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| **We commit to promote civic space, counter backlashes on gender equality, and defend human rights, in national, regional, and global spaces. We increase diverse participation, including youth, in global and regional policy making spaces, to ensure grassroots voices can access international human rights mechanisms, and advocate to Member States to adopt and enforce laws that protect human rights of women and girls in all their diversity and prevent discrimination, all forms of violence and harassment. We will also encourage religious literacy, to promote understandings of how religious discourses are being used to both advance and restrict human rights.** | | | | |

**75 Years On: Faith actors commit to promote civic space, counter backlashes on human rights and advance gender justice.**

On the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ACT Alliance and our members, Felm, Act Church of Sweden, HEKS, and DanChurchAid, affirm our collective commitment to this global instrument that guarantees the rights and freedoms to all human beings.

As faith and rights-based actors, working in over 120 countries, we believe it is critical to mobilise and strengthen our collective networks to promote civic space, counter backlashes on human rights, and advance gender justice. This includes ensuring the right to freedom of assembly, association and speech.

The last decade has been marked by a democratic backsliding worldwide. According to the [V-Dem Institute](https://v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf), in 2022, the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen has deteriorated down to 1986 levels. Now only 13 percent of the world’s population is considered to live in a liberal democracy. Human rights are being violated, and authoritarian rule and fundamentalisms are on the rise, contributing to the erosion of the space for free and independent civil society, fundamental civic freedoms, gender justice, and the rule of law. The situation is further exacerbated by decreasing respect for human rights and multilateral cooperation while nationalism, traditional values, and polarization are increasing.

Anti-rights actors are strategically working to stall or even regress important gender policy and political commitments. In this context, notions of religion, family values, and freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) are used by states and certain religious actors as instruments to push back the advancement of women’s rights and inclusive policies on the global arena. The rhetoric, strategies, and financial backing of those pushing this narrative have thus increasingly influenced national, regional, and global arenas. All this has led to a common misconception of a factual polarisation between religion and human rights in general and gender equality, SRHR, and LGBTQI+ persons rights, in particular.

A narrow version of religion, in particular Christianity from our own experience, is often mobilised and instrumentalised in global policy arenas: “Whenever religion enters the public sphere and becomes powerful in politics, it tends to orbit around gender issues. Patriarchal gender norms are packaged in the language of religion because it legitimises them. It makes them appear divinely ordained and unchangeable.” (**Khalaf-Elledge 2021**). Eighty-four per cent of the world’s population identifies as members of a faith group, and faith principles and religious and traditional leaders shape social norms and values. Faith actors are diverse, and while some are influencing government policies and practices, to block progress, there are many who are working within their communities and globally to defend universal and inter-dependent human rights, often in challenging and fragile contexts.

Civil society is increasingly experiencing multiple restrictions locally, nationally, and globally. These involve administrative hurdles in registration processes, restrictive legislation, barriers to receiving foreign funding, travel bans, surveillance, and smear campaigns. Human Rights Defenders, including faith leaders, are exposed to harassment, persecution, arbitrary arrest, detention, physical violence, or murder. Most at risk are those working on environmental / land rights, freedom of expression, Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), women’s, girls’, and LGBTIQ+ person’s rights. Impunity is widespread, indicating inadequate legal systems and authorities that do not take the threats seriously. The shrinking civic space challenges the very right to exist as a free and independent civil society, have the conditions to be operational, and be a constructive and critical voice for change.

We believe that civil society organisations, including faith-based actors, are critical to transform the needs and rights of poor and marginalised groups into social and political power and that strong civil society organisations are essential for the sustainability and long-term development. Faith-based organisations and religious leaders are potentially very important human rights actors, who have considerable influence on large constituencies, and often can contribute to holding states accountable to human rights obligations.

We are committed to working with partners, who are rooted in communities, to strengthen a strong, autonomous, and vibrant civil society. Locally led projects and partnerships enable better understanding of the problems of poverty and marginalisation and are critical in ensuring sustainable development and Agenda 2030:

**To mark the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human rights, we pledge to:**

1. Strengthen strategic alliances between likeminded actors to defend human rights, and collectively counter backlashes on gender equality in national, regional and global spaces.
2. Invest in increasing diverse participation, including youth, in global and regional policy making spaces, to ensure grassroots voices can access international human rights mechanisms, including the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, including the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

1. Advocate towards Member States to adopt and enforce laws that protect human rights of women and girls in all their diversity and prevent discrimination, all forms of violence and harassment. For this to include an investment in action and response mechanisms to address violence against women and girls in physical and digital spaces, and protect and support those that are targeted, including Women Human Rights Defenders, including faith leaders, who are speaking out for gender justice.
2. Promote understandings of how faith actors can both legitimize and challenge gender inequality and human rights violations and are critical stakeholders to engage. Encourage religious literacy to governments and development agencies, to promote an understanding of how religious discourses are context specific, historically situated, and diverse.

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