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Statement submitted by Anglican Consultative Council, Association of Presbyterian Women of Aotearoa, New Zealand, Church Women United, Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches, Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, Lutheran World Federation, Presbyterian Church (USA), Presbyterian Women in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Inc., Salvation Army, United Church of Christ – Board for World Ministries, United Methodist Women, World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women, and Women’s Missionary Society of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, 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

As a coalition of United Nations accredited Christian denominations and organizations, Ecumenical Women at the United Nations is committed to gender justice. We welcome the opportunity to address the 65th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women on women's full and effective participation and decision-making, elimination of violence against women and girls, and women's empowerment and sustainable development.

We envision a human community where everyone's participation is valued, none are excluded based on gender, race, ethnicity, age, religion or cultural practice, and diversity is celebrated as God's gift to the world. Women of faith play a vital role in achieving gender equality and sustainable development. Engaging faith-based organizations and communities in women's empowerment and global development is key to fulfilling the rights of women and girls.

A moral imperative: ending gender-based violence

Ecumenical Women recognizes gender-based violence and violence against women and girls as egregious human rights violations. Gender discrimination and cultural, structural, and economic factors are root causes of violence that demean the dignity and sacred worth of women and girls. The State bears the primary responsibility to prevent violence and to protect the economic and social rights of women and their families. Inequality in education, unequal pay for equal work, sexual harassment, trafficking in persons, unaffordable and inaccessible health care and services, and gender-biased inheritance laws are a few examples of structural violence, gender inequity and injustice.

Ecumenical Women acknowledges the role that misinterpretation of religious beliefs has played in these disparities. We reject the misuse of religion to perpetuate patriarchal ideologies, discrimination, and violence. It is our solemn mandate to seek the holistic well-being, care, and protection of the human rights of all women and girls.

In this global moment, we acknowledge the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on women and girls. Our concept of peace and safety has been forever changed. Pre-existing vulnerabilities facing women and girls have been exacerbated as social protection networks and service provisions were disrupted. Under lockdown, violence against women and girls increased globally. Services to individuals experiencing gender-based violence provided by faith-based organizations and churches have been impacted because of COVID-19 mandated closures.

Throughout the pandemic, our member organizations have engaged volunteers, congregations, and communities in the work of gender-based violence awareness and advocacy, such as:

Re-launch of the World Council of Churches' "Thursdays In Black" global campaign to end rape and gender-based violence. This global movement is inspired by grassroots women-led organizing and engages all people, including men and boys, to transform attitudes and practices that perpetuate rape and violence.

Local radio, social media, and other communications have been used by the Mothers' Union within Anglican dioceses to assist groups in countries such as Uganda and Myanmar to promote gender-based violence awareness and prevention of COVID-19.

The Lutheran World Federation and the World Federation of Methodists and Uniting Church Women, among others, provide holistic care for survivors, work to

prevent sexual violence, fight against impunity for perpetrators, and raise awareness of the need for reparations funds for survivors.

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Presbyterian Women, African Methodist Episcopal Church Women in Ministry and other members organized capacity-building events on advocacy and awareness campaigns to end trafficking and sexual exploitation of women. Some have established Global Anti-Trafficking Councils to oversee the progress of this work in addition to supplying resources for survivors and their families.

A seat at the table: women's participation and inclusion in decision-making

Women continue to experience multiple and intersecting discriminations and are denied equal opportunity with men to participate in decisions affecting their lives—from public to private spheres and from high level government decision-making to households. Many existing institutional structures and cultural barriers are inherently gender-biased, prohibit gender equality, deny women's rights, and must be critically examined and radically transformed.

We have witnessed increases in women's inclusion at various levels in church and society, including as heads of denominations and senior-level clergy. Examples from members include:

The Episcopal Church has elected women to its most senior lay and ordained leadership positions.

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) hired the first woman of color as the head of its Mission Agency in 2018.

The Salvation Army intentionally works to ensure that women, particularly those from developing countries, are appointed to decision-making positions and leadership, particularly where they will be the final decision makers.

Women and girls' leadership is also acknowledged in other ways:

In Zimbabwe, a Lutheran female church leader has led efforts to incorporate a gender justice curriculum in public schools.

Churches within the Anglican Communion are working to normalize inclusion of women by engaging girls in church activities and decision making from a young age and adopting gender-inclusive language during worship.

United Methodist Women provides support that facilitates young women's leadership and representation in all programs at 50 per cent of participation.

The global impact on education due to COVID-19, particularly for young girls, is devastating. In some countries, lost employment due to the pandemic and response has been borne disproportionately by women, yet women are not involved in decision-making processes for response and recovery. We cannot wait for a cure to COVID-19 before addressing these systemic and institutional changes.

Calling for equality and equity: sustainable development for all

Faith-based organizations have been effective agents in achieving sustainable development, pre-dating the United Nations and recognized within development circles as enduring providers, rooted in and trusted by communities. As Agenda 2030 becomes less attainable due to COVID-19's socioeconomic effects, faith communities have a greater role to play and should be supported by UN agencies and governments as integral partners in achieving gender equality and sustainable development.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted worldwide issues of structural economic inequality, racial injustice, and devastation caused by climate change. Our members continue to provide extensive services and programs, including maternal and child health services, disaster risk reduction programs, and more, which contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals. From our Christian perspective, the right to access adequate services, particularly health services, expresses every woman's and girl's inherent dignity. Yet, this access, especially to sexual and reproductive health services, remains obstructed and is further threatened by our current global political climate.

Recommendations to Member States

Implement fully the Beijing Platform for Action and other international agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Agenda 2030, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Security Council Resolution 1325, the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Eradicate unlawful and harmful practices that perpetuate violence against women; strengthen financial, legal, and judicial protections for victims of violence; eliminate discrimination and gender biases in local and national laws, policies, and customs.

Recognize the important role of faith leaders and communities in addressing harmful cultural practices that are fundamental to overcome prejudices and include faith actors in multi-stakeholder partnerships for achieving gender equality and justice and ending gender-based violence.

Affirm the human rights of women, including their right to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education and services, free from discrimination and violence, and promote equal relationships in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the integrity of the person, consent, and shared responsibility for sexual behaviour and its consequences.

Promote equitable sharing of authority and responsibilities in all aspects of society, and support women's and girls' equal access to economic and political power and decision-making bodies, particularly for women experiencing multiple discriminations.

Create, implement, and enforce comprehensive legal protections for women and girls against discrimination, particularly regarding employment, housing, education and health care and for victims of sexual violence, assault, harassment, and abuse.

Implement special measures, like preferential financing, resource allocation, and programming for particularly marginalized groups of women and girls and include gender-specific indicators and gender disaggregated data in all statistical reporting.

Promote gender equality education, comprehensive sex education, and life skills training for all, including men and boys, in schools and community institutions.