

SANWED ISLAMABAD DECLARATION

Legislation to create enabling environment for widows urged



ISLAMABAD: Aurat Foundation President Dr Masooma Hassan presenting a memento to Benazir Income Support Programme Chairperson Farzana Raja at the concluding session of the workshop.

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Islamabad

Representatives of the South Asian Network for Widows' Empowerment and Development (SANWED) have unanimously adopted the 'Islamabad Declaration on Mainstreaming the Rights of Widows' at the concluding session of the regional consultative workshop held here on Thursday.

The declaration highlights the urgent need for legislative and policy reforms for removing all forms of discrimination and creating an enabling environment for widows and their families. The workshop which focused on issues and challenges faced by widows and single women across South Asia was organised by the Aurat Foundation in collaboration with the South Asian Network for Widows' Empowerment in Development (SANWED).

The declaration called upon the governments to compile, maintain and regularly update

databases on widows and their dependents, for the registration of widows for national identity cards, passports, licences, land title registration, social security, compensation, widowhood allowances and registration of women-headed households (WHHs).

It says with at least 245 million widows around the world, more than 115 million of them living in absolute, devastating poverty, along with their more than 500 million children. It mentions that widows are not always elderly women cared for by their adult children. They are very often young children themselves and they are a diverse and heterogeneous group. The document realises that the number of such women is rapidly increasing, due to wars and armed conflicts, ethnic cleansing, natural disasters, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The comprehensive declaration mentions that in spite of numerous landmark international instruments and national

legislation towards the elimination of discrimination and violence against women, widows have not been benefited and that widows' lives are determined by patriarchy, discriminatory interpretations of tradition, custom, religion, and resultant practices, demonstrated through stereotyping, deprivation and denial of inheritance rights to land and property, mobility, autonomy, and agency.

It called upon the Saarc to formulate a regional policy on widowhood, to be adapted and adopted as a National Policy by each member state; and to recognize and accord official consultative status to SANWED. The Pakistan chapter of SANWED was also launched on this occasion.

The declaration calls upon the governments to ratify the Optional Protocol to CEDAW and to incorporate the situation of widows in their regular reports to the UN. It demands the respective governments to enact laws to provide and pro-

tect widows' right to inherit and exercise control over their husbands' property, land and assets, irrespective of customary traditions and unjustly sanctified injunctions seeking to minimize or limit widows' share in inheritance. It further demanded the governments that peace initiatives must result in diversion of funds away from militarisation, towards social sector development imperatives, with a focus on widows and their dependents. The document urges the government to provide widows, (particularly conflict-affected) access to justice through repeal of discriminatory laws and enact legislation to criminalize forced marriages of widows either within or outside their marital families, trafficking, forced prostitution and sex slavery.

It calls upon the One UN System to recognise widows as a special category in the cross-cutting issues and thematic groups for integration and mainstreaming of concerns.

Earlier, addressing the concluding session, Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) Chairperson Farzana Raja appreciated the SANWED activists for their struggle for widows' rights. She said that BISP has got a data of 180 million individuals that makes 27 million families. "Of the 27 million families, 6.9 million are getting cash grants." She also said that due to BISP, 20 million women got CNICs. She said that out of total women getting cash grants from BISP, 300,000 are widows. Speaking at the session, Shanthi Anusha Sachithanandam, Chief Executive Officer, Viluthu, Centre for Human Resource Development, Sri Lanka, talked about the recognising of widows in conflict and post-conflict era. She also shared with the participants that in Sri Lanka, they use the term 'women-headed households' instead of widows.

Dr. Mohini Giri, Chairperson of Guild for Service, India, in her presentation said that most of the time widows are themselves rigid and they need to change their mindset. Sachet Executive Director Dr. Rakhshanda Parveen gave a detailed presentation on the situation of widows in Pakistan and complained about the lack of data on widows in Pakistan. She also emphasised that in the context of widows' issues, not only the sex, but class shall also be considered.

Aurat Foundation COO Naeem Mirza shared the details of the drafting process the declaration for widows' rights. He also announced the unanimous selection of Dr. Masooma Hassan, President, Board of Governors, Aurat Foundation, as the representative of Pakistan SANWED chapter in the central SANWED Secretariat.

At the end, the declaration, titled the 'Islamabad Declaration for Mainstreaming Widows and Single Women's Rights in Public Policy,' was presented and adopted unanimously. The declaration was read by eminent human rights activist Tahira Abdullah. The drafting committee, which drafted the declaration, comprised Margaret Owen from England, Lily Thapa from Nepal, Dr. Mohini Giri from India, Ferdous Ara Begum from Bangladesh, and Tahira Abdullah, Neelam Hussain, Saima Munir from Pakistan.