



## **Economic and Social Council**

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### **Commission on the Status of Women**

**Fifty-ninth session**

9-20 March 2015

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women  
and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled  
“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace  
for the twenty-first century”**

### **Statement submitted by ACT Alliance — Action by Churches Together, a non-governmental organization 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.



## **Statement**

### **About ACT Alliance**

ACT Alliance is a network of 146 churches and church-related organizations from over 70 countries, the majority from the global south, working in 140 countries around the world. The organization is committed to respect, empower and protect the dignity, the uniqueness and the intrinsic worth and human rights of every woman, man, girl and boy. We make no distinction and strongly oppose any discrimination on the basis of nationality, race, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious belief, class or political opinion. As a global faith-based alliance, we have recommitted ourselves to bridging the gender gap and to actively addressing unequal power relationships, be they social, economic or political for the promotion of human dignity for all.

The organization works with communities and individuals on the basis of need and human rights, ensuring that the capacities and capabilities of communities are considered at all times, especially targeting those who suffer discrimination and those who are most vulnerable.

### **Beijing +20, poverty and the post-2015 agenda**

In 1975, Member States of the General Assembly identified the need for women's rights to be central to the United Nations agenda — this was affirmed in the first International Women's Year. While much has been accomplished in the last 40 years, many women's rights are yet to be fully realized. The organization urges Member States to use this opportunity, 20 years on from agreement on the Beijing Platform for Action, to call for transformational change for the well-being of women and girls, highlight critical areas for continued attention, and identify synergies with the post-2015 development and the women, peace and security agendas.

These key areas include:

- Equal access to economic assets, including the right to independent ownership of land, property and earnings, equal pay, recognition of the role women play in achieving food security, and a recognition of unpaid caring responsibilities;
- Women's access to and participation in decision-making and leadership;
- Equal access to health systems, including sexual and reproductive health and rights and services;
- Equal access to all levels of education;
- Guarantees of a life free of violence, exploitation and fear;
- The gendered impact of climate change and disasters, as well as the demonstrated benefits for women's transformational participation in disaster risk reduction.

Gender equality continues to be one of the most prolific drivers of poverty, and sustainable development will not be achieved unless gender inequality, along with other forms of inequality and discrimination, is prioritized and addressed by decision-makers, at all levels. For this reason, the organization continues to call for a stand-alone goal on gender equality within the post-2015 sustainable development

goals, and a renewed set of transformational targets. As a faith-based alliance, we acknowledge that religious conviction can be harnessed as a positive force for transformational change, but we lament when it has also been an obstacle to progress, as articulated in article 24, chapter 2, of the Beijing Platform for Action. In that spirit, we affirm article 9 of chapter 2 and the need for full realization of all human rights and freedoms.

### **Economic justice and food security**

Women around the world still struggle for access to economic assets such as income, credit and land. Women predominate in precarious low-paid roles and are responsible for the majority of unpaid caring responsibilities, and discriminatory laws and practices still remain in relation to inheritance rights. This inequality can be seen in the agricultural sector where 70 per cent of the world's active farmers are women small-holders, farming on less than 2 hectares, who in total produce 50 per cent of food for consumers on 20 per cent of land. Women are key actors in promoting and maintaining the seed and crop variety of 1.9 million species worldwide. It is time women farmers are recognized, supported and rewarded for their essential contribution to food security.

### **Leadership and participation**

The fact remains that only 22 per cent of parliamentarians globally are women, and women hold far fewer positions of power than their male counterparts. However, increases in numbers alone will not lead to meaningful participation of women within decision-making structures. Social, religious and cultural norms that limit women's effective participation at all levels, including within the household, need to be progressively challenged. Quota systems may be helpful temporary measures, but they must be accompanied by wider efforts to achieve sustainable change. These include capacity-building for female candidates of all ages, empowerment of young women, knowledge-sharing and alliance building.

### **Gender-based violence**

The high numbers of women and girls who are victims of gender-based violence, an estimated 35 per cent globally, according to the World Health Organization, are both scandalous and represent major obstacles to sustainable development. Domestic violence, harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and cutting, and early and forced marriage, as well as the continued use of rape as a weapon of war, must all be highlighted and challenged. Boys and men are also victims of gender-based violence, especially during conflict, a point that often goes unrecognized and unreported but that can have detrimental effects on entire communities. To address gender-based violence and fulfil the objective to end all forms of violence against women and girls, there is a need for inclusion in the post-2015 development agenda. Implementation will require legislation and effective use of legal frameworks, sufficient financial investment in both prevention and response, and a focus on challenging harmful social and cultural norms which perpetuate violence.

**Maternal health and sexual and reproductive health and rights**

Maternal health must remain a core sustainable development priority, and progress to date has been too slow; in 2013, almost 300,000 women died from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. No reduction in the number of maternal deaths will be achieved without fulfilment of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health rights, including family planning and age and context appropriate sex education. Controversy over, and subsequent inaction, on addressing the negative social and cultural dimensions of sexual and reproductive health and rights has had a detrimental impact on gender equity, sustainable development and peace.

**Education**

The gender gap in primary education has decreased, and this should be celebrated. However, men and boys continue to have more opportunities at secondary and tertiary levels and in vocational education. Barriers such as early and forced marriage, forced pregnancy, fear of reprisal, unequal household and childcare responsibilities, lack of decent sanitation facilities, ineffective and inappropriate sexual and reproductive education for both girls and boys, and sexual violence continue to bar girls and women from participating equally in education and learning.

**Recommendations for the fifty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women**

The organization calls on Member States to renew and reprioritize their commitment to the Beijing Platform for Action, to a transformational post-2015 development agenda and to full implementation of commitments at the national level. This includes:

- Full implementation of existing agreements and commitments, with no regression, exception or stepping-back from agreed language;
- Sufficient financing made available for implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and future sustainable development goals, including financing for women's rights organizations at local level;
- National fiscal policy and domestic resource mobilization should also promote gender equality through the use of progressive direct taxation, social protection and gender-budgeting;
- Recognition of the positive role that faith can play in building resilient communities, promoting well-being and achieving gender equality;
- Collaborative efforts, including through the engagement of men and boys, to address harmful social norms.