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MODEL CHARTER FOR THE RIGHTS OF WIDOWS

A Draft Protocol for adaptation to specific country, legal, social, cultural and economic situations.

Discrimination against and abuse of **WIDOWS** occurs across a wide spectrum of cultures, religions, ethnic groups, regions, irrespective of the economic or education status of the women subject to this oppression

Attitudes to and treatment of widows varies from relatively mild indifference and social exclusion (prevalent in some developed countries of the West) to extreme mental, physical and sexual torture, and even to murder. In Tanzania, a HelpAged study found that in one year as many as 400 elderly women, mostly widows, were murdered or stoned to death accused of being *witches*. In several South Asian communities the vernacular words used for widows mean *witch*, *sorceress*, *prostitute*, *whore*. Across ethnic groups widows are systematically and routinely vilified, perceived as bringing ill omens and bad luck, and the real cause of their husbands' deaths. Traditional practices may be not merely degrading, but life-threatening.

In the context of legal rights, whether enshrined in International Law, or in the Constitution and Domestic Law, widows are often beyond the reach of modern statutes, and may, for various reasons, be unable to access the modern justice system in their countries. In countries where parallel systems of law co-exist (religious, customary, modern), widows' lives are mainly determined by interpretations, made by leaders of their local communities, of the former two systems. Thus, widows are often barred from inheriting from their dead husband's estate; may be evicted from the family home; lose custody of their children to the male relatives of their deceased spouse. They may be unable to own or dispose of land, and be subject to horrific, degrading and life-threatening traditional practices.

In spite of the many ratifications to the CEDAW, the consensus of the Beijing Platform for Action, the widespread support for the Elimination of Violence to Women, and the endorsement by governments of the SCR 1325, widows continue to be excluded from the progress made in raising the status of millions of the World's Women.



Not only are they denied their basic human rights, civil, political, social and economic, but their crucial roles in society, in development, in peace building, as sole supporters of their families has not been recognised. There is a dearth of statistical data and little situational analysis of their day-to-day struggles to survive.

But change is on the way as widows begin to organise themselves to be agents of CHANGE, lobby for law reforms, are represented in decision-making, and begin to be counted and heard.

The Charter for WIDOWS' RIGHTS demands the elimination of all discrimination against widows, both within the family and in community and public life. Non-state actors – such as family members – may not justify the abuse of widows on the grounds of “custom”. As Nafis Sadik once said, famously, “ no custom or religion can ever justify the oppression of women”. We add, nor of WIDOWS.

The plight of widows of war often worsens in the aftermath of conflict, and SCR 1325 has not assisted them to have their immediate as well as long-term needs addressed. But the aftermath of war, when the numbers of widows and wives of the missing will have increased unprecedentedly, is the opportune moment for widows to organise themselves and ensure that, for example, in the drafting of new constitutions, in law and administrative reforms, widows' issues are mainstreamed and their rights guaranteed.

This Draft draws on all the Human Rights Conventions and Charters, and particularly on the CEDAW and the Beijing Platform. It also accommodates the consensus arrived at in agreeing the MDGs and other Resolutions and Declarations.

The Articles below describe acts and attitudes which are, in most countries, already proscribed under the general principles of international laws ratified by governments. Here they are spelt out specifically.

It is hoped it will be a useful lobbying tool for widows' groups, women's organisations, and inform the relevant Ministries (Women, Justice, Health etc.) of the principle issues.



WIDOWS' CHARTER

NOTING THAT ALL WOMEN ARE EQUAL before the law and that the human rights of women are inalienable, universal and non-transferable,

NOTING THAT IN MANY COUNTRIES WIDOWS SUFFER FROM LOW STATUS, DISCRIMINATION, VIOLENCE AND LACK OF LEGAL RIGHTS

NOTING THAT IN MANY COMMUNITIES WIDOWS ARE STEREOTYPED AS EVIL, BRINGING BAD LUCK, AND THAT SOCIAL ATTITUDES TO WIDOWHOOD OBSTRUCT THEM FROM FULLY PARTICIPATING IN CIVIL SOCIETY

NOTING THAT IN SPITE OF INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC LAWS GUARANTEEING EQUALITY IN INHERITANCE, LAND OWNERSHIP, AND CRIMINALISING VIOLENCE TO WOMEN WIDOWS ARE OFTEN BANNED FROM INHERITING, EVICTED FROM THEIR HOMES, DEPRIVED OF ALL THEIR PROPERTY, AND LEFT IN DESTITUTION

NOTING THAT WIDOWS ARE OFTEN VICTIMS OF DEGRADING AND LIFE-THREATENING TRADITIONAL PRACTICES IN THE CONTEXT OF FUNERAL AND BURIAL PRACTICES

NOTING THAT WIDOWS, IN THE CONTEXT OF THE AIDS PANDEMIC, SUFFER STIGMA AND ABUSE, HAVE SPECIAL HEALTHCARE NEEDS BUT ARE ALSO KEY CARERS OF CHILDREN, ORPHANS AND OTHER DEPENDENTS.

NOTING THAT THERE IS NO SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DISCRIMINATION AND ABUSE OF WIDOWS IN THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION

NOTING THAT WIDOWS ARE KEY SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PLAYERS IN DEVELOPMENT

REAFFIRMING THE IMPORTANT ROLE THAT WIDOWS DO AND MAY PLAY IN THE RESOLUTION AND PREVENTION OF CONFLICTS

EXPRESSING CONCERN THAT THE IMPACT OF THIS TREATMENT OF WIDOWS HAS SEVERE AND NEGATIVE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WHOLE OF SOCIETY

IN PARTICULAR BECAUSE THE POVERTY OF WIDOWS DEPRIVES THEIR CHILDREN OF THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS TO SHELTER, FOOD, EDUCATION AND THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD



RECOGNISING THE URGENT NEED TO MAINSTREAM A WIDOWS' PERSPECTIVE IN ALL POLICY DEVELOPMENTS AND DECISIONS

REAFFIRMING THE NEED TO IMPLEMENT FULLY ALL INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMANITARIAN LAW THAT PROTECTS THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS DURING AND AFTER CONFLICT AS WELL AS IN TIMES OF PEACE

REQUIRES ALL GOVERNMENTS TO USE ALL MEASURES POSSIBLE TO ELIMINATE THIS DISCRIMINATION, AND TO WORK WITH WIDOWS' GROUPS TO ASSESS THEIR NUMBERS AND THEIR SITUATION SO AS TO DEVELOP POLICIES AND LAWS TO ALLEVIATE THEIR ISOLATION AND POVERTY, AND ACKNOWLEDGE THEIR VALUABLE SOCIAL CAPITAL.

ARTICLE 1

Widows shall enjoy equality with all women and men, irrespective of their age or marital status.

Any treatment of a widow which differs from the treatment, legally, socially, economically, of a widower shall be deemed to be discriminatory and therefore illegal.

Widows shall not be discriminated against, in word or deed, either in family and private life, or in community and public life.

The State is guilty, by omission, of breach of the law, if it implicitly condones discrimination and abuse of the widow by non-state actors, such as family members.

ARTICLE 2

- a) Widows shall have the right to inherit from their husband's estate, whether or not the deceased spouse left a will.**
- b) Widows may not be disinherited**
- c) Widows may not be "inherited" as wives or concubines to their husband's brother, nor forcibly placed in a "*levirate*" relationship, nor forcibly made pregnant by a relative in order to continue producing children in her dead husband's name.**
- d) A widow has the right to remarry**
- e) A widow must be free to marry someone of her own choice**
- f) Polygamy and temporary marriage is forbidden.**
- g) "Honour Killings" are murder**
- h) Daughters shall inherit equally with sons**



- i) **“Property-Grabbing” and “chasing-off” are criminal offences, punishable as the most serious category of crime**
- j) **Anyone who attempts or manages to deprive a widow of any of her property, take custody of her children, without an order of a judge or magistrate shall be guilty of the most serious category of crime**
- k) **Anyone, whether a relative or a stranger, who seeks or manages to gain control of the dead husband’s bank account, insurance policy, accident compensation claims, without the order of the Court is guilty of the most serious category of crime**
- l) **Free Legal Aid shall be given to widows in all inheritance, property and personal status disputes**

ARTICLE 3

- a) **Anyone who arranges or coerces a widow to participate in harmful traditional practices in the context of funeral and burial rites shall be guilty of the most serious category of crime (for example: ritual cleansing through sex; scarification; isolation; restrictions on diet and dress endangering mental and physical health)**
- b) **Anyone who has sexual relations with a widow in the context of funeral and burial rites shall be guilty of Rape, and subject to the maximum penalty.**
- c) **Anyone who forcibly deprives the widow of custody of her children shall be guilty of a serious offence**
- d) **Anyone who physically, mentally or sexually abuses a widow is guilty of the most serious category of crime**
- e) **Anyone who verbally abuses a widow by calling her insulting names shall be guilty of an offence.**

ARTICLE 4

Any restrictions on a widow’s mobility, even where based on “custom” which continues after the 14th day after the death of the spouse are unlawful and anyone responsible for restraining the widow is guilty of a criminal offence

- a) **Any restrictions, due to her marital status, on a widow’s freedom to access social, health and education services are unlawful**
- b) **Any restrictions concerning domicile, diet, clothing, life-style imposed on a widow against a will are unlawful**
- c) **All restrictions on widows’ accessing health care, including family planning services, are unlawful.**
- d) **Any restriction on a widow’s right to citizenship, a passport and freedom to travel is unlawful.**



ARTICLE 5

All appropriate measures shall be taken to eliminate discrimination against widows in the field of employment, in particular:

- a) The right to the same employment opportunities and remuneration as other men and women**
- b) It is an offence under the Employment Acts for anyone to dismiss a woman from her employment because she has become a widow and must take some reasonable time off work for the funeral rites is guilty of an offence**
- c) It is an offence to refuse to employ a widow because she is wearing mourning clothes**
- d) Suitable child-care and elderly care support shall be provided to widows who work outside the home.**

ARTICLE 6

- a) The term “violence against women” includes any act of gender-based violence against a widow that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to her, including threats of such acts, coercion, or deprivation of liberty.**
- b) No widow-abuse may be justified by citing custom, tradition or religion.**
- c) All appropriate measures shall be taken, through, for example public education and training of opinion leaders, to change the negative stereotyping of widows**
- d) No relative shall detain a widow in his or her household as an unpaid domestic worker without registering before the court and being subject to regular monitoring and inspection by the social services.**
- e) All appropriate measures shall be taken to protect widows and their children from sexual exploitation, prostitution and trafficking of women and girls.**
- f) It is no defence to this law that the widow consented to be victim of the alleged violence.**

ARTICLE 7

- a) All appropriate measures shall be taken to ensure that those dependent on widows – children, other orphans, the old, sick and frail people – are identified that gaps in assistance are filled.**
- b) Where appropriate, widows should receive financial support to balance opportunity costs in sending children to school.**
- c) Appropriate measures shall be taken to eliminate discrimination against widows in areas of economic and civil life. In particular**
 - (i) The right to a pension and family benefits**



- (ii) Elimination of delaying bureaucratic barriers to widows accessing pensions
- (iii) Elimination of corruption in the dispensing of pensions to widows
- (iv) Special measures to assist illiterate widows access their economic and legal rights
- d) Widows' children should have priority in assessment for education scholarships.
- e) Widows should be recognised as carers, particularly in the case of infection with AIDS and be given special support to allow them to fulfil this role fully.

ARTICLE 8

WIDOWS OF CONFLICT AND POST CONFLICT

- a) Recalling SCR Resolution 1325, and recognising the huge increase in the numbers of widows and wives of the missing as a consequence of armed conflict
- b) Noting the absence of reliable data on the numbers and situations of widows and wives of the missing.
- c) Recognising that many widows of war have also been victims of rape and sexual violence
- d) Recognising also the extreme vulnerability of widows and daughters of widows in the instability of societies in the aftermath of war
- e) Noting the unique role widows play as custodians of the social fabric of communities
- f) Noting also widows' unique roles as peace builders and peace makers, through their ability to link hands with widows across ethnic, religious and national divides
- g) Recognising that years after Peace Accords are signed widows of war continue to struggle to survive in refugee and IDP camps and are unable to return to their original homes
- h) Recognising the particular individual security issues for women without male protectors
- i) Noting the alarming rise in domestic violence as well as sexual violence in the community in the post conflict situation
- j) Expressing concern at the vulnerability of widows and their children to rape, forced prostitution and trafficking by criminals, occupying troops, so-called peace-keeper forces
- k) Expressing concern that particular issues of widows and wives of the missing must be on the peace negotiations and accords agendas
- l) Noting the many numbers of orphans, sick, old, wounded and traumatised people dependent on widows for their survival
- m) Understanding that widows are often the sole support of AIDS victims and may be infected themselves



CALLS all actors involved in negotiating and implementing peace agreements to address the special needs of widows and wives of the missing and ensure the protection and respect for their human rights.

CALLS on all actors to support widows to band together in associations so that they can collectively undertake MAPPING AND PROFILING PROJECTS to fill the gap in statistics on their situation.

CALLS on all actors to ensure that widows' are represented in these negotiations so that their particular concerns, for example:

- i. rights of safe return**
- ii. inheritance and property rights, land allocation and ownership**
- iii. protection of widow witnesses at national and international tribunals**
- iv. personal status guarantees in constitutional and legislative reform**
- v. protection of widow witnesses at national and international tribunals**
- vi. counselling and health care for widowed victims of sexual abuse and rape**
- vii. addressing needs of widows who are refugees or internally displaced, and widow asylum seekers**
- viii. support widows' associations to map and profile themselves and disseminate the information**

ARTICLE 9

Government will support the establishment of a National Federation of WIDOWS, with clusters and sub-groups in every town and sets of villages so that information on the needs of widows is available and can inform policy making at the national and local level.

- a) All appropriate measures shall be taken to support widows organising themselves into self-help and empowerment groups**
- b) These groups shall be acknowledged as being decisive components of civil society, to be involved as participants in the development of social, economic policies affecting their situation.**
- c) Support shall be given to the establishment of a National Federation of Widows' Groups with an advisory status to government.**
- d) Widows' shelters and legal aid centres for widows shall be established.**
- e) Statistic and Data shall be collected and a situational analysis undertaken to ascertain the true numbers, needs and roles of widows in society.**



- f) In recognition of the gap in knowledge, Governments will explore alternative methods of collecting such information, such as participatory poverty and demographic assessment studies involving the widows' groups themselves.**

ARTICLE 10

- a) Governments shall address the situation of widows in their work programmes to achieve the Millennium Development Goals**
- b) Governments shall bear in mind the special situation of widows when identifying measures to implement the CEDAW, the BPFA, the Declaration Eliminating Violence against Women, the Convention against Torture, SCR Resolution 1325 and all other human rights conventions and charters.**