



COVID-19 & WIDOWHOOD

The Virus' Invisible Victim

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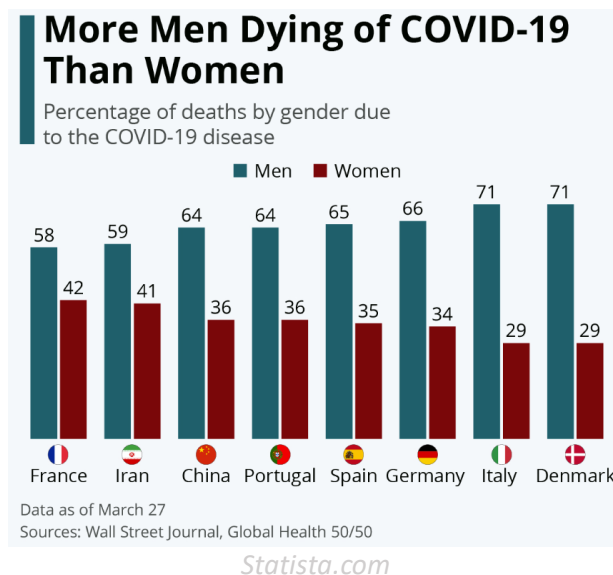
Global Fund For Widows

COVID-19: A Widow Making Machine

The coronavirus outbreak is poised to create an unprecedented numbers of widows across the developing world; and the international community is not prepared for the devastating repercussions. Global Fund for Widows maintains that the virus will *expose* and *exacerbate* the plight of widows throughout the developing world.

A WIDOW MAKING MACHINE

As data from the COVID outbreak is analyzed, there is an emerging scientific consensus that men are dying at a dramatically faster rate than women. The explanations for this trend vary, from the naturally stronger immune systems of women, to men's tendency to engage in more risky behavior. However, the data is unequivocal, COVID-19 appears poised to disproportionately kill men across the world.¹



This virus is not the first disaster to disproportionately affect men. The Global Fund for Widows has seen similar trends in active conflict zones across the world, where research confirms men face a 1.3 to 10 times increased risk of death.² While robust democracies and developed nations with strong social support are more well poised to respond to these deaths, much of the developing world is resting on the brink of an unprecedented human rights disaster. In underdeveloped communities widows remain one of the [most destitute and disenfranchised groups, and little is being done to address their status](#). Just months after UN Women President, Ambassador Penelope Beckles, called for critical UN action on widowhood, COVID-19 is poised to grow the crisis exponentially.

¹ <https://www.statista.com/chart/21345/coronavirus-deaths-by-gender/>

² *Christin Ormhaug*, Armed Conflict Deaths Disaggregated by Gender. International Peace Research Institute. 2009

WORK & LOCKDOWNS

COVID-19 is exacerbating widows' vulnerability. Already on the periphery of decent/secure work, global lockdowns have resulted in widows' sudden loss of employment. Deprived of an income, widows have been forced to live off of meager savings, to the extent that any exist at all. As widows have been disinherited from their land and property, they do not have any fiscal source of backstop or support. The absence of any form of government issued social protection for widows in most developing countries further exposes their immediate and acute financial vulnerability.

Widows working as migrants, day labourers, temporary workers, and overseas domestic workers suffered added risks as they were forced into immediate migration to return home from places of work, plunging them into physical vulnerability in addition to fiscal vulnerability. In India, millions of day labourers were left stranded after immediate work and train stoppages, forced widows to walk hundreds of kilometers and forage for food on their returns to villages. Widows expelled from homes where they worked as domestic live-in workers found themselves on flights to their homeland, but stranded at airports with no money or ability to travel to their final destination.

Testimony: A widow from the Philippines working as a domestic worker abroad was sent back to her homeland when her host family entered lockdown. Stranded near the airport, the widow had no money to complete the journey to her village, or to eat. Without her income, her 3 children, mother, and sister in the village were also running out of food.

HUNGER

Within two weeks of individual country lockdowns, GFW's partners around the world began sounding the alarm, reporting that widows in their countries were calling for immediate hunger relief. Having been disinherited of land that could have been used for simple subsistence or assets that could be sold, widows have no buffer to manage the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns. Food insecurity was a problem for widows before COVID-19, now starvation is their reality. As mothers of young children, they bear the added burden of feeding their young.

Testimony: A young widow in Kenya washed clothing in nearby homes to feed her 8 children, including her 6-month old baby. Kenya's COVID-19 lockdown meant she could no longer wash clothes for households. Within a few days, she ran out of money to feed her children. One evening, the neighbors could no longer endure the persistent and desperate cries of the children, and entered the widow's home. They found the destitute widow boiling a pot of rocks. The widow, desperate to calm her children, had begun to boil rocks in order to trick her starving children into thinking that a meal was on the way, in hopes that they may collapse of exhaustion.

EDUCATION

Unable to afford school fees after being disinherited, widows have always found educating their children to be a major challenge. Unable to send children to school exposes their daughters to child marriage while leaving sons vulnerable to a life of radicalized indoctrination and recruitment. Impoverished and disinherited, widows also lack access to internet resources. With COVID-19 school stoppage, children of widows are unable to access online school if it exists, disrupting their qualifications for sitting for annual exams, and having long-term implications on their path forward. Furthermore, continued lockdown and loss of employment means widows may struggle to return to work in the post-COVID world, rendering them further weakened in addressing their children's educational needs. Exposed in this crisis is governments' absence of social protections such as school bursaries for widows and their children.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Forced into high risk, low paying or other informal sector work, widows – and their children - are rendered vulnerable to human trafficking. COVID-19 has exacerbated such vulnerability, as impoverishment and hunger force desperate considerations. Within two weeks of the COVID-19 lockdowns, GFW began receiving evidence of increased human trafficking activity. Desperate to satiate starving mouths, and judgement clouded by the instinct for survival, widows are being enticed and preyed upon by child traffickers, promising full meals and safe play for their children.

Testimony: A young widow in Cameroon who had been disinherited of her land, ran out of money a few days after Cameroon initiated its COVID-19 lockdown. As hunger gripped the family, the widow claimed that she was approached several times by a fellow female villager, promising to feed the widow's children if she let them come to her home and play with her own children as "babysitters". Facing starvation as the lockdown continued, the widow begrudgingly agreed to "lend" her daughter for a day to the woman, believing the woman's promise that she will offer the girl a good meal in exchange.

COVID-19 & WIDOWHOOD: MUCH TO BE REVEALED

While the Global Fund for Widows has been able to identify some of the implications that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on widows and their children, there is much that needs yet to be revealed. With certainty we believe that the pandemic will continue to expose government failures to address the plight of widows, especially as it pertains to securing widows' inheritance, land, and ownership rights. Failure to offer widows with protections such as unemployment insurance, cash transfers, food rations, and school bursaries will have multigenerational impact on their families. Underinvestment in healthcare systems will further tax widowed populations and increase them in number. The implications of this will continue to exacerbate the current status of widows including their hunger, vulnerability to human trafficking, and inability to educate their children.

CALL TO ACTION

GFW is working closely with its partners to continue to sound alarms on these issues. We call upon the UN Security Council and the General Assembly to immediately move to protect widows and their children. We call on UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and Deputy GS Amina Mohammed to fulfil their promise to address the issue of widowhood and its multiple intersectionalities. We call on UNWomen to make widowhood part of their agenda. We call on the High Commissioner of Human Rights to acknowledge violations of widows' rights and to bring immediate legal protections to them. We call on the Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food, on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, on Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, on Violence Against Women, on Trafficking in Persons to feature widows in all of your testimony. We call on the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Violence Against Women (CEDAW) to issue a General Recommendation to hold governments accountable in protecting widows' rights. We call on the World Bank to further its work on widows around the world. We call on major civil society groups including the Global Fund, Landesa, Oxfam, the International Committee Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, AARP, HelpAge International, the Global Fund for Women, the 8 UN Major Groups and Women's Movement NGOs to work with us both to educate people about the plight of widows and to address their lack of social protection.