



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
2 December 2019

English only

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-fourth session

9–20 March 2020

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and
to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and
peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by Worldwide Organization for Women, a non-governmental organization 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

The Worldwide Organization for Women promotes freedom of religion as the first pillar in the advancement of women's rights and empowerment, and recognizes its significance in economic improvement and peaceful societies. We further observe that Sustainable Development Goals 1, 5, and 16 will not be achieved without an emphasis on and the strengthening of religious freedom. The Worldwide Organization for Women continually works to educate women, civil society, and government about the benefits of religious freedom. The Worldwide Organization for Women presented on this topic at the sixty-second session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2018.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action affirms "the empowerment and advancement of women, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief", however; the right of private worship and gathering, even nondiscrimination, is insufficient. The critical component and measure of religious liberty in society is broad public accommodation of an individual's free exercise and practice of faith in all aspects of life – social, political, economic, and more. Conscience is the most innate property of personal possession. Internal religious development cannot be separated from an individual's outward behaviour and practice without infringement.

James Madison, the author of the world's first constitutional government, emphasized that government cannot give title to invade a person's conscience or withhold that debt of protection. He charged that any government that directly or indirectly violates the property that individuals have in their opinions (free speech), their religion (morality), their persons (rights), and their faculties (conscience) is not a pattern for just government. He recognized these first freedoms as interconnected, and that the protection of these (free speech, morality, rights, and conscience), is alone the end of just government. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action affirms this duty of government.

Empirical research demonstrates that government denial of religious freedom quickly erodes to the denial of other freedoms, and shows that religious liberty directly correlates to the improvement or demise of other freedoms. The associations between political freedom, freedom of the press, civil liberties, and women's empowerment are significant, according to data provided by Grim and Finke (Grim and Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied*, 2010). Their research also indicates that contrary to public belief, ensuring broad religious freedom for all correlates to reduced violence and conflict, as well as religious persecution.

Stable environments are key to the economic development of States. According to research conducted in collaboration between Georgetown University and Brigham Young University, religious freedom is one of only three significant factors associated with global economic growth. The report is based on the gross domestic product growth of 173 countries (Grim, Clark, and Snyder, *Is Religious Freedom Good for Business?: A Conceptual and Empirical Analysis*, 2014).

In 2019, religious freedom remains seriously hindered, indicating a great impediment to women's empowerment and freedom, the eradication of poverty, and peaceful existence. Grim and Finke conclude in their study of over 200 nations that religious freedom across the globe is routinely denied by both government as well as society. Up to one-third of states highly restrict religious freedom with up to 70 per cent of the world's population living within such States' borders.

Contradictory to the prediction of social scientists, data from the Pew Research Center shows increased exercise of faith and religious affiliation among individuals.

Currently, 84 per cent of the world's population claims a belief and practice, and those numbers are on the rise.

In consideration of new language additions during the sixty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women in support of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, specific emphasis and attention to religious liberty should be distinguished when referring to human rights. Actions to be taken under strategic objectives should specify the release of imprisoned persons on religious grounds, the elimination of forced conversions, swift government intervention in societal persecution and abuse, and an end of governmental business restriction and regulation based on religious practice, conscience, and affiliation. Special recognition of the religious dimension and the benefits it has upon society is critical for progress, and should be included in human rights educational programmes and materials. The advancement of religious freedom is a remedy of particular importance in the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 1, 5, and 16.
