

23 June 2011 –Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today urged societies to ease the hardship that widows endure when their husbands die by respecting their rights to such social entitlements as access to inheritance, land tenure, employment and other means of livelihood.

“All widows should be protected by the rights enshrined in the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) and other international human rights treaties,” said Mr. Ban in a [message](#) to mark the first *International Widows Day*, which will be observed on 23 June every year.

“But in reality, interpretations of customary codes, as well as traditional mourning and burial rites, often deny widows virtually all of their universally recognized rights,” said the Secretary-General.

The [Day](#) was created by the General Assembly last year in an effort to highlight violations of the rights of widowed women with a view to ensuring their protection under national and international law, empowering them and restoring their human dignity.

The Secretary-General noted that of the approximately 245 million widows in the world, more than 115 million live in extreme poverty, and that in countries affected by conflict, women are frequently widowed young, thrusting upon them the heavy burden of caring for children, often in environments of unrest, displacement and lack of support.

“In places where a widow’s status is linked to her husband, she may find herself suddenly shunned and isolated. Marriage – whether she desires it or not – may be the only way for a widow to regain her footing in society.

“Some of these widows are teenagers – or even younger. The death of their husbands can leave a terrible legacy these widows must endure throughout their remaining years,” said Mr. Ban.

In many countries, widowhood is stigmatized and seen as a source of shame, with women

whose husbands have died thought to be cursed in some cultures or even associated with witchcraft. Such misconceptions can lead to widows being ostracized and abused. Poverty among widows is often exacerbated by little or no access to credit or other economic resources, and by illiteracy or lack of education.

Mr. Ban said that despite the difficulties that widows face, many make valuable contributions to their communities, often taking on leadership roles at the highest levels. Others work in their families, taking in orphans, serving as caregivers and reaching across lines of conflict to mend tears in the social fabric.

“We must recognize the important contribution of widows, and we must ensure that they enjoy the rights and social protections they deserve.

“Death is inevitable, but we can reduce the suffering that widows endure by raising their status and helping them in their hour of need. This will contribute to promoting the full and equal participation of all women in society. And that will bring us closer to ending poverty and promoting peace around the world,” the Secretary-General added.

Governments have the responsibility to adhere to their commitments to ensure the rights of widows as enshrined in international law are respected. Even when national laws exist to protect the rights of widows, weaknesses in the judicial systems may compromise the way widows' rights are defended. Lack of awareness and discrimination by judicial officials can also prevent widows from approaching the justice system to seek reparations.

To mark the Day, a panel discussion is scheduled at UN Headquarters with Ban Soon-taek, the Secretary-General's wife, and Cherie Blair, the President of the Loomba Foundation and the former first lady of the United Kingdom, among those expected to speak.

The event is organized by the Michelle Bachelet, the Executive Director of UN Women, and Sylvia Bongo Ondimba, the First Lady of Gabon.

Source: [UN News](#)

