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Statement submitted by ACT Alliance – Action by Churches Together, Anglican Consultative Council, Association of Presbyterian Women of Aotearoa New Zealand, 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, Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, Islamic Relief, Lutheran World Federation, Restored, and The Girls’ Brigade International Council, 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+25, a collective of faith actors advocating together for gender justice

We are living in changing global, regional, and national environments. Countries face increasing polarization, the rise of populist nationalism, and contestation, both within and between societies. There is an increasing threat to multilateralism as a critical platform for global collaboration, and shrinking space for civil society, including faith actors, even as the recognition of the importance of including faith-based organizations and religious actors has increased. Hard won achievements of women's rights are being threatened; the pushback is deep, pervasive, and relentless. As outlined in our statement Faith in Beijing+25, a collective of faith actors pushing back against the pushback, submitted by Islamic Relief, we, as faith actors, acknowledge the urgent need to address regressive forces that are gaining strength – driven by religious, economic, and political fundamentalisms.

Religious actors are not monolithic. We have a plurality of voices, yet recognize that we are stronger when we stand together. As religious actors and networks of faith-based organizations, we are strengthening existing and developing new partnerships to defend women's rights and advocate for greater action. We believe that gender equality and empowerment can best be accomplished by affirming human dignity and engaging in holistic development and intersectional approaches that leave no one behind. For this purpose, we act, advocate, educate and collaborate, and commit to holding all levels of leadership accountable – public and private, religious and secular, and domestic and international.

Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality by 2030 requires significantly increased implementation at every level, while acknowledging and addressing different regional challenges and contexts. God's world was designed to be based on equality and justice for all. We call on Member States to advance the objectives of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, with targets and indicators that will transform our world anew.

Acknowledging families

We acknowledge and celebrate that families are diverse and include, for instance, extended families, single parents, widows, and female-headed households. The structure of a family should never be a barrier to accessing services, protection or justice. We recognize that religion is often used in arguments opposing an inclusive understanding of family, and many religious actors have put substantial efforts into arguing that the only valid representation of family is the nuclear family. Religious institutions have sometimes colluded with, and been seduced by, contexts and cultures wherein the oppression of women by men has become normative, which is the opposite of what our faith demands.

As religious actors and faith-based networks, we stand together to challenge this narrow interpretation of family, and advocate for the use of inclusive language and for addressing discriminatory legislation. Family law is one area of legislation that is crucial for the fulfilment of women's rights. It regulates matters such as: women's legal status before, during, and after marriage; the legal age of marriage; domestic violence; marital rape; custody of children; inheritance; and ownership of land and property. Faith actors can play a crucial role through advocacy in their own religious communities to promote legislative change as well as through shadow reporting to

the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women committee regarding discriminatory legislation and examples of how to change it.

Many countries recognize parallel religious authority over marriage and family matters through religious family law as well as through religious court jurisdiction. This means, for instance, that religious leaders and institutions in India, Palestine, and Lebanon have direct power over issues such as the rights and responsibilities of a husband and wife in marriage, whether a victim of domestic violence can file for divorce, and whether men and women have equal rights to own and inherit property.

Controversy over the social, religious, and cultural dimensions of sexual and reproductive health and rights, and the subsequent inaction in addressing them has had a detrimental impact on gender equality and sustainable development. We uphold women's human rights, including their right to access to comprehensive sexual reproductive health education and services free from discrimination and violence. As faith communities, we acknowledge that we have a responsibility to promote equality, dignity, and non-discrimination using the sacred texts to challenge unjust family/gender norms and inspire effective and gender-just responses. We are uniquely equipped with theological resources that allow us to effectively advocate for families in their diversity.

Ending violence against women and girls

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), it is estimated that 35 per cent of women worldwide experience physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lives. Too often, violence against women and girls is understood as a women's issue. It is a violation of human rights and a cause and consequence of gender inequality. Domestic violence, harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and cutting, and early and forced marriage, as well as the continued use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, must all be highlighted, challenged, and strategically ended. Our understanding of violence is not limited to physical abuse, and we advocate that emotional, psychological, financial, modern slavery, discriminatory and institutional abuse, is recognized and addressed.

Religious actors and faith-based networks must be part of this work. We acknowledge the role that some religious actors have played, and continue to play, in furthering, supporting, excusing, or minimizing violence against women and girls. We seek to redress where we have caused harm and are working to challenge gender injustice in our institutions, communities, and relationships. For example, Restored has developed training programmes and resources to equip religious institutions and faith communities to respond effectively and appropriately to violence against women and girls.

We advocate that religious communities take primary prevention and early intervention seriously, and listen to the lived experiences of women and girls. As people of faith, we are mobilizing and equipping our religious communities around the world to speak out against sexual and gender-based violence. For example, the World Council of Churches mobilizes global faith communities to stand together as part of their Thursdays in Black campaign. Many faith actors are also working to build faith literacy within secular institutions and governments to ensure that the empowering role of faith in survivors' lives is recognized and supported.

Inspired by scripture and lived experiences

Eighty-four per cent of the world's population self-identifies as members of a faith or religious group. Our religions play an important role in the formation of people's values, norms of acceptable behaviour, and life roles. The important role of faith-based organizations was recognized in the agreed conclusions of both the sixty-

second and sixty-third sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women. We acknowledge that while many of our religious scriptures promote unconditional equality, the human approach to the religious texts often fails to attain this all-encompassing justice.

For example, the Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa are supporting contextual Bible readings in communities through the Tamar campaign. Many members of the collective responsible for this statement, including Islamic Relief and Side by Side, have also been working with faith leaders on dismantling myths and religious and cultural misinterpretations that uphold the oppression of women, girls, men, and boys, by focusing on issues such as reproductive health, inheritance rights, economic rights, access to health care, early and forced marriage, and domestic violence.

Recommendations

Faith actors occupy a unique position to make transformational and sustained progress towards gender equality. However, to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality, legal frameworks must represent the vision in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of a gender-just world, and not the unjust patriarchal structures that we are trying to transform. We call upon Member States to:

- Work intensively to create gender equitable laws in partnership with civil society, including faith actors, which enable access to justice for women and girls around the world.
- Insist on inclusive language and wording that emphasizes that multiple legal systems must comply with international human rights obligations in final documents, resolutions, and policies of the United Nations.
- Provide sufficient financial investment in both prevention and response, and legislate and effectively use legal frameworks to challenge harmful social and cultural norms that perpetuate gendered violence.
- Strategically work with religious actors and faith-based networks in the protection and promotion of human rights of all people, including the prevention and elimination of violence against women and girls, challenging unjust family norms, and working to eradicate gender injustice.