



The UN & You

BY TERESA KOTTURAN SCN – JUNE 2019

International Widows' Day is June 23

The United Nations in 2010 launched [International Widows' Day](#) to raise awareness of the violation of human rights that widows suffer in many countries after the death of their spouses. There are 258 million widows around the world. For many women, the death of a spouse is the beginning of a list of losses – their social status, marital home, land, property, social security, dignity, and, at times, their children. Often they are evicted from their homes, ostracized and abused. Whereas men losing spouses lose none of their human rights. In fact, they are offered support to begin anew.

According to a 2018 report by UN Women, one in 10 widows lives in extreme poverty. Many widows face economic, social, physical and psychological violence from their families and communities. Customary laws and cultural norms support such economic violence against widows despite statutory law protections. Traditional practices isolate and shame widows and restrict their mobility and access to job training to improve their earning ability to support themselves. It is important to remember that not all widows are old. Violent conflicts and forced child marriages create many child widows.

International Widows' Day is an opportunity for action towards achieving full rights and recognition for widows who are invisible, uncounted and ignored.

There is a lack of reliable data to develop policies and programs to address the poverty, violence and discrimination suffered by widows. The ultimate goal of International Widows' Day is to develop resources and policies to empower widows and allow them to have access to education, work, healthcare and lives free of violence and abuse. This will give them the opportunity to create a life for themselves and their children after the death of a husband, ending the cycle of poverty and abuse.

Strong advocacy is needed to ensure that governments uphold their commitments to enshrining the rights of widows in international law, including the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) and the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). In countries where national laws exist to protect the rights of widows, weaknesses in the judicial systems compromise how widow's rights are defended. This should be addressed.

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Photo caption: A 38-year-old widow who lost her husband in the Central African Republic war escaped to a refugee site in Cameroon with her five children, one of whom died. Photo credit: UN Women/Ryan Brown

Photo source: <https://www.un.org/en/events/widows-day/>