



**GLOBAL
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WIDOWS**



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THE SITUATION OF WIDOWS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Preliminary Research Report

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The views expressed in this article reflect those of the author and not of the Global Fund for Widows.

1. Scale of Widowhood and Female-Headed Households

There isn't much national data on widowhood specifically, but a few related numbers help sketch the picture. The 2023–2024 DRC Demographic and Health Survey (EDS-RDC III) found that 28% of households in the country are headed by women — 32.1% in urban areas versus 25.7% in rural ones (DHS Program/UNFPA, 2023–2024). That share has been climbing for two decades: 21% in 2007, 25% in 2013–2014, 28% now.

Female-headed households aren't the same as widow-headed ones, though — women end up heading households for all kinds of reasons, not just losing a husband. The closest widowhood-specific figure comes from the same survey: 2.1% of women aged 15–49 in the DRC were widowed as of 2023–2024 (DHS Program, DRC 2023–2024 marital-status data). But that only covers women under 50, leaving out a large chunk of the widow population. A real national widowhood figure across all ages doesn't seem to exist yet, at least not in what I could find so far.

2. Legal Protections for Widows

The DRC Family Code, amended by Law No. 16/008 of 15 July 2016, gives widows more protection than you might expect on paper:

Inheritance. Article 758 puts the deceased's children first in line to inherit, but the surviving spouse is right behind them, in the second category along with certain close relatives (DRC Family Code, Art. 758). So a widow isn't cut out of her husband's estate by default — she has a legal claim to it.

Matrimonial property. Article 530 separates property that belongs to the marriage from property that belongs solely to the deceased's estate. Once shared debts are paid off, whatever's left of the marital property is split evenly between the spouses, or their heirs (DRC Family Code, Art. 530). In other words, property a widow built up jointly with her husband is hers — not automatically folded into his inheritance.

Protection from harmful rituals. Article 544 makes it a criminal offense to force a widow or widower through treatment or rituals that violate their dignity, liberty, or privacy (DRC Family Code, Art. 544). This is a direct legal response to degrading mourning customs.

3. On Paper vs. Reality

The law looks solid, but the reporting on the ground tells a different story. In June 2026, Radio Okapi covered concerns from SAVOC (Synergie des Associations des Veuves et Orphelins du Congo), a widows' and orphans' advocacy group. Their list of ongoing problems: property grabbing, being cut out of inheritance, social discrimination, few economic options, and customs that still work against widows despite the law (Radio Okapi, 24 June 2026). SAVOC is pushing for stronger enforcement, emergency support, and real economic empowerment programs — not just legal text.

For what it's worth, the government responded. The Minister of Gender, Family, and Children publicly committed to strengthening inheritance protections for widows and improving their access to microfinance, job training, and income-generating work (Radio Okapi, 24 June 2026).

Take on this: the gap here isn't in the law itself — it's enforcement. Widows have inheritance rights on paper; advocacy groups are still describing property grabbing as routine.

4. Government and Social Protection Mechanisms

CNSS survivor pension. The Caisse Nationale de Sécurité Sociale pays a survivor pension to a surviving spouse, eligible children, and sometimes dependent parents (DRC CNSS). To qualify as a spouse, the marriage generally needs to have been civilly registered at least six months before the death, plus the usual paperwork — ID, family-composition certificate, marriage certificate, death certificate.

Lump-sum payment. CNSS also pays a one-time survivor allowance if the deceased had between 12 and 180 months of insurance coverage (DRC CNSS).

The catch: these benefits only reach people whose spouses were in the formal social-security system. That's a small slice of the population, so this is nowhere near a universal safety net for widows.

Broader programs. The World Bank-backed STEP program (Projet pour la Stabilisation de l'Est de la RDC pour la Paix) is bigger in scale. Between 2014 and 2022, it reached about 5.8 million people, roughly 3 million of them women, and gave direct livelihood or safety-net support — cash transfers, cash-for-work, grants, entrepreneurship, and life-skills training — to about 530,000 people (World Bank, February 2023). A 2025 World Bank update says similar programs are still running.

But STEP is aimed at poor and vulnerable populations generally, not widows specifically. So far, I haven't found a nationwide cash-transfer program built specifically for widows — that's worth digging into further before ruling it out entirely.

5. Ministry of Gender, Family and Children — Partnership Potential

The Ministry's stated job includes protecting women, children, and families; researching their conditions; fighting discrimination and violence against women; and supporting women in national development (DRC Ministry of Gender, Family and Children).

They've already flagged widow-specific issues themselves. Their message for the 2024 International Day of Widows and Orphans called out how hard it is for widows to raise children alone and reclaim inheritance rights (DRC Ministry of Gender, Family and Children). The Minister repeated that commitment in June 2026, tying it to both inheritance protection and economic access (Radio Okapi, 24 June 2026).

Why this matters: the government has already put its concerns in writing — inheritance problems and lack of economic opportunity for widows. Both are areas where GFW's expertise would line up directly with what officials are already saying they want to fix.

6. What's Still Missing

- No solid national widowhood number across all ages
- No confirmed widow-specific cash-transfer program at the national level
- No clear data on how many widows actually get CNSS survivor benefits in practice, versus how many are eligible