



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

#### Sixtieth session

14-24 March 2016

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to  
the twenty-third 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, Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of  
the World Council of Churches and Lutheran World Federation,  
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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## **Statement**

Action by Churches Together Alliance is a network of 146 churches and church-related organizations working in 140 countries around the world. The network, founded by the Lutheran World Federation and World Council of Churches, 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 are committed to bridging the gender gap and to actively addressing unequal power relationships, be they social (including religious), economic or political in nature for the promotion of human dignity for all.

### **Fulfilling the Beijing agenda, Addressing Poverty and Realizing the Sustainable Development Goals**

In 1975, Member States of the General Assembly identified the need for women's rights to be central to the United Nations agenda. While great strides have been accomplished for gender equity in the last 41 years, many human rights are yet to be fully realized, particularly by women and girls. The Action by Churches Together Alliance urges Member States to use this opportunity, building on the reaffirmation of the Beijing Platform for Action, to call for systematic transformational change for the well-being of women and girls in the roll-out of the Sustainable Development Goals through 2030, new commitments to Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent related resolutions on Women, Peace and Security as well as deep consideration and action on the gendered impacts of climate change leading towards the anticipated mandated period of a new climate deal from 2020.

### **Key areas in these agendas that require urgent attention by the commission include:**

- Equal access to economic assets, including the right to independent ownership of land, property and earnings, equal pay for work of equal value, recognition of the role all genders, but particularly women, play in achieving food security, and a recognition and redistribution of unpaid care work
- Equal 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, discrimination and fear, including ending impunity for all forms of gender-based violence
- 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 eradication, 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. The Action by Churches Together Alliance therefore praises all member states of the United Nations for the successful agreement of the entire Sustainable Development Goals package - inclusive of a stand-alone goal on gender equality and for the integration of gender considerations in many other areas within this ambitious multilateral sustainable development agenda. It is of paramount importance that all stakeholders now complement these ambitions through the adequate commitment of financial, human and political resources by all stakeholders.

As a faith-based alliance, we acknowledge that religious conviction can be harnessed as a positive force for transformational change, and we celebrate the contributions toward gender equality made by the faith sector. However, we lament when faith ideology has been an obstacle to progress, as articulated in article 24, chapter 2, of the Beijing Platform for Action. In that spirit, we re-affirm our role in article 9 of chapter 2 and the need for full realization of all human rights and freedoms.

### **Women's Economic Empowerment**

Women around the world still struggle for access to economic assets such as decent work, fair income, credit and land. Women predominate precarious low-wage roles, while at the same time they are responsible for the majority of unpaid caring familial or communal responsibilities, often with little or no social safety nets. This double burden is often institutionalized in discriminatory laws and practices impacting all areas of women's lives and livelihoods, including but not limited to, inheritance rights, marriage contracts and other systems that deny the independent agency of every person. This inequality can be seen clearly in the agricultural sector where 70 per cent of active farmers around the world are women small-holders — each occupying less than 2 hectares of land — yet who in total produce 50 per cent of food consumed, much without financial profit. 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 and this affirmation should be central to the successful completion of the Sustainable Development Goals.

### **Women's Political Empowerment**

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, such as those recommended by the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, 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. Positive and people-centred political leadership, owned by all genders, is an essential element of the successful fulfilment of social and economic development, both in aid effectiveness and robust implementation of globally

agreed goals, targets and indicators for poverty eradication and truly sustainable development.

### **Ending Gender-based Violence**

The high numbers of women and girls who are affected by gender-based violence is at an estimated 35 per cent of the female population globally, according to the World Health Organization. This estimated figure is both a scandal and represents a major obstacle to impacts of sustainable development interventions. 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 by the commission. Boys and men are also victims of gender-based violence, within and outside conflict, a point that often goes unrecognized and unreported but that can have detrimental effects on individuals and communities alike. This reality is recognized by Beijing Action Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals and in Security Council resolution 1325, which should be followed up by committed action by states. However, 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 that perpetuate violence, which must remain high on the commission's priority list of actionable change items. We particularly urge the commission to recognize the importance of engaging with faith-based actors in the effort to address these harmful norms.

### **Universal Maternal Health and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights**

Maternal health and population trends must remain core sustainable development priorities. 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. The inclusion of family planning, age of consent minimums and context-appropriate sex education are all essential elements that need further consideration. Goal 5 Target 6 of the Sustainable Development Goals advances this dialogue greatly, but progressive action is now required. 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 social equity, sustainable development, climate adaptation and mitigation as well as peace. Social services, such as women's health and health education, should primarily be the responsibility of the state, and thus service delivery programmes should not be delegated to profit seeking enterprise. Public sector funds, therefore, should be expanded for these programs around the world.

### **Equal Access to 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 gender-based violence continue to bar girls and women from participating equally in education and learning opportunities, even when they are offered.

**Recommendations for the sixtieth session of the Commission on the Status of Women**

The Action by Churches Together Alliance calls on Member States to act now on the renewed and re-prioritized commitments to the Beijing Platform for Action (pledged at the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women), and on the successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Successful implementation should include:

- Full implementation of existing agreements and commitments, with no regression or exception
  - Sufficient financing made available for implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly goal 5) and for the sustainability of women's rights organizations- including faith — based women's organizations — as these organizations have demonstrated local ownership and have contributed significantly to many of the gender equality successes made
  - 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, and communities of faith, are playing in the provision of social services and contribute in humanitarian response, and those they 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 and discriminatory social norms and to promote social equality
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