

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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

**Statement submitted by Global Fund for Widows, Graduate Women International (GWI), Guild of Service, Make Mothers Matter, Mother’s Union, National Alliance of Women’s Organizations, National Council of Women of Canada, Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform, The Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba Memorial Foundation, Wales Assembly of Women, Widows for Peace through Democracy, Widows Rights International, Women’s Federation for World Peace International, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

The world is increasingly aware that the current global institutions are no longer fit for purpose. There have been numerous initiatives in answer to the growing recognition that humanity is in transition to a more mature age which recognises our global interconnection and the need for global processes that are flexible to new realities. The system we currently have is insufficient for the needs of humanity and, though many proposed reforms would resolve this shortfall to a degree, current arrangements struggle under the weight of our crises.

It is well recognised that women and girls as a whole across the planet suffer most in times of crisis and thus are disproportionately affected in recent times due their displacement from the climate emergency or increasing conflict. Many are thus suffering from poverty and hunger. A demographic that is currently unrecognised is that of widows and female headed households.

Yet it is also recognised that widows can be active agents of positive change. The advancement of women and girls is essential for social progress. It is vital that the most disadvantaged women, of whom widows are a significant demographic, are recognised and included in policies and programmes to ensure they are not left behind.

In looking at the priority theme of the Commission on the Status of Women, Widows Rights International and the co-signatories of this statement ask Member States to also consider the definition of poverty with a far wider measure than Gross Domestic Product. Whilst material well-being correlates with happiness to a certain point, and it is known that financial independence for women enables her to make important decisions for the family with the resources she has under her own influence, the ultimate correlation is weak. Although this challenge is well understood, the United Nations is still discussing only these kind of indicators and these tend to take our attention and focus from both discourse and action. In so many cases purchasing power is used as an important metric, yet despite a growing understanding that the drive to have more “stuff” is the underlying cause of the climate emergency, this is still the metric most used. We ask Member States to consider a wider definition of poverty. A new metric taking into consideration the wealth of lived experience of actual people needs to be developed. For example, a region that is materially prosperous but suffers from acute alienation, poverty, suspicion, obesity and other such illness can no longer be considered more “developed” than one that may suffer from unemployment or malnutrition but enjoys bonds of support across families and communities and experiences generosity of spirits and resources albeit meagre. The depression, substance abuse, and suicide seen among the richest citizens and communities of the richest nations in the world bear sad witness to the disconnect between access to material resources and services and the human vision of a contented and satisfied life.

Whilst widows are an unseen and unheeded group that some research (Loomba Foundation) suggests is not less than 250 million and anecdotal evidence suggests could be as much as double, and they survive within the context of negative taboo and harmful traditional practices, yet time and again they prove a source of resilience within communities. Naserian in Tanzania has proven that given small technical assistance, the widows themselves create and develop projects that transform the lives of many and change culture such that since its inception in 2010, the areas in which it works now experience almost no Female Genital Cutting, a huge reduction in violence against women and forced and early marriage. Such examples of best practice can provide a helpful tool when searching for meaningful policies and programmes to alleviate poverty for women and girls globally.

If we are searching for ways in which to alleviate all types of poverty including those related to loneliness and mental health, we would do well to ask ourselves difficult questions about the human condition. In addition, it is no longer possible to progress using a system where the few are working on behalf of the many. As our examples of best practice illustrate, this work needs to be shouldered equally by increasing participation of all members of our human family. We ask Member States to ponder on the underlying principles at work with these organisations and their success. Common to these projects is the importance of the project emerging from the grass roots. They are a response to needs articulated by local widows. If the world is to develop to a more mature condition this development must happen at the individual and social levels simultaneously.

Volunteering is an important resource. Participation in service is both a goal and a strategy as service is an expression of the inherent nobility of human nature. Projects for widows also need to serve the entire local community. By participating in the projects, not only do widows gain in knowledge but also in confidence and a stronger sense of agency and are able to participate in community life including decision making. Unpaid work undertaken by widows and women and girls across the globe is unrecognised as it is unremunerated and yet provides unmeasured services and benefits for society.

The Barli Institute for Rural Women, which serves the rural poor in Indore, India, has been developed to address directly the needs of the local community. Training is intended to provide not only income-earning opportunities but also to foster new attitudes about women among the participants and their families. Changing attitudes of families is essential in an area where women are traditionally considered valuable only for reproduction and manual work and where neglect of women and girls leads to a high mortality rate for females.

The Guild of Service India also uses this development method supported by the Global Fund for Widows. Their crafts training takes place at the same time as informal discussions which stimulate self expression and awaken an awareness of problems and solutions. Women trained at the Guild and those in Naserian gain self-respect and confidence from their experience and their newly acquired skills.

Likewise health and hygiene information is included in discussions with widows in the activities of Naserian and the Algerian Women's Organisation. They also share ideas on spiritual and moral education of children. Respected men working with the organisations speak with other men in the community about the principle of equality.

When seeking to prevent and alleviate poverty, two further elements need to be recognised: the importance of just taxation and the need for trustworthiness.

Experience has demonstrated that utilising financial resources is rarely sufficient to bring about lasting solutions, yet sufficient financial resources will be required to bring commitments into reality. A global tax body is required that uses best practices for domestic tax policy and funds international efforts.

Some would say that trust, and trustworthiness, can be conceived of as the most vital resource we have, but it is in short supply. Trust is a fundamental prerequisite: without it, no agreement can be expected to succeed. Failure of agreements breeds further mistrust. Building trust requires time, sacrifice, honesty, accountability, transparency, and dependability. We have to learn lessons on how to break cycles of mistrust, find avenues where our trustworthiness can be demonstrated, and build on those successes. This has implications for everything we do, and if Member States wish to ensure an outcome that will prevent or alleviate poverty for women and girls they must needs recognise the need for growth in our collective capacity for trust and trustworthiness as an international community.

In light of the above we ask Member States to ensure that the Agreed Conclusions from the sixty-eighth session:

- Look at a wider definition of poverty and what it is to be prosperous;
- Consider the relation of prosperity to well-being and happiness;
- Take lessons from projects that are making a difference in the field;
- Consider that no development can truly take place other than by the efforts of the population themselves;
- The importance of judicious funding;
- The importance of universal participation;
- The need for a global taxation system;
- The importance of trust;
- Recognition of the immense value of unpaid work;
- The need to recognise the substantial demographic of widows and female headed households and provide support within the United Nations system to address their needs and realise their potential.

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