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Statement submitted by Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches, 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 current global socio-economic trends attest to the deleterious impact of poverty on the well-being, mental health and political stability of a nation, particularly among women and girls. By reducing poverty and creating opportunities for economic independence among women and girls, the risk of violence is decreased and the scope for gender equality is strengthened.

As a fellowship of 352 churches, actively working for human rights, peacekeeping and sustainable development goals including the reduction of poverty and food scarcity and the increased access to water, sanitation and health, the World Council of Churches welcomes the theme of CSW68 ‘Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective.’

Challenges

The fellowship of churches recognizes the following challenges for women and girls of all ages:

Economic disparities

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by economic disparities. Compared to men, they often have less access to resources, including land, credit, and technology, which hinders their participation in economic activities. This exclusion perpetuates cycles of poverty, making it difficult for them to break free from traditional gender roles.

Work

Disparities in the workplace help to explain why poverty disproportionately impacts women more than men. In both developing and developed countries, women generally earn less than men for the same work, encounter more obstacles in the labour market, and do most of the unpaid social reproductive or care work in the home. While national economic policies tend to focus on growing the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), GDP does not measure unpaid social reproductive or care work, thus overlooking the contributions of women and girls to the economy.

Education and health

Access to education and healthcare remains a challenge for women and girls in many countries. As for girls, limited water and sanitation infrastructure in schools, heavily taxed menstrual products as well as cultural norms marginalize them, limiting their advancement with education and earning potential. When education is not free, there is often a preference to educate the boy child before the girl child, putting her at a disadvantage from childhood. Early marriage and limited sexual and reproductive health services, especially safe labour and delivery, can lead to obstetric fistula, causing further socio-economic marginalization and impoverishment.

Women and girls in marginalized communities, the poor, the displaced, and those living with disability bear the brunt of inequalities in access to health. The Primary Health Care approach, which is meant to address these inequalities, is poorly implemented as most public health systems are predominantly curative rather than preventive in their orientation and are underfunded.

At the same time, poor women and girls feel the brunt of austerity measures and cuts in public spending on education and health. In most cases, these cuts could be avoided if governments were to take decisive steps to tackle tax avoidance and

evasion and to implement tax measures that make wealthier people, multinational corporations, and polluters pay their fair share of taxes.

Food insecurity

Lack of food security exposes women, especially from poor communities, to increased risk of exploitation and violence as they seek food to sustain their families. Though 70% of farm-related work is being done by women, less than 20% of land is owned by women. Young girls are traded and forced into child marriages as families deal with unprecedented levels of food scarcity and the rising cost of living.

Lack of access to water, sanitation, and hygiene

Women bear the heaviest burden when there is no access to safe water and sanitation. In most places that lack these resources, women and children are responsible for retrieving water for their families, often spending several hours each day traveling and waiting at a water point. This puts them at risk of assault and injury. Women and girls often stay home from work and school to care for family members that are sick with water-related diseases. They miss school when there are no toilets to give them a private place to take care of their hygiene needs during menstruation. Time lost in fetching water (taken from education, childcare, paid labour and other livelihood activities that are part of poor people's survival strategies) robs women of their entire futures.

Lack of access to other basic amenities

Other basic amenities such as housing and shelter, childcare, reliable energy sources and clean cooking facilities, finance and credit, transportation, legal rights and protection, and social support networks are essential facilities and services for individuals to live a decent and dignified life. The lack of these amenities disproportionately impacts women and contribute to the cycle of poverty.

Poverty and Indigenous women

Indigenous communities are often equated with conditions of poverty. This reality is an ongoing legacy of colonialism, which saw the grabbing of Indigenous land and resources, and a function of systemic racism and discrimination. Indigenous women bear the brunt in terms of insecure livelihoods and poor health, including mental health.

Poverty, climate change and rural women

Climate change deepens poverty for women, especially rural women. With scarce assets such as land to fall back on, women are less able to cope when harvests collapse because of extreme weather events. As a result, women farmers often fall into chronic indebtedness as microcredit schemes are often targeted towards them. When food shortages arise from poor harvests, women prioritize the food needs of male household members and children over their own needs.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Sexual and Gender Based Violence has skyrocketed because of the global lockdown and recession caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Countless stories of physical abuse, harassment, online exploitation, and sexual abuse have resulted in the naming of SGBV as a shadow pandemic.

The link between poverty and violence is well documented. The risk of violence towards women living in poverty is exacerbated by racism which devalues the lives

of ‘non-white’ women and leaves them vulnerable to predation. A World Bank study indicates that lost productivity due to domestic violence can negatively set back a country’s GDP by 1.2 to 2%. The IMF projects that reducing the level of SGBV in Sub-Saharan Africa could result in long-term GDP gains of around 30 per cent.

Recommendations

Despite the challenges discussed above, there are pathways to empowering women and girls and promoting gender equality globally, in keeping with SDG1, which seeks to ensure that ‘all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including microfinance.’

To make meaningful strides toward addressing gendered poverty and accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, the World Council of Churches calls on Member States to:

- Recognize and value the unpaid care work done predominantly by women in measuring the GDP and in the development of economic policies; address the gender-based wage gap and other inequalities in the workplace including through legislation; as well as support women-led micro enterprises.
- Ensure that girls have access to quality education through scholarships, stipends, infrastructural amenities, and other incentives that encourage girls to stay and progress in school; and invest in the decolonization of education systems. Invest in and ensure women’s access to effective, efficient, and low-cost healthcare, including maternal, sexual and reproductive health services; and fully operationalize the Primary Health Care approach.
- Invest in food sovereignty and agro-ecology; implement land reform policies that prioritize equal access to land for rural women; as well as provide low-interest credit, relevant technologies, and training for rural women.
- Work with local communities to provide access to clean water, sanitation facilities and other essential amenities, especially for disadvantaged women and communities. Take steps to establish social protection and support systems for Indigenous, disabled, and other marginalized women, including ensuring access to shelters for abused women and their children, counselling, and mental health programmes.
- Promote a gender-just transition away from a fossil fuel-based economies; as well as provide timely and sufficient climate finance for adaptation and loss and damage, ensuring that such finance reaches rural and Indigenous women.
- Make tax and other fiscal policies responsive and beneficial to women through gender budgeting processes; as well as implement progressive wealth and other taxes at global and national levels to finance critical investments in education, health, agro-ecology, water and sanitation, and social protection.

Conclusion

We believe that addressing gendered poverty and achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is not only a moral imperative but also essential for sustainable development and global peace. By addressing the challenges, they face and seizing the opportunities for progress, we can build a more just, inclusive, and prosperous world for all.

We call upon governments, the United Nations, civil society, and faith-based organizations to join hands in this endeavour. Together, we can make poverty history and the vision of gender equality a reality, leaving no one behind. Let us work tirelessly to empower women and girls and ensure that their rights and dignity are upheld.
