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Statement submitted by ACT Alliance – Action by Churches Together, Anglican Consultative Council, Christian Aid, Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Islamic Relief, Lutheran World Federation, Mothers’ Union, Soka Gakkai International, The Girls’ Brigade International Council, The United Society, United Religions Initiative, and World Evangelical Alliance, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Faith in Beijing, a collective of faith actors, working to build back with Gender Justice

As faith actors advocating together for gender justice, we celebrate the milestones achieved. However, we lament the slow pace of progress, the gaps that remain, and the continued backlash against gender equality and women's rights. We believe in the transformative power of justice-oriented approaches and call on Member States to implement all binding and non-binding agreements on gender equality, which is critical in ensuring that "No One is Left Behind".

Pre-existing vulnerabilities and injustices are exacerbated during a crisis, since social and protective networks are disrupted. The COVID-19 pandemic and the related aftershocks are pushing women and girls further into poverty. Around the world, we are witnessing a regression of women's rights. Marginalized groups, from Dalits in India, to migrants in Central America, have been especially vulnerable both to the virus and to its economic, social and psychological consequences. COVID-19 is causing economic disruption, which is disproportionately impacting women and girls. Many women are employed in social and informal sectors that are having to drastically adapt or close. Young people are also experiencing a disruption to their education, which puts girls increasingly at danger of early marriage and childhood pregnancies.

Measures put in place to reduce the risk of COVID-19 are also impacting access to vital services, including healthcare, safe houses and life-saving support. Although lockdowns are a protective measure, they bring another deadly danger. Sexual and physical violence already impacted one in three women globally, and the isolation as a result of lockdowns has resulted in a shadow pandemic. As United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres noted, "for many women and girls, the threat looms largest where they should be safest – in their own homes" (2020).

Faith in a justice-oriented COVID-19 response and recovery

An intersectional justice-oriented lens is required in the response and recovery to COVID-19, addressing gendered, racial and all forms of oppression. Where the pathway for change is oriented by evidence-based decision-making, which includes women and girls. We, as faith actors, are committed to ensuring that gender justice and equality becomes a reality around the world. Together, we have decades of experience working with justice-oriented approaches in social, development, advocacy and humanitarian spaces.

An estimated 84 per cent of our world's population identifies as members of a faith or religion. Faith plays a major role in the formation of people's values and norms of acceptable behaviour. Faith leaders often hold trusted positions and have considerable influence to change attitudes and behaviours in many communities, sometimes where governments fail to reach. In responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, many faith leaders and faith communities are positive and powerful forces: sharing accurate health information, modelling healthy behaviour, advocating for measures to address gender-based violence and supporting the most vulnerable in society. However, without support and strategic engagement, faith actors can also amplify misinformation and spread COVID-19 myths, which can result in increasing stigma, fear, and gender inequalities.

As we continue to battle the epidemiologic crisis, all stakeholders encounter a long-standing crisis of clashing worldviews that are impacting the rights, agency and power of women and girls. Our social, political and economic systems are broken and

the normal state of affairs is not conducive to just relationships. We need to fundamentally transform how we interact with one another. Lack of progress is not only related to challenges in the implementation of equality laws but also intrinsically linked to state and non-state actors strategically working to reverse gains made. While we have achieved much progress, we cannot risk any backslide on gender equality. We must all challenge unequal power structures and, ultimately, push forward the gender equality agenda.

Financing the COVID-19 response and recovery

COVID-19 has created a fundamental opportunity: an opportunity to reorganize our world with a new just social order. The pandemic has underscored the critical role of effective and accountable government in a crisis. The scale and suddenness of the impacts, and the complex trade-offs between health, and wider social and economic goals, have tested governments around the world. The crisis has laid bare the interdependence and fragility of life, and the need for deep solidarity between people. We have seen how underinvestment in public health in one country is a threat to the health of the rest of the world.

In fragile contexts where complex political realities and tensions between state and non-state actors can quickly escalate, this pandemic will most certainly have catastrophic consequences. While government leadership is essential, the response to public health and humanitarian crises needs to adopt a wider approach in strengthening national health systems, building on government, private sector, and civil society capacities, including those of faith-based organizations and faith leaders.

As we embark upon this new decade of change, it is essential that we challenge structural oppression, which is perpetuating destructive social norms and will increasingly inhibit progress towards Agenda 2030. We call for greater levels of vision and ambition to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. We need to make gender justice our new normal. This is essential to enable a broad-based and equitable global recovery that radically transforms our economic, political and social relations. We need to build back with gender justice.

Recommendations:

Member States

Strengthen essential services; promote accountable governance; and lay the groundwork for a sustainable future.

Urgently mobilise public finance for the COVID-19 recovery, which uses a robust gender lens.

Ensure the inclusion of civil society and faith-based organizations as equal partners in the COVID-19 recovery and during this decade of action, acknowledging their critical role in achieving these commitments.

Work with the IMF, World Bank and other international financial institutions, to agree a \$42.7bn debt cancellation package benefiting 76 low-income countries, covering all creditors and all debt payments owed for 2020.

Ensure that all laws, policies, taxation and public spending promote gender equality and strive for economic models centred on women's rights in the post COVID-19 recovery.

UN agencies and institutions

Enable strategic engagement with faith actors who are working to counteract backlashes to gender equality and promote the implementation of international human rights law.

Integrate mechanisms to ensure gender parity in faith-based actors and faith institutions.

Support multi-stakeholder partnerships working to advance gender justice, which include faith actors and feminist organizations.

Allocate resources to strengthen faith literacy, while also working with faith actors to strengthen their human rights literacy.

Include diverse faith voices working for gender justice in the Women Rise for All Campaign, and in all UN Summits on the COVID-19 recovery.

Multilateral Institutions and Donors

Stop promoting austerity packages and giving conditional loans, which are trapping governments into neo-colonial relationships that harm their ability to deliver on the rights of those furthest behind.

Resource partnerships between faith-based actors and women's rights advocates, who are working to promote human rights and the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Promote and provide gender disaggregated data, which documents the gendered impact of COVID-19 fiscal policies.

Include in loan- and other donor-related packages, commitments and obligations for the realization of gender equality as stated in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Cancel the \$42.7bn debt preventing 76 countries in low-income countries from strengthening public health systems and social protections.

Faith Actors

Challenge socially constructed norms and tackle the root causes of gender inequality and its results, such as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

Teach on the stewardship of gender justice, encourage people of faith to promote gender justice, mentorship and counselling programs for the intersectional needs of survivors of gender-based violence, widows and women with disabilities.

Encourage peer mentorship among teens and youth to address gender inequalities.

Speak out against sexist, racist and all forms of discriminatory practices. Uphold a zero-tolerance policy on all forms of violence against women and girls.

Promote gender equality, justice and human rights in religious institutions and faith communities. Champion evidence based public health policy to counteract myths, stigma and gender stereotypes.