



**COMMUNIQUÉ AT THE END OF A ONE-DAY FAITH ACTORS’ CONFERENCE ON IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON GENDER JUSTICE AND CHILD PROTECTION: ACTION BY FAITH ACTORS DURING AND BEYOND THE PANDEMIC, HELD AT THE DESMOND TUTU CONFERENCE CENTRE IN NAIROBI.**

**Preamble**

The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) in partnership with seven other international faith-based organizations, ecumenical networks and faith institutions namely: Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN), Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy (EHAIA), Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa (FECCLAHA), World Vision, Christian Aid, Side-by-Side Faith Movement for Gender Justice and Faith to Action Network hosted the launch of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender Based Violence (GBV) at the AACC- Desmond Tutu Conference Centre, in Nairobi, Kenya on 27th November, 2020.

The objective of the event was to deliberate on enhancing faith based action against gender inequality, SGBV, child abuse, and the interconnectedness to unsustainable population.

Participants noted that the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has brought about poverty-related stress and economic insecurity due to massive job losses referring to the rising statistics as reported by WHO and UNFPA.

**OBSERVATIONS**

- a) Quarantines and social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic have increased the likelihood of SGBV and child abuse- as there is increased daily physical exposure to perpetrators who reinforce abuse tactics of social isolation;
- b) Religious actors have been crucial as first responders in communities, especially helping to dispel misinformation, engaging communities in ensuring government guidelines are followed towards curbing the spread of the disease, as well as in protection from violence, stigma and deteriorating mental health;
- c) During the COVID-19 crisis, women’s access to financial instruments, which is vital for poverty reduction, has been disproportionately impacted. Changing family structures, combined with school closures and financial distress, have resulted in higher rates of exploitative, transactional sex among adolescent girls and higher fertility rates, with longer-term consequences for increased SGBV and child abuse; and

- d) The most successful efforts in bringing boys and men aboard the fight against SGBV are those which engage with boys and girls at formative stages during adolescence, before gender biases and social norms are fully internalized. Men and boys should not only be trained on healthy masculinity, but be involved at all levels of gender based violence prevention and response.

**Acknowledged** the critical role of faith leaders in the fight against SGBV Noting that Faith leaders and faith-based organizations have a crucial role to play in ending Gender inequality and all forms of SGBV and child abuse during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic through: -

- a) Bringing their values of faith and action based on Scripture to political contexts on local, national and international platforms, and they should use these to amplify ending SGBV and child abuse.
- b) Their elaborate structures spread to the grassroots increasing their proximity to the community and therefore strategically placing them as key players in changing negative and retrogressive cultures perpetrating gender inequalities and cycles of violence against women and girls.
- c) Utilization of their weekly platforms to sensitize and create awareness to their congregants and communities on SGBV and child abuse.
- d) Use of their influence and leverage in grassroots power to influence decision making including policy development and ratification of global, regional legislative frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and local/ national Sexual Offenses Acts.
- e) Facilitation of direct consultations with organizations of women with disabilities in response to their specific needs. Additionally, they also need to strengthen the capacity of local, informal groups of women with disabilities, which are crucial in identifying and supporting women and girls with disabilities who are victims of violence in the community and family settings.

**Called** upon the religious leaders in fighting SGBV to implement practical steps in the fight against SGBV by pursuing knowledge and updating themselves on the existing SGBV referral pathways in order to disseminate the same towards facilitating access to SGBV services throughout the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

Faith actors and leaders at the launch committed to the following actions as practical strategies to increase religious leaders' ability in ending SGBV and child abuse. These were:

- a) Collaborating with organizations and agencies that work on gender justice and child protection at all levels.

- b) Prioritizing strengthening the response capacity of religious actors and leaders by increasing access and link to other actors that provide specialized services, such as psychosocial, shelter and justice services and systems.
- c) Ensuring that the church/religious owned health centers, offer services and provide competencies to render a comprehensive response to sexual violence and its consequences. This should include, counselling, shelters, hotlines, prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections such as HIV, and provide pregnancy-related care for women and girls.
- d) Ensuring that excluded women and girls including those from remote communities, disabled, displaced persons, migrants, refugees, and others have equal access to SGBV prevention and response during the health crisis.
- e) Developing and disseminate awareness mechanisms among the congregations against 'out of court' settlements that continue to undermine justice for SGBV survivors.
- f) Creating multi-religious support groups for victims of violence and additionally train religious leaders on SGBV/child abuse reporting frameworks and mechanism.

**Recommended the following:**

- a) A regional mapping of existing faith actors and leaders and enlisting new ones to work more collaboratively towards common child protection and gender justice goals.
- b) Build partnerships with research institutions and academia in order to strengthen the availability of evidence on the gender implications of health emergencies to inform advocacy and programmatic interventions that are gender-sensitive and responsive.
- c) Convene religious institutions analysis of religious norms that propagate cycles of violence against women and children.
- d) Ensure that faith based organizations are part of the referral pathways towards ensuring access to SGBV and child protection services throughout the health crisis and beyond.
- e) Establish localized church/ mosque legislations that support safety of women and children, such of these are; gender and child protection policies.
- f) Include women and youth in the formulation of SGBV and child protection responses during the health crisis and beyond.