



Breaking the Cycle of Poverty: Inclusion of Widows and Their Dependents

Report on the GFW side event at the 68th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, 12th March 2024

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Introduction

On 12th March 2024, as part of the 68th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW68), the Global Fund for Widows co-sponsored a Side Event with the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Poland aimed at facing the struggles related to rural widowhood. The event included discussions of topics including access to equal justice, disinheritance and the brutal mistreatment of widows through practices such as cleansing and sexual violence.

The event began with a brief introduction to the mission and work of the Global Fund for Widows by Chairwoman and President of the organization, Heather Ibrahim-Leathers. This was followed by a speech from Katarzyna Kotula, the Minister for Equality from Poland, who discussed the importance of viewing widowhood as a broad issue that requires targeted policy changes. Later, other members of the panel spoke including Aisha Jumwa Katana, the Cabinet Secretary for Gender for the Republic of Kenya; Manjulaa Narasimhan who serves at the Department of Sexual and Reproductive Health, World Health Organization; Ana Maria Munoz-Boudet from the World Bank; and Melrose Karminty, the Minister of Social Welfare for the Republic of Sierra Leone. The conversation between the panelists emphasized the gaps in data, the lack of political attention on the issue, as well as the efforts being made by governments to position widowhood as a central issue in conversations regarding gender inequality.

The Russian-Ukrainian War's effect on Widows in Poland

The newly appointed Minister for Equality for Poland, Ms. Katarzyna Kotula began her speech by reflecting on the severe economic and emotional struggles that result after the passing of a spouse. She then discussed how Russian aggression against Ukraine has resulted in a growing population of widows in Poland. To combat the intense discrimination and economic hardships faced by these widows, Ms. Kotula called upon governments to pass policies that create greater economic opportunity for these widows. She remarked on the importance of creating enabling environments where widows are assisted with their daily finances. Ms. Kotula also referenced the Polish government's previous support of those affected by war and violence, such as the many refugees after the collapse of the Soviet Union. She ended her speech by reinforcing the importance of social structures that protect and preserve the rights of widows, as it will offer them more economic opportunity.

Financial Empowerment through Legislation for Widows in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone's Social Welfare Minister, Melrose Karminty spoke about the many hardships faced by widows in her country, such as the harmful cultural practices and barriers to economic success. Similarly to Poland, widowhood in Sierra Leone has only risen in the previous years, due to factors such as its civil war (1991-2002), the outbreak of many deadly diseases including Ebola, the mudslides that killed over 1000 people in 2017, and the outbreak of Covid-19.

In light of these events, Ms. Karminty spoke about various pieces of legislation that Sierra Leone has passed to address the needs of its growing widow population. These include The Domestic Violence Act passed in 2007, The Devolution of Estate and Property Act passed in 2007, and The Registration of Customary Marriage Act passed in 2009. These legislative initiatives aim to advance economic empowerment by ensuring the protection of widows from disinheritance and discrimination. Karminty indicated that these laws are not sufficient for widows in Sierra Leone, insisting that continued efforts of support are necessary to solve poverty among widows. Finally, she emphasized that her ministry is dedicated to pushing forward solutions that create long-term, inclusive growth for women.

Sexual and Reproductive Health Challenges Faced by Widows

Panelist Mrs. Manjulaa Narasimhan, from the World Health Organization's Department of Sexual and Reproductive Health, addressed the health-related challenges of widows around the world. She noted that widows are at a much higher risk of suffering reproductive and sexual health problems such as HIV, maternal mortality, unintended pregnancies, and unsafe abortions. These health risks are caused by sexual exploitation, domestic violence, and forced cleansing practices which involve forced sex and bodily harm. Mrs. Narasimhan drew attention to the fact that these practices are far more likely to occur since many widows lack access to education, employment, and adequate pensions that would allow them to escape poverty and unsafe living environments. Narasimhan called for empowering widows to receive health care and for including widows in community life and decision-making. She ended her speech by urging governments and global health organizations to prioritize the health and rights of widows as a key component of social justice and public health.

World Bank Strategies for Supporting Widows and Addressing Gendered Poverty

Ana Maria Munoz Boudet, of the World Bank, pointed out the dearth of data on widows and how it makes efficient policymaking and resource planning much more difficult. Poverty, she explained, is typically calculated by the household and per household head, hiding the experience of widowed women, especially those who live in the households of others. Existing surveys, like demographic and health surveys, present divergent pictures on widowhood experience (<https://dhsprogram.com/Countries/Country-List.cfm>) Where data has been more plentiful, as in Nigeria, Mali, Zambia, and Uganda, surveys more clearly show the disadvantages on widow nutrition and on child health.

She referred to programs including the World Bank's Women Business and the Law 2024, accessible through this link -- <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl>, which attempts to increase the data collection surrounding the challenges widows face throughout the developing world.

She also referenced Bangladesh's Widow, Deserted, and Destitute Women Allowance program as a model of success in the area of government support, noting that it has supported over 2.5 million women and improved access to food, health and financial inclusion.

Ms. Munoz Boudet then referred to widowhood differentials by region and age and explained how, in Africa, over 22% of women have experienced widowhood by age 49, as compared with Europe and Central Asia, where widowhood is more common after 60. The World Bank response has primarily been focused on legal reform, financial support, asset access, economic empowerment, and social norm change through focused programs—e.g., Kosovo land rights projects and livelihood protection in Bangladesh. Munoz Boudet reiterated the importance of building strengthened evidence to create effective policy change and increase the visibility of the plight of widows.

Legal Protections and Financial Initiatives for Widows in Kenya

Aisha Jumwa Katana, Kenya's Cabinet Secretary for Gender, Culture, the Arts, and Heritage, highlighted the daily problems faced by her country's 2.8 million widows. Jumwa asserted that widows in Kenya, and Africa as a whole, have many problems, including restricted access to healthcare, restricted rights to property, no social support, harmful cultural practices, and restricted knowledge of inheritance law. Jumwa noted that Kenyan widows are young, with more than half of them being widowed

before the age of 39, and mothers to multiple children. These factors leave them at a stark juncture of vulnerability and responsibility. She noted that widows often suffer from social stigmatization, psychological harm, and sexual victimization, opening them up to the possibility of contracting HIV and other diseases. Jumwa noted the significance of empowering the widow with legal knowledge and resources so she can fight for her right to inheritance and achieve economic independence. Jumwa outlined several government initiatives: the Tamini Mjane Widow Fund, which provides financial support for widows; the Wesam Journey Empower the Widow Grant, accessible through the Unclaimed Financial Assets Authority; and access to the Hustler Fund using the National Government Affirmative Action Fund. She also highlighted the 2022 amendment to the Matrimonial Property Law and the amendment to the Law of Succession; both aimed at protecting widows' property and inheritance rights. Finally, Jumwa reaffirmed the government's commitment to increasing vocational training for widows, enabling them to become independent and productive contributors to Kenya's economy.

Collecting and Analyzing Data Regarding Widows

After all the panelists had spoken, Mrs. Heather Leathers posed the question, “What can be done in our respective countries to help collect and analyze data?”

Mrs. Manjulaa Narasimhan was the first to respond and stated the importance of close analysis of the data collected, as many women often struggle with a range of complex challenges. She emphasized that data and analysis lay critical groundwork for creating policies to build programs that support widows.

Ms. Katarzyna Kotula next addressed the question by stating that the Polish government does not have an issue with collecting data, but rather with analyzing the intersectionality of the data. She referenced Mrs. Narasimhan’s previous statement that being a widow is only one aspect of the many challenges facing widowed women. She insisted on the importance of the new Polish Government under Prime Minister Donald Tusk, established on the 13th of December, to recognize widows as a group of women in need of policy change to support their economic needs. Finally, she stressed the importance of understanding the data associated with widowed immigrants from Russian aggression. She stated that it is important to create policies that allow these women to be accepted into Polish society.

Next to answer was Mrs. Melrose Karminty from Sierra Leone. She emphasized the paucity of data in Sierra Leone, and how this is a primary reason that plights of widowhood have gone unrecognized for so long. She mentioned that since the Global Fund for Widows outlined the inability of the United Nations to meet the SDGs

(Sustainable Development Goals) with widowhood as a worldwide problem, these widows are no longer suffering in silence. Finally, she mentioned the importance of clear data to inform the creation of legal policies and programs to assist widowed women.

Finally, Mrs. Ana Maria Munoz-Boudet responded by saying that many countries have access to data but have decided not to use and analyze this data for the betterment of widows. While there are many surveys done, including household surveys, demographic surveys, health surveys and more, they are rarely utilized to benefit widows. Mrs. Munoz-Boudet reiterated the importance of using and understanding this data. She also believes that by analyzing the data that countries do have access to, it will be easier to understand where there is a deficiency in data and correct it.

Conclusion

At the CSW68 Side Event at the United Nations, the five distinguished panelists clearly demonstrated the need for targeted legal and economic action to address the needs of widows around the world. Through their testimonies, the panelists emphasized the importance of data collection, legislative reform, and financial empowerment. By utilizing the strategies suggested by the panelists and gaining a deeper understanding of the problems faced by widows, nations big and small can ensure the well-being of millions of widowed women around the world.

This report was prepared by a Global Fund for Widows community supporter, a high school student with an interest in women's rights and the structural challenges faced by widows.

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