



Global Fund for Widows

Ending the World's Silence on Widows: Opportunities for Leadership around the World

Event Summary

June 2022

Ending the World's Silence on Widows: Opportunities for Leadership Around the World

Tuesday, 21 June 2021, 9:00am EDT

Hosted by:

The Global Fund for Widows

Moderated by:

Zain Asher

Anchor CNN International, One World

Opening Remarks:

H.E. Ambassador Hilda Suka-Mafudze

Ambassador of the African Union to the United States

Keynote Address:

High Commissioner Callista Mutharika

Former First Lady of Malawi

Permanent Representative of the Malawi to UNEP & UN-Habitat

Panelists:

H.E. Ambassador Victoria Sulimani

Deputy Permanent Representative of Sierra Leone to the United Nations

Ms. Karen Fowler

Co-Founder, Pour Les Femmes

Mr. Vikas Khanna

Chef, Global Goodwill Ambassador for Widows

Ms. Heather Ibrahim-Leathers

President, Global Fund for Widows

Closing Remarks:

Ms. Katrina Fotovat

Senior Official to the Secretary of State, Office of Global Women's Issues

Report by:

Global Fund for Widows

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Event Summary Report

Tuesday, 22 June 2022

As the global widowhood movement continues to grow, in part due to the adoption of UN General Assembly Resolution 76/252, the Global Fund for Widows (GFW), convened a panel of gender experts and practitioners for a discussion on national-level action that can mainstream widowhood as a human rights issue. The event's speakers also took the floor to share stories and experiences of widows in certain parts of the world and of those who have taken up the call to action on their behalf.

Experiencing Widowhood and its Effects

Widowhood was an experience that affected many of the event panelists – Zain Asher, spoke about her mother and how courageous choices kept her family from feeling many of its adverse impacts, and Amb. Sulimani and SO Fotovat also noted they were a daughter of a widow. For Vikas Khanna, a trip to Vrindavan, India, a city known for the bright colors of its Holi Festival, the white widows are required to wear struck him. After connecting with one individual in particular and offering her a clandestine bit of pink chalk, he swore to bring their plight to the world and produced, *The Last Color* film. Most harrowing, however, was Madam Mutharika's Keynote Address in which she spoke of becoming a widow. Despite being the First Lady of Malawi, being educated and a woman of her own means, her in-laws still plundered her estate and brought violence upon her family members until she fled her home. Together, these stories made it clear that no one, regardless of any privileges they may hold, is immune to the adverse effects of widowhood.

Widowhood in International and Regional Systems

Ambassador Victoria Sulimani, Deputy Permanent Representative of Sierra Leone to the UN, spoke about her Mission's leadership during the negotiations of the UN General Assembly. As Sierra Leone continues its recovery from a conflict that created a high number of widows, Ambassador Sulimani recalled that her country has witnessed the catastrophic consequences of widowhood on women and children. She announced Sierra Leone's intention to run for a 2024-2025 seat on the Security Council making widowhood a key priority in their WPS platform. The importance of widows in peace and security was emphasized by Senior Official Fotovat, who detailed the important roles widows and female-headed households play in conflict resolution and reconstruction – the widows often shoulder the weight of raising and shaping their future societies and should be supported as such.

The Role of Social Enterprises in Creating Dignified Work

Karen Fowler, Co-Founder of Pour Les Femmes, and Heather Ibrahim-Leathers of Global Fund for Widows commented on the importance of economic inclusion and empowerment as being key components in the fight for gender equality and shifting the paradigms around widowhood. At the Pour Les Femmes Foundation, nearly all of the women they employ in their DRC operations are widows, who in the DRC are subject to social marginalization and discrimination, giving them dignified and gainful employment. GFW has found that through their WISALA intervention, respect for widows in their communities increases as they build their businesses and wealth. By targeting overlooked populations,

Widowhood and Development

SO Fotovat, outlined the importance of addressing widowhood across the US Government, not only in data collection but outlining the different ways in which widows are currently benefiting from humanitarian aid and foreign policy objectives. Structural and pre-existing inequalities continue to hamper widows' integration into public life, citing the plight of widows and the wives of the missing in Syria as an example of where women's rights paradigms are in need of a shift if there is truly to be meaningful progress towards gender equality in a post-conflict era. As the Ambassador of the African Union to the USA, H.E. Amb. Suka-Mafudze noted the diversity of culture and history across the continent but was sad to find that discrimination and rights abuses against widows were a cross-cutting issue. As a result, she pledged to advocate for widows across her work, including in supporting widow-specific development projects and frameworks on the African continent.

Conclusions

The panel agreed that momentum on the meaningful progress in the public and private sectors must not be lost and that further efforts must be done to include their voices and needs in development programs, post-conflict reconstruction, and foreign policy on gender equality at the national and international levels. Many speakers took the opportunity of presenting on Capitol Hill to call on the USG to add widows to the State Department's Human Rights Reports, urged Congress to recognize International Widows Day, and pass a resolution that would direct gendered policy work and priorities to incorporate widowhood. They all stressed the need to offer a better framework of protection of their rights across policy agendas like peace and security, sustainable development, and public-private partnerships.