**Oral Statement by ACT Alliance (ACT), Lutheran World Federation and World Council of Churches to the 62nd Commission on the Status of Women**

As networks of Churches and Christian faith based organizations working in humanitarian response and human rights-based development in over 145 countries - in rural areas that are often out of the institutional reach of national governments - we call for an end to gender inequality and injustice. We welcome the Commission’s acknowledgment that the specific challenges of women and girls living in rural communities must be addressed and that those most marginalized, such as rural and indigenous women and girls, cannot be ‘left behind’.

**Why work with Faith Actors to end gender based violence and harmful practices**?

UN mechanisms such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and the Universal Periodic Review show that a number of customary laws and the misuse of religious beliefs threaten progress on women’s and girls’ rights - even within countries that have ratified treaties and committed to implementing human rights standards.

In many countries, large parts of the population use customary law rooted in convictions, values and beliefs. The importance of involving faith actors cannot be overemphasized, as they can play critical and influential roles and have the potential to bring lasting change. Progressive faith institutions contribute to challenging patriarchal attitudes and practices by promoting women’s leadership and participation at all levels of society and by engaging men in promoting gender equality.

For example, churches in Uganda, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe have intentionally targeted support to vulnerable women and girls in rural communities. Their deliberate efforts to promote gender justice within the church structures, schools and congregations have led to concrete actions to address early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation. A theological discourse that promotes gender justice can translate into powerful responses extending well beyond the faith-related context.

**Our recommendations to Member States**

1. Incorporate analysis of religious and customary systems in policies to address harmful practices in rural communities and recognize the positive role that communities of faith can play in altering social norms. Engage with women, girls, men and boys in addressing and transforming harmful and discriminatory social norms and promoting social equality.

2. Work in partnership with churches, other religious institutions and faith based organizations using their experiences and expertise in enhancing the role of faith as a positive force to promote gender justice.