

Joint Ecumenical Statement by Action by Churches Together – ACT Alliance (ACT), Commission of the Churches in International Affairs of the World Council of Churches (WCC), and Lutheran World Federation (LWF) to the 62nd Commission on the Status of Women

As networks of Churches and Christian faith based organizations working for decades in humanitarian response and human rights-based development in over 130 countries, we call for an end to gender inequality and injustice. Our faith inspires us work to address the needs not only of the body but also of the mind and spirit, honoring the fullness of humanity. We also extend into the most rural areas that are often out of the institutional reach of national governments. We welcome the Commission's acknowledgment that the specific challenges of women and girls living in rural communities must be addressed in order obtain gender justice for all. These challenges must be particularly addressed in line with the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030 to ensure that those most marginalized, such as rural women and girls, are not 'left behind'.

Working with Faith Actors to End Harmful Practices

United Nations mechanisms such as the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), show that a number of customary laws and the misuse of religious practices beliefs threaten progress, particularly concerning rural women and girls' rights, even within countries that have ratified treaties and committed to implementing human rights standards. For example, in Sierra Leone, up to 85 percent of the population uses customary law as part of the formal and informal legal system. Moreover, civil unrest in a country can weaken formal justice systems; in such situations, the population might resort to traditional dispute settlement mechanisms, which complicates and may preclude the assurance of the rights of women and girls, particularly in rural communities.

Acknowledging that these customary and traditional practices are rooted in convictions, values and beliefs, the importance of deliberately involving religious leaders of different faiths cannot be overemphasized. Such leaders play critical and influential roles within society and people of all age groups in communities rely on them for guidance on many matters. As such, working with faith based actors has the potential to bring lasting and sustainable change to end harmful traditional practices including female genital mutilation/cutting and child, early and forced marriage.

Faith institutions' networks reach the most rural areas where even governments have difficulty in ensuring an institutional presence. These religious communities, institutions and leaders can contribute to challenging patriarchal attitudes and practices by promoting women's participation at all levels of society. By encouraging women to occupy leadership positions and engaging men and boys in promoting gender equality and justice, faith actors can offer a lasting, substantial impact as these processes contribute to a paradigm shift in communities' understanding of gender that is owned by the people themselves.

As an example, churches in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe have intentionally targeted support to vulnerable women and girls in rural communities, and 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. At the core, a theological discourse that values women and girls and promotes gender justice can translate into powerful responses that translate well beyond the faith-related context.

Access to Education

Our institutions provide up to 60 percent of educational services in some rural contexts. We are concerned that a large gap remains in school enrollment between rural and urban areas, even though the gap between boys and girls in school enrollment has significantly narrowed in many countries, particularly at the primary school level. According to household data gathered by Women Watch from 42 countries, rural girls are more likely to be out of school than rural boys, and they are twice as likely to be out of school as urban girls. Not only are girls in rural schools most likely to miss school during their menstruation because of stigma, poor sanitation, lack of water and lack of access to sanitary pads, they also risk being victims of early and forced marriages which may further inhibit their education. Travelling long distances to access education increases vulnerability of girls being subject to sexual assault and harassment getting to and from school.

As a result of practices withholding girls from attending school, illiteracy rates are substantially higher in adult women in rural areas. Lack of competence in skills such as reading and writing are an obstacle for rural women to 1) knowing and fully understanding their rights; 2) accessing the justice system; 3) holding political positions, and 4) approaching financial institutions to obtain micro-credits and other services. As one example, a baseline study by Lutheran World Federation completed in Angola showed that 80% of female respondents identified illiteracy as a major obstacle to understanding legislation.

As such, it is imperative that we build resilient social protection and education systems so that rural women can both contribute to and benefit from sustainable development.

Land Rights and Land Grabbing

Land grabbing significantly affects rural women who depend on their land for their livelihood. A recent submission to the 24th Session of the UPR Working Group stressed the situation of Mozambique, where numerous foreign and national private companies lease and purchase large tracts of arable land in many cases leading to the eviction of small farmers. Additionally, in their work to hold corporations and states responsible for such land grabs, women human rights defenders from indigenous populations, face death threats and violence disproportionately to their male counterparts.

Through our organizations' engagement with rural communities, we acknowledge that while many rural and indigenous communities live interconnected and interdependent with the land, the participation of women's groups in the management of small shareholding farmers' access to land and water resources is still a challenge.

For rural women in societies where customary or religious practices prevent them from owning land, vulnerability to poverty and hunger is heightened. It is important that both the legislative and customary practices are critically examined in order to ensure women have legal rights to land and formal recognition of their equal skills and rights as farmers and agricultural workers. The Sustainable Development Goals have gender equality and women's empowerment at their core, and include a target to "double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, particularly women." Faith communities are active partners in addressing these practices and promoting change in the cultural mindsets and beliefs that prevent women to access and own land.

Climate change

Climate change is increasingly heightening rural women's vulnerabilities. Tasks of growing and preparing food, gathering firewood for fuel and collecting water become more grueling with the increased occurrence and intensity of storms, floods and droughts. Research findings indicate that women recover more slowly than men from economic losses due to destroyed harvests and livelihoods. Their lack of property rights and control over land and water resources--aggravated by their limited access to information, education, credit, and technologies--translate to fewer means to cope with a warming climate. As part of Agenda 2030, building climate resilient communities, to which many faith-inspired organizations are committed, is crucial for the empowerment of rural women.

Access to Health in Rural and Indigenous Communities

Within rural communities, indigenous women and girls are particularly marginalized. They face severe discrimination and marginalization, and disproportionately suffer poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy. They are also disproportionately affected by natural disasters and armed conflicts, and are often denied access to education, land property, and other economic resources. Furthermore they are also the most severely affected by corruption and impunity because of limited access to justice. Globally, indigenous peoples suffer from poorer health, are more likely to experience disability and reduced quality of life, and ultimately die younger.

Sexual health is particularly relevant to indigenous youth and adolescents, especially in rural areas. Lack of affordable quality services and transport to travel long distances, as well as stigma in communities, are some of the barriers to access services. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) notes, "A special mention needs to be made with respect to indigenous adolescents, given the higher proportion of adolescent maternity that reveals ethnic-related unequal access to reproductive rights." For example, in Latin America, the proportion of young mothers in the indigenous population is higher than that of the non-indigenous population and rates of HIV infection among indigenous women have risen from 4 percent in 1990 to 30 percent in 2007 (Inter-agency Support Group on Indigenous Peoples' Issues, 2014).

As part of the empowerment of rural and indigenous communities, we call on governments to introduce culturally sensitive approaches to healthcare structures, incorporating and enhancing non-harmful traditional medicinal techniques, and better training for practitioners. Living conditions for indigenous women and girls must be improved, with access to rights like education, health care, decent work and social protection.

Based on our experiences as faith-based networks and institutions, our recommendations to Member States are as follows:

1. Fully implement the Beijing Platform for Action, and all other existing agreements and commitments, with no regression or exception, and develop national implementation plans to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, with particular reference to Goal 5 and gendered targets.
2. Incorporate analysis of religious and customary systems in policies, and engage collaboratively with women, girls, men and boys, to address harmful traditional practices in rural communities, recognizing the positive role that communities of faith can play in transforming social norms and promoting social equality.

3. Support and implement policies and laws that guarantee a life free of violence, exploitation, discrimination and fear for all women and girls; end impunity for all forms of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) and strengthen judicial systems' capacity to handle cases of SGBV.
4. Develop and implement long-term, inclusive education plans in line with CEDAW principles which include improving access to education in rural areas as well as strengthening literacy and education programs that target rural women and girls.
5. Legally establish, institutionalize and promote rural and indigenous women's rights, capacity, and space to participate in decision-making processes at all levels.
6. Review and revise laws, including customary and religious laws, which inhibit women's ownership of land to ensure equal access and rights; review and amend development policies that lead to evictions and in cases where relocation is unavoidable, ensure Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) and enact measures that allow women to decide on development that affects them.
7. Promote equal access to economic assets, including the right to independent ownership of land, property and earnings, equal pay for work of equal value, access to affordable credit and appropriate technologies; recognize the role that women play in achieving food security, and promote policies that recognize and redistribute unpaid care work.
8. Establish functional field offices for governmental institutions that serve rural populations, and employ culturally sensitive approaches that value traditional techniques and fluency in local languages.
9. Depoliticize women's and girl's health and provide equal access to health services, including sexual and reproductive health and rights.
10. Guarantee rural women's participation in designing, developing, and implementing national adaptation programs and climate action plans.
11. Work in partnership with faith based organizations and churches using their experiences and expertise in enhancing the role of faith as positive force to promote change in society.