

Joint Statement by Commission of the Churches in International Affairs of the World Council of Churches (WCC), Action by Churches Together – ACT Alliance (ACT), and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) to the 63rd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

As networks of churches and Christian faith based organisations working for decades in humanitarian response and human rights-based development in over 130 countries, we affirm that all persons are created in God's image and call for an end to gender inequality and injustice. We are committed to respecting and protecting the dignity, uniqueness, intrinsic worth, and human rights of every woman, man, girl and boy. It is our conviction that no person should be excluded and we strongly oppose any discrimination on the basis of nationality, race, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious belief, class, age, ability, cultural practice or political opinion.

God's world was meant to be one of abundance with fundamental human rights and dignity for all; however, we know that women and girls are disproportionately denied this abundance. As global faith-based alliances and networks, 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. We therefore affirm the promotion of gender equality and justice from both a theological and human rights perspective.

The role of faith in ensuring social protection

We welcome the Commission's review of social protection systems, public services, and sustainable infrastructure and affirm their critical role in achieving Agenda 2030 and gender justice. As people of faith, we are deeply concerned by the growing inequalities and the impact on the lives of people everywhere. We acknowledge that equal rights to social protection for women and girls remains unfulfilled, and the specific underlying causes of women's vulnerability and exclusion must be addressed in order to obtain gender justice for all.

Churches and faith based organisations have historically been, and continue to remain, at the forefront of providing social services and support to those living in the socio-economic margins. We therefore believe we have a critical role to play in actively working for just societies and advocating for social protection for all. As such, we continue to call for the recognition of our work and the resources of faith and hope that are critical for informing the direction of this ongoing work. From our Christian values, we add our voices to movements of people from all over the world who will be calling for redistribution of wealth and social protection as a matter of justice and human rights.

Civil society, including the faith-based community, plays an important role in challenging attitudes, norms and traditions that contribute to undermining women's rights and dignity. The wounds of women are most often caused by human inability to overcome the social and institutional structures which fail to address unequal power relations and diminish women and girls' God-given dignity.

Theologically, social development is to work for a just society for all, and we must continue to call for action in order to curb evil in the form of marginalisation, stigmatisation, exclusion and oppression (poverty and inequality) in order for societies to truly embody mercy and love.

Women as well as men are created in the image of God and deserve to be respected, protected and cared for. In forums such as the Commission on the Status of Women, it is necessary for member states to agree upon and protect strong international frameworks, as suggested in the “Sigtuna Statement on Theology, Tax and Social Protection (2017)” produced by members in our collective network.

We maintain that the contributions and empowerment of women and girls of all ages are fundamental, enshrined in the Beijing Platform for Action, upheld in the Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and international laws, and necessary to meet all the Sustainable Development Goals.

A vision for life in abundance

As communions, networks of churches and humanitarian organisations, we have been working to build equitable and sustainable societies in all regions of the world since the founding of our organisations more than 70 years ago. In our understanding of God’s grace and covenant, we have a powerful vision of what just society is: life in abundance for all that includes mutual respect, sharing of resources, and fully honouring human dignity.

This vision has become our vocation. Our local to global rights-based approach is reflected in our churches’ and members’ dedication to humanitarian and social and economic development work. As an example, the Lutheran World Federation has been implementing rights-based programs in Angola, Mozambique, Chad, Colombia, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Nepal, amongst others, focusing on women’s rights to nutrition, healthcare, land, access to clean water, environmental protection, and other social protection systems. In countries like Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, and Uganda, the defence of the rights of women and girl refugees and the internally displaced, including providing them with assistance and protection, has also been an ongoing concern we have sought to address. Within all of our programmatic and development work, we acknowledge the importance of social protection systems as a critical piece to ensure just and sustainable societies for all.

Call to action

As we continue our work in pioneering social services and support for those left behind, we also mobilise the prophetic voice of the church to inspire, influence, and mobilise people of faith and broader civil society to transform attitudes and behaviors in all sectors of society.

In a statement prepared for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the World Council of Churches said:

“It has been painful for us to acknowledge that institutions which should stand in solidarity with women, including governments and the churches, have not often responded with resolute action. We encounter, through our contact with women at the periphery of all our societies the struggle for dignity and livelihood that women engage in every day. We believe that empowerment is not possible as long as women live in contexts of violence, often exacerbated by cultural and religious tradition.”

We draw the attention to the liberating power of religions and we affirm the positive and supportive role that the churches and other religious institutions can play in standing in solidarity with women and others who are marginalised. We employ the distinct resources of religion (scripture, religious practices, and organisational resources), in order to develop contextual Bible studies, advocacy tools, and theological justification for a just society and social protection for all.

We affirm publicly funded social protection as a moral imperative and assurance of every person’s God-given dignity, particularly for those that have been rendered invisible by current economic and development realities, especially women and girls. We believe that social protection is an essential requirement for a just society, regardless of nationality, legal citizenship, or the level of economic development in a country.

Recommendations

Affirming the primary responsibility of the state to guarantee social protection for all, and based on our experiences as faith-based networks and institutions, we call upon Member States to:

1. Work in partnership with faith based organisations and churches, learning from their experiences in mobilising the role of faith as a positive force to promote change in society, particularly drawing on our existing sustainable structures and long-standing experience at the forefront of social service provision.
2. Incorporate analysis of religious and customary systems in policymaking, and engage collaboratively with faith actors and women, girls, men and boys, to address harmful and discriminatory norms and practices that hinder progress in guaranteeing full social protection.
3. Recognise the positive role that faith, and communities of faith, are playing in the provision of social services, humanitarian response, building resilient communities, promoting well-being, transforming social norms, and achieving gender equality.
4. Fully implement existing human rights agreements and international commitments on social protection such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and ILO Recommendation 202 on Social Protection Floors, with no regression or exception.
5. Sufficiently finance the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 5, and ensure the sustainability of women’s rights organisations, including faith-based women’s organisations, prioritizing local ownership.

6. Promote gender equality and equitable redistribution of resources through the use of progressive direct taxation, social protection and gender-budgeting in national fiscal policy and domestic resource mobilisation to uphold the international responsibility and theological imperative to leave no one behind.