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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 achieve gender justice.

As faith actors, we call for women's full and effective participation in public life, including in decision-making and leadership spaces, and the elimination of sexual and gender-based violence. Around the world, we witness a push back against gender equality. With equal force, the COVID-19 pandemic is unveiling systemic inequality and exacerbating gender injustice.

Religious institutions and faith communities exist in nearly every community around the world, which puts faith actors at a unique advantage to bring about collective action towards the Sustainable Development Goals. The important role of faith-based organisations was recognised in the Commission on the Status of Women Agreed Conclusions in 2013, 2016, 2018 and 2019.

Our commitment to gender equality and justice is based on our shared belief in human dignity and that every individual has the same inalienable value and rights. We acknowledge that religious institutions, customs, and practices at times have contributed to creating and reinforcing unjust and patriarchal systems and structures.

As faith actors, we are pushing back against the push back on gender equality. We stand together to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms of women and girls throughout the world. In this statement, we call for urgent action, decisive leadership and targeted investments from Member States to achieve Agenda 2030 and ensure gender equality for all.

Obstacles faced by women in accessing power and decision-making across all levels

While Member States have made strides to increase women's participation in political decision-making processes, this progress has been too slow. Equal access to power and decision-making for women is fundamental to representative and responsive governance. Reaching 50/50 parity requires continued efforts to break down barriers and turn commitments into reality.

Women face numerous barriers to accessing power and taking part in decision-making, including patriarchal norms and practices, discriminatory legislation, lack of secondary and tertiary education, discrimination at work, and lack of financial and moral support. In many countries, women operate on the margins of the mainstream economy and are not included in formal economic decision-making. Gender-transformative approaches are needed to tackle unequal power relations to ensure that women gain visible and strategic leadership positions and can influence the rules and decisions governing all sectors of society, including the market.

A significant obstacle is that women and girls continue to be responsible for most of the unpaid care work. Many countries lack social protection schemes, including child and elderly care, which restricts women from participating in the formal work force. Investment is needed in social protection to enable women to fully participate in public life.

Women and girls are important stakeholders in peacebuilding, conflict prevention and conflict resolution. However, they are often excluded from participation in peace processes, particularly high-level negotiations, due to social norms and tradition. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 needs to be further promoted and implemented at the grassroots level.

Changes in cultural norms are essential for increasing women's access to decision-making. Around the world, women and youth groups in churches, mosques and temples, are pushing religious communities to increase women's and girls' power and influence. Religious and secular women's groups play vital roles in pushing this agenda forward, holding stakeholders accountable and preventing further regression in women's rights.

Social norms and narratives as barriers for women's full participation as leaders and participants in public life

Social norms and narratives are powerful forces that have a direct impact on an individual's choices, freedoms and capabilities. UNDP's Gender Social Norms Index 2020 shows that almost nine out of ten people hold some level of bias against women. 50 percent of people surveyed believed that men make better political leaders than women.

The majority of the world's population identifies as members of a faith. Religions play a major role in the formation of people's values, norms of acceptable behaviour and life roles, including who should be a leader in society. Faith can inspire people to reflect on and change their behaviour. Thus, faith leaders have great potential to influence norms that can be barriers to the full participation of women in leadership and at different levels of decision-making.

All over the world, young women are stepping up, seeking and taking leadership, for instance in the global Generation Equality Forums. However, they continue to face different forms of discrimination. Lack of investment, opportunity, participation and voice are hindering their critical contributions to Agenda 2030. Accelerated action is needed to address these gender inequalities as young women are critical drivers of change.

Gender-responsive social protection can influence gender norms by ensuring equal opportunities, such as access to education or right to pensions. Systemic change in social protection can shift behaviours and attitudes, which may result in equitable shares in domestic work, parental/care responsibilities and recognition of unpaid domestic work.

Financial investment, power and capacity are needed to strategically address restrictive social norms. This includes action and investments specifically aimed at young women's empowerment. Equitable opportunities must be identified and supported to enable women's full participation as leaders and participants in public life. Faith responses include gender audits, advocating for women in formal leadership positions, setting quotas for women's and girls' participation in committees, as well as recognising how women continue to provide leadership in informal faith spaces.

Ending violence against women and girls

Gender-based violence is a serious threat to gender equality and violates human rights. It is a structural problem that permeates every dimension of society and affects all social classes, cultures and religions. Physical, psychological and sexual abuse is intrinsically linked to power and control, rooted in patriarchal and misogynistic systems. To end sexual and gender-based violence, intersecting inequalities must be addressed. Actions and language that perpetuate sexual and gender-based violence must change, shifting the responsibility, focus and blame to the perpetrator instead of focusing on the behaviour of women and girls.

UN-Women has estimated that 1 out of 3 women have experienced violence at some point in their lives. 650 million women and girls have been married before the

age of 18 while 200 million women and girls between 15 and 49 have undergone female genital mutilation. The UNDP Gender Social Norms Index shows that 30 percent of people surveyed consider it ‘reasonable’ for a man to exercise violence against his partner.

Ending violence requires action at all levels: institutional, societal and individual. Enactment and implementation of laws and policies, as well as work to change norms, attitudes and behaviour, are essential for ending gender-based violence. Strategic partnerships with faith actors are needed to challenge destructive social norms and promote legislative reform, particularly in family law. Religious leaders, when adequately sensitised and equipped, can play an important role in transformative action to end violence against women and girls. Many faith actors are raising awareness and campaigning against gender-based violence and the broader structural causes of gender injustice, for example by using contextual scriptural studies to critique toxic masculinities.

Recommendations to Member States

- To ratify and fully implement international and regional conventions, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Maputo Protocol and the Istanbul Convention, to ensure that women and girls have equal rights and protection.
- To fully implement the Beijing Platform for Action and all commitments, including non-binding agreements for gender equality.
- To enact and implement domestic laws and robust mechanisms that ensure women’s agency and power to decide over their own lives, and their full participation in public life and leadership.
- To work with religious actors as strategic partners, in both preventative and responsive measures, to address gender inequalities and harmful social norms.
- To provide long-term sustainable funding for the provision of services for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, and for initiatives that address violence against women and girls. This includes, but is not limited to, health services, legal advice, counselling and support.
- To provide long-term sustainable funding to women-led and women’s rights organizations, including in emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To work towards achieving gender parity in public decision-making spaces especially in political leadership.