

Stigmatized, shunned and shamed, International Widows' Day draws attention to their unique needs

The loss of a spouse or partner is often devastating, but for many women it [is magnified](#) by a “long-term struggle” for basic needs, human rights and dignity, according to [UN Women](#), in a message to mark International Widows' Day.

On its website dedicated to the Day, the United Nations calls the abuse of widows and their children “one of the most [serious violations](#) of human rights and obstacles to development today.”

“We must consider both the [vital role widows play](#) in our society, the ways in which gender inequality impacts their ability to thrive on their own, and the specific recognition and attention that they need from all of us,” underscored Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women in her message for the Day.

Across a wide range of countries, religions and ethnic groups, when a woman's husband dies, she is left destitute – often illiterate or uneducated with no access to credit or other economic resources – rendering her unable to support herself or her family, according to the UN.

According to UN Women's 2018 [Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), nearly one-in-ten of the estimated 258 million widows globally live in extreme poverty – with little or no input to policies impacting their survival.

“When widows with young children lose property, income and other assets—especially in the absence of support for unpaid care work—they may be forced to take their daughters out of school to work or help take care of siblings and housework,” continued Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka.

“This is how gender inequality perpetuates itself, continuing the cycle of disadvantage for girls and women for decades to come,” she added.

In 2010 the General Assembly set aside [23 June](#) each year to pay tribute to the millions of living spouses who endure extreme poverty, ostracism, violence, homelessness and discrimination.

While violence against women is one of the most widespread violations of human rights, widows may be at particularly high risk.

In many countries widows find themselves the victims of physical and mental violence – including sexual abuse – related to inheritance, land and property disputes.

Moreover, they often endure poor nutrition, inadequate shelter and vulnerability to violence – combined with a lack of access to health care. Although they are frequently rape victims and, through economic insecurity, sometimes driven to sex work, their gynecological needs often go unaddressed.

Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka highlighted that to empower women, barriers to justice must be removed and social stigma norms tackled.

“On this International Widows’ Day, let us remember that widows are heroes, working hard to keep families, communities, and societies together following the loss of their spouses,” said the UN Women chief.

“As societies we owe it to the widows of the world to give them the respect, visibility and unique support they need,” she concluded.

Women’s rights face global pushback from conservatism, fundamentalism – UN experts warn

Women’s rights are under threat from a “backlash” of conservatism and fundamentalism around the world, a United Nation panel warned on Friday.

“[Alarming pushbacks](#) have been progressing across regions of the globe”, through what the Working Group on Discrimination against Women in Law and in Practice described as “alliance of conservative political ideologies and religious fundamentalisms,” in its [report](#) to the [Human Rights Council](#) in Geneva.

“Practices such as polygamy, child marriage, female genital mutilation, so-called honour killings, and criminalizing women for sexual and reproductive behavior, have no place in any society,” said a statement from the working group, adding that “there is no acceptable justification for waiting for the elimination of discrimination against women.”

Citing “rising authoritarianism, economic crises and rocketing inequality”, the Working Group warned that hard-fought gains risk being reversed.

The expert panel also noted positive changes, including the recent Irish referendum to repeal a near-total constitutional ban on abortion.

“Through popular vote as well as legislative and judicial actions, efforts are being made, in particular to secure reproductive rights, which is encouraging in a global context of retrogressions in this area” the experts said.

Moves in certain countries to eliminate the gender pay gap and strengthen laws criminalizing rape and sexual violence are also “key successes in the struggle to eliminate discrimination against women,” they continued.

Of the “many obstacles” that women face, the UN report contends that family, culture and sexual and reproductive health “remain the most significant challenges” with “the biggest backlash”.

For 70 years, women’s equality has been enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; nearly 40 years ago the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was adopted; and 25 years ago, on Monday, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action established that women’s rights are an indivisible part of human rights.

However, the experts spelled out: “No country in the world has successfully eliminated discrimination against women or achieved full equality”.

“This should not be tolerated or normalized. There is an urgent need to protect past gains, and move forward to secure equality for women everywhere,” they stressed.

The experts applauded women human rights defenders globally, and urged the international community to move forward on gender equality and guard against what is described as the current backlash.

The UN Working Group on [discrimination against women in law and in practice](#) was created by the Human Rights Council in 2011.

[Japanese law professor elected new judge at the International Court of Justice](#)

An international law professor from Japan has been elected to serve with the principal judicial organ of the United Nations, following the resignation of a sitting judge, earlier this month.

Dr Yuji Iwasawa, 63, will join the 14 judges at the International Court of Justice ([ICJ](#)), following separate but simultaneous voting processes in the General Assembly and the Security Council on Friday.

He will replace Judge Hisashi Owada, 85, also of Japan, who resigned this month, citing old age and the fact that his daughter Masako, Crown Princess of Japan is set to become the country’s Empress next year, according to media reports.

The ICJ settles legal disputes between states in addition to providing UN entities with advisory opinions on legal matters.

Located in The Hague, in the Netherlands, it is one of the six principal organs of the UN and the only one not situated in New York.

The others are the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council and the Secretariat.

ICJ judges are elected by both the General Assembly – where all 193 UN Member States are represented – and the 15-member Security Council.

Candidates are required to obtain an absolute majority of votes in both chambers: that is 97 in the General Assembly and eight in the Security Council.

Representatives from 189 countries took part in the General Assembly vote on Friday, with five abstaining.

Mr. Iwasawa obtained all 184 votes and was elected unanimously by the Security Council.

The 15 ICJ judges serve for nine-year terms. However, the election was called as Mr. Owada resigned before the end of his term in 2021, which Mr. Iwasawa will complete.

The new judge is a law professor at the University of Tokyo. He is also the current chairperson of [the UN Human Rights Committee](#), a group of independent experts which monitors countries' compliance with the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#).

The 1966 treaty is among the core instruments of international human rights law, calling on states to ensure that the rights of all people in their jurisdictions are respected, regardless of their race, sex, religion, national or social origin, or other distinctions.

US migrant children policy reversal, still 'fails' thousands of detained youngsters: UN rights experts

The United States government decision to end its border policy of forcibly separating migrant children from their parents, does not help thousands of youngsters already in detention, who should be released and reunited with their families, a group of UN rights experts said on Friday.

The group of 11 independent Special Rapporteurs, and other experts, insist that the detention of the migrant children – “most” of whom are asylum-seekers from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras – inside the US, “severely hampers their development and in some cases, may amount to torture”.

[Their statement](#) issued to reporters in Geneva, follows President Donald Trump’s decision to sign an Executive Order ending the practice of forcible separation on Wednesday, two months after the so-called “zero-tolerance” policy was introduced.

The order calls for detaining family members together, who are caught attempting to enter the US, mostly at the southern border with Mexico.

The experts, appointed by the [Human Rights Council](#) in Geneva, said that the Order simply “does not address the situation of those children who have already been pulled away from their parents.”

We call on the Government of the US to release these children from immigrant detention and to reunite them with their families – *UN human rights experts*

“We call on the Government of the US to release these children from immigrant detention and to reunite them with their families based on the best interests of the child, and the rights of the child to liberty and family unity,” the statement added.

The group of experts had already expressed their grave concerns to the US government over the impact of the zero-tolerance policy in early April. The policy made all adults and children trying to cross the border liable to criminal prosecution as a punitive deterrent, the experts noted.

“The separations have been conducted without notice, information, or the opportunity to challenge them. The parents and children have been unable to communicate with each other,” said the statement, adding: “The parents have had no information about the whereabouts of their children, which is a cause of great distress.”

“Moreover, we are deeply concerned at the long-term impact and trauma, including irreparable harm that these forcible separations will have on children.”

Echoing that point of view, the [UN Children’s Fund \(UNICEF\)](#) said on Friday that it was opposed to separating children from their families for the purposes of migration control.

Spokesperson Christophe Boulierac, added that the agency would also be opposed to unconfirmed media reports that children could stay with their families if all of them had to remain in detention.

An alternative would be to take a non-custodial community approach, Mr. Boulierac added.

Last Monday, the [UN Secretary-General, António Guterres](#), said in a statement that “as a matter of principle” refugees and migrants should always be “treated with respect and dignity, and in accordance with existing international law,” although he did not single out the US in this regard.

[UN Human Rights chief](#), Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein told the opening of the Human Rights Council in Geneva on Monday, that the practice of child migrant separation, amounted to “government-sanctioned child abuse” which may cause “irreparable harm” with “lifelong consequences”.

Special Rapporteurs address either specific country situations or thematic issues, across all parts of the world, and work on a voluntary basis, without any salary or remuneration for their work.

[Human rights chief calls for international probe on Venezuela, following ‘shocking accounts of extrajudicial killings’](#)

In Venezuela, “credible, shocking accounts of extrajudicial killings” and impunity for perpetrators, indicate that the rule of law “is virtually absent”, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)) said on Friday, in a call for an international inquiry into the alleged violations.

Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein’s appeal to the UN Human Rights Council to mount a high-level investigation, follows the publication of a new report by his office into the Latin American country, detailing serious abuse allegations.

“For years now, institutional checks and balances and the democratic space in Venezuela have been chiseled away,” the High Commissioner said in a statement.

Briefing journalists in Geneva, OHCHR spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani confirmed that the new OHCHR report provides an update on alleged abuses committed amid bloody demonstrations held against constitutional reforms, proposed by the government of President Nicolas Maduro.

“This report...spotlights the failure of Venezuelan authorities to hold accountable perpetrators of serious human rights violations that include killings, the use of excessive force against demonstrators, arbitrary detentions, ill-treatment and torture,” Ms. Shamdasani said.



Helena Carplo/IRIN News

Protesters in La Castellana, an eastern Caracas neighborhood in Venezuela, run away from the tear gas bombs, fired by the National Guard and the National Bolivarian Police. 18 May 2017.

On the subject of extrajudicial killings since 2015, the OHCHR spokesperson said that the report contained “credible, shocking accounts” that young men in poor neighbourhoods had been targeted “who fit the profile (of) so-called criminals”.

In some cases, they had been killed in their home, Ms Shamdasani noted, adding that the OHCHR report detailed how security forces “will tamper with the scenes, so that the killing would appear to have occurred in an exchange of fire”.

The report also highlights the grave impact of the social and economic crises gripping Venezuela.

Families are “having to search in rubbish bins”, Ms Shamdasani said, adding that 87 per cent of the population is now affected by poverty.

“The human rights situation of the people of Venezuela is dismal,” she continued. “When a box of blood pressure pills costs more than the monthly minimum salary and baby milk formula costs more two months’ wages – but protesting against such an impossible situation can land you in jail – the extreme injustice of it all is stark.”



Meridith Kohut/IRIN

Shoppers wait in line for five hours to buy a ration of bread from a small bakery in Cumaná, Venezuela. June 2016.

The High Commissioner's call for an international Commission of Inquiry will be heard by the Human Rights Council – the UN's principal human rights organ – which is currently in session in Geneva.

It has previously created two such probes following allegations of serious rights violations in Syria and Burundi.

Vast numbers of Venezuelans are starving, deprived of essential medicines, and trying to survive in a situation that is spiralling downwards with no end in sight – *Special Rapporteur Philip Alston*

Beyond the Human Rights Council, Zeid said that there was also a “strong case” for the matter to be passed to the International Criminal Court (ICC), “given that (Venezuela) appears neither able nor willing to prosecute serious human rights violations”.

Spokesperson for the Human Rights Council, Rolando Gomez, confirmed that no State is immune from scrutiny of its rights record “regardless of whether they are a member of the Council or not”.

Although there have been no special sessions on Venezuela at the Council, States and NGOs have delivered no fewer than 40 statements during general debates at the Council since last March sharply criticizing the human rights situation there.

The issue of Venezuela's rights record overlapped into a presentation of a report on extreme poverty by Council-appointed Special Rapporteur Philip Alston.

He told Member States: "I and several other Special Rapporteurs reported earlier this year that 'vast numbers of Venezuelans are starving, deprived of essential medicines, and trying to survive in a situation that is spiralling downwards with no end in sight'."