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Statement submitted by ACT Alliance — Action by Churches Together and Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches, 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

Action by Churches Together — ACT Alliance is a network of 146 churches and church-related organizations working in 140 countries. The network, whose members are associated with the World Council of Churches or the Lutheran World Federation, is committed to respect, empower and protect the dignity, intrinsic worth and human rights of every woman, man, girl and boy. We 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 call for an end to gender inequality and injustice; gender-based discrimination and violence; to bridge the gender gap and address unequal power relationships for the promotion of human dignity for all.

The ACT Alliance recognizes commitments to gender equality and justice in existing international instruments and development frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women; the Beijing Platform for Action; commitments to Security Council Resolution 1325 and related resolutions on Women, Peace and Security; the call for systematic transformational change for women and girls' well-being in the roll-out of Agenda 2030, as well as consideration and action on the gendered impacts of climate change, leading towards the anticipated mandated period of a new climate deal from 2020.

We acknowledge that religious conviction can be harnessed as a positive force for transformational change and the realization of women's rights as human rights, and we celebrate the contributions of the faith sector towards gender equality and justice on all levels. We lament when faith ideology creates obstacles 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 in seeking the full realization of all human rights.

Women's Economic Empowerment in the Changing World of Work

Globally, women struggle for access to economic assets such as decent work, fair, equal and just income, credit and land. Women dominate precarious low-wage roles, while also being responsible for the majority of unpaid familial caring and/or communal responsibilities, often with little or no access to social protection, a benefit that has the potential to contribute to gender equality as women are at greater risk of poverty than men.

This double burden is often institutionalized in discriminatory laws and practices impacting all areas of women's lives, including but not limited to, inheritance rights, marriage contracts and unequal remuneration. These inequalities are visible in the agricultural sector where the majority of global farmers are women small-holders. We must also protect and enhance women's right to land by recognizing and drawing on women farmers' traditional knowledge of seed reproduction and other techniques.

Women are a large share of the agricultural labour force where there is a need for significant improvements in workers' conditions. Agricultural labour is poorly paid, with little or no job security. A low proportion of agricultural workers belong

to unions, and the right to organize is restricted in many countries. Similar trends exist in the formal industrial sector where women typically hold low wage jobs and own or control little of the capital assets. Women are often at the fringes of the regulated working environment and are denied bargaining power and the right to organization. Progress is regularly undercut by lack of political will and legal insufficiencies.

Women's unequal access to the formal labour market is closely linked to unequal access to education. Although girls' rights to primary education have increased barriers such as early, child and forced marriage still prevent women and girls, including indigenous girls, from accessing education. Therefore, equal universal access to quality primary, secondary and tertiary education is fundamental to the right to decent work.

Women's Political Empowerment

Political leadership by all genders is essential for social and economic development, especially in aid effectiveness, implementation of globally-agreed goals, targets and indicators for poverty eradication and sustainable development. Political empowerment presupposes equal access to and participation in decision-making and leadership, and must include strategic affirmative action in key areas of relevance to women and girls.

Collaborative efforts to empower women as actors in the political sphere must include engagement of men and boys to address harmful and discriminatory social norms and to promote social equality. Furthermore, the recognition of equal social and legal status of women is essential for women to powerfully participate in the full realization of human rights and of Agenda 2030. Also, measures should be taken for protection and promotion of an enabling environment for civil society organizations, including faith-based organizations, to be able to independently and innovatively contribute to these aims.

The fact remains that only 22% of parliamentarians globally are women. Women hold far fewer positions of power than their male counterparts. 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, are helpful measures, and can be accompanied by wider efforts to achieve sustainable change, including capacity-building for female candidates of all ages, empowerment of young women, knowledge-sharing and alliance building.

The Empowerment of Indigenous Women and Girls

Indigenous women and girls face severe and specific discrimination and marginalization. Over-represented in rates of poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy, they are also most affected by insufficient transparency and corruption in political institutions and other areas of governance and leadership. Living conditions as well as access to education, health care, decent work, and social protection for indigenous women and girls must be improved.

We must also strengthen indigenous women and girl's awareness of their rights and roles in political decision-making, as well as their ability to exercise these rights through strengthened democratic institutions. Protection of women who are active as human rights defenders in the area of economic, social and cultural rights, especially with regard to the agency of indigenous people, is important, and use of indigenous knowledge systems based on ethical principles of interconnectedness, interdependence of humanity and ecological community must be respected.

Land rights and equal access to rights of indigenous women to determine the development that takes place on their lands and territories in accordance with their priorities, traditions and cultural significance of land is vital to enable them to maintain their livelihood, culture and identity. The principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent is an essential prerequisite in order to ensure that affected communities are meaningfully involved in key decisions that impact their lives and livelihoods. Extractive industries infringe on indigenous peoples' rights and ancestral territories.

Ending Gender-based Violence

Due to unequal structures of power, high numbers of women and girls are affected by gender-based violence, a major obstacle to successful 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, challenged, and strategically ended. Gender-based violence also affects boys and men within and outside conflicts, a point that often goes unrecognized and unreported but that can have detrimental effects on individuals and as well as the well-being of communities. This reality is recognized by Beijing Action Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals and in Security Council resolution 1325, which should be followed up with committed action by states. Implementation requires legislation and effective use of legal frameworks; sufficient financial investment in both prevention and response, and challenging harmful social and cultural norms that perpetuate violence. We particularly urge the Commission to recognize the importance of engaging with faith-based actors in the effort to address these.

Universal Maternal Health and Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights

Maternal health and sexual and reproductive health rights are basic rights for all, and especially women, and central in saving lives, improving peoples' health and opposing repression. Access to sexual and reproductive health rights is a prerequisite of girls' education and women's economic empowerment. In 2015, almost 300,000 women died from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. A reduction in the number of maternal deaths will not be achieved without fulfilment of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health rights. The inclusion of family planning, age-of-consent minimums, access to sexual and reproductive health care and context-appropriate comprehensive sexual education are all essential elements that need further consideration. Goal 3, Target 7 as well as Goal 5, Target 6 of the Sustainable Development Goals advances this dialogue, and progressive action is required now. Controversy over the social, religious and cultural dimensions of

sexual and reproductive health rights and subsequent inaction in addressing them has had a detrimental impact on social equity and sustainable development.

Recommendations for the Sixty-first Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

The ACT Alliance and World Council of Churches calls on the Commission, Member States, civil society and the private sector to act now on:

1. Full implementation of existing agreements and commitments, with no regression or exception.
2. Sufficient, sustainable and accessible financing made available for implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly goals 5 and 3) and for women's rights organizations including faith-based women's organizations.
3. Recognition of the positive role that faith, and communities of faith, can play in achieving gender equality and justice.
4. Strengthening evidence to inform policies and practice aiming at achieving gender equality and justice.
5. National fiscal policy and domestic resource mobilization to promote gender equality through the use of progressive direct taxation, social protection and gender-budgeting.
6. 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.
7. Legally establish and institutionalize women farmers' rights of participation in decision-making.
8. Collaborative efforts, including the engagement of men and boys, to address harmful and discriminatory social norms and to promote social equality.
9. Recognition of equal social and legal status of women to be able to act in their own right for realization of human rights and the right to participate in Agenda 2030.
10. Equal access to and participation in decision-making and leadership, strategic introduction of affirmative action in key areas of relevance to women and girls.
11. Equal access to enabling environments for civil society organizations in general, and specifically those addressing issues regarding women's rights and participation.
12. Equal access to rights of indigenous women to determine the development that takes place on their land and territories in accordance with their own priorities and cultures.
13. Strengthen indigenous women's and girls' awareness of their rights and their capacities in political decision-making.

14. Protection of women who are active as human rights defenders in the area of economic, social and cultural rights in general and specifically with regard to indigenous women.

15. Implement laws at national, regional and global levels that guarantee a life free of violence, exploitation, discrimination and fear, including ending impunity for all forms of gender-based violence and strengthening judicial systems' capacity to handle cases on sexual gender-based violence.

16. Support and implement policies and legal frameworks of prevention and response to gender-based violence.

17. Depoliticize women's health and provide equal access to health systems, including sexual and reproductive health rights.
