



# WIDOWHOOD

The Link  
to

# HUNGER & FOOD INSECURITY

EDITED BY  
Heather Ibrahim-Leathers

WRITTEN BY  
Victoria Elizabeth Mueller

April 2020



*Global Food For Widows*

## Widowhood: The Link to Hunger

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, after a decade of steady decline, the number of people globally suffering from hunger is on the rise. In 2019, more than 820 million people in the world were hungry. Not only is global hunger becoming more severe, but it is also becoming more gendered. Women represent over 60% of the chronically hungry worldwide. In addition, over 2 billion people globally suffer from moderate to severe food insecurity. With respect to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, and in particular, SDG 2, which pledges the eradication of hunger and food insecurity, this data is quite disconcerting. Investigating and addressing populations that are specifically susceptible to hunger may provide a more tangible method for attaining this goal.

Widows and their families are particularly vulnerable to hunger. In order to fully comprehend the relationship between widowhood and hunger, however, it is necessary to explore the economic implications of becoming widowed. Across the world, but particularly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, women often rely on their husbands for financial support in order to run their households. The dissipation of this economic safety net when a they lose their husbands often leaves widows and their families in poverty. Cultural expectations that require women to maintain the household and provide childcare for their children often contribute to widows' lack of marketable skills and consequent ability to work.

One of the most notable and glaringly degrading economic consequences of becoming widowed in areas like Africa and Asia is the disinheritance that widows face. When a woman's husband dies, is killed, becomes "permanently missing" as a result of political or social unrest, or simply abandons her, she immediately loses all of her household income. While in many countries and cultures the inheritance of widows is protected by statutory law, cultural codes almost always prohibit this inheritance. With their worth being immediately removed following the death or disappearance of their husbands, widows lose any sense of economic agency and are treated rather as transactional pawns in familial politics.

What does this lack of financial stability, limitation on marketable skills, and disinheritance mean for widows? When widows are left without economic support, the ability to save, and a viable means to finding employment, they are launched into an intergenerational, ever-expanding cycle of poverty. The poverty that arises from widows being banished from their homes and holding no financial claims results in a lack of basic resources such as food, water, and shelter. According to the Loomba Foundation's 2015 *World Widow Report*, one of the four core threats to the well-being of widows and their children is hunger. Because there is such a dramatic fall in living standards when a woman is widowed, the health of her family often falls drastically as well. The lack of regular access to nutritious and sufficient food, which occurs when widows are left without property and are unequipped to provide for their families, puts them at greater risk of malnutrition and poor health. According to the Loomba report,

widowhood correlates directly to children's hunger, poor nutrition, and sometimes even acute malnutrition.

Furthermore, though most widows are barred from inheritance because of cultural practices, in the rare occasion when they are able to inherit land, this land is often limited both in terms of area and quality of soil. According to the Loomba report, when widows are able to inherit, they often own progressively smaller plot sizes caused by pressures of population growth, deforestation, and the subdivision of land between family members. This land is often nonarable and unimproved; the soil is exhausted, severely decreasing her agricultural output. Because low quality land leads to weak yield and because she must financially provide for essentially all the needs of her family throughout the year (including clothing, healthcare, education costs and housing) through each harvest, widows face both food and income insecurity. The overuse of the small amount of land coupled with the poor nutrients in the soil lead to a decrease in the nutritional status of the widow and her family. The fact that she relies on the harvest as a form of income and this harvest is often weak in quality and yield means that her income is jeopardized, furthering the poverty of her household.

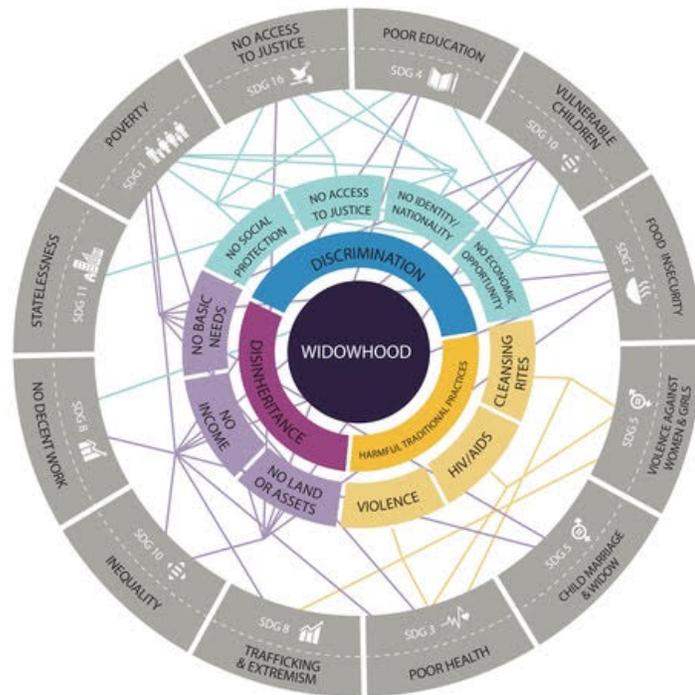
The general lower nutritional status of widows and their families was more specifically investigated in the 2016 World Bank Report "Poverty in a Rising Africa." The report established that in Mali, for example, widows disproportionately head the poorest households. As a result, they are statistically more likely to have worse nutritional status than women of other marital statuses within the same age brackets. Similarly, the report found that in Nigeria, cultural norms and the ensuing inheritance practices with certain ethnic and religious groups resulted in lower levels of nutritional status for widows.

ActionAid's "Securing Women's Rights to Land and Livelihood" report argues that guaranteeing land and property rights for women is one of the most powerful yet neglected methods for alleviating global hunger and poverty. As previously established, women's ability to feed their families is seriously restrained by the lack of feasible employment opportunities and their inferior access to productive resources, assets, credit and land. Landesa, an organization that works to secure land rights for vulnerable populations, also recognizes the correlation between widowhood, access to land, and hunger. By working to provide land rights for populations of which a large majority earn their living through agriculture, including widows, the organization works to reverse the dispossession of land, effectively reducing the hunger and poverty widows and their families face. The ability for women to access and control land is crucial for improving their status and reducing gender inequalities, which in turn are critical factors in reducing the prevalence of poverty, hunger and malnutrition. Because widows are among the greatest population of women worldwide who face a restriction on land and property rights, the connection between widowhood and hunger becomes more immediately more visible.

The relationship between widowhood and hunger is yet another example of how widowhood impacts not only the widow herself, but also her children. The epidemic of widowhood is innately, in this sense, a contributor to worldwide cyclic poverty. In order to eradicate this poverty and attain SDG 2, widowhood must be addressed. The Global Fund for

Widows found that the economic and social implications of widowhood are directly tied to many of the SDGs, in addition to hunger.

From a human rights perspective, because it leads to more well-intentioned and purposeful research, relevant data, and effective lobbying, separating widowhood from other human rights movements and leveraging the authority of such an alone-standing campaign would not only formally validate the struggles faced by widows, but would also provide a more tangible method of alleviating global hunger and accomplishing all of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals for 2030.



## Works Cited

- “Marie’s Story: Learn How Land Rights Helped a Rwandan Widow.” *Landesa Rural Development Institute*, 25 Nov. 2015, <https://www.landesa.org/resources/maries-story/>.
- Mhoja, Monica. “Branded as Witches, Stripped of Land: Tanzania’s Widows Need Support.” *Landesa Rural Development Institute*, 11 May 2018, <https://www.landesa.org/blog-branded-as-witches-stripped-of-land-tanzanias-widows-need-support/>.
- Securing Women’s Right to Land and Livelihoods*. ActionAid International, 2008.
- The Shock of Widowhood: Marital Status and Poverty in Africa*. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/africacan/the-shock-of-widowhood-marital-status-and-poverty-in-africa>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2020.
- The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2019.
- “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” *Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform*, 2015, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>.