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Statement for International Widows Day by Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

Including widows in the work to “build back better” from COVID-19

Over the past several months, we have seen the myriad ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic impacts the lives of women and men differently. Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the effects of the pandemic are exacerbated for women and girls. At the same time, mortality from the virus tends to be higher for men. UN Women’s data hub, Women Count, presents World Health Organization data that shows men account for 59 per cent of coronavirus deaths in Italy, 68 per cent in Mexico and 77 per cent in Thailand. This represents a devastating human loss, and one that is likely leaving tens of thousands of women newly widowed at just the time when they are cut off from their usual socio-economic and family supports.

Already, widows were largely unseen, unsupported and unmeasured in our societies. The latest figures that we have (2015) estimate that some 258 million women globally have been widowed. The actual number is likely to be much higher and to grow further as the coronavirus and its related effects on health continue to rage around the world.

Experience from past pandemics, for example HIV/AIDS and Ebola, shows that widows are often denied inheritance rights, have their property grabbed after the death of a partner, and can face extreme stigma and discrimination, as perceived ‘carriers’ of disease. Worldwide, women are much less likely to have access to old age pensions than men, so the death of a spouse can lead to destitution for older women. In the context of lockdowns and economic closures, widows may not have access to bank accounts and pensions to pay for healthcare if they too become ill or to support themselves and their children. With lone-mother families and single older women already particularly vulnerable to poverty, this is an area that needs urgent attention.

Governments must provide immediate support, while working to revamp social and economic structures in the long-term. In addition to legal reform to ensure that widows have equal inheritance and property rights, we need to see fiscal stimulus programmes that support widows and older single women economically. For example, the reach and benefit levels of social assistance programmes such as cash transfers and social pensions should be expanded and these benefits must be accessible to those without bank accounts. It is critical to invest in the work of civil society, in particular grassroots and community-based groups, who can provide widows with vital support at the local level and challenge the discriminatory, sometimes deadly social norms that they face.

Widows must not be left out of our work to “build back better” from COVID-19. Let us ensure that our recovery prioritizes their unique needs and supports societies to be more inclusive, resilient and equal for all.