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**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 Anglican Consultative Council and Mother’s Union, non-governmental organizations 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 Anglican Consultative Council and Mothers' Union - a global family of churches and a women-led Christian movement representing 165 countries and 85 million people - welcome the opportunity to make this statement ahead of the 69th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

The Beijing Declaration is a bold plan of action that is needed to bring about gender equality and justice in the home, in our communities, societies and countries. The health of relationships between men and women is intrinsically linked to the health of our societies and wider international systems. We revisit the Beijing Declaration at a time when tensions between Member States are high and many societies are increasingly divided. We see broken relationships between men and women in each of these areas of tension.

A recognition of the fundamental importance of the relationship between men and women is at the heart of the Bible, which holds that men and women were created equally in the image of God. Many of our churches and organisations are focusing on transforming situations in which this equality has been diminished and where there have been consequential rises in gender-based violence, domestic abuse, sexual violence in conflict and societal division. We examine ourselves and challenge world-views and practices that undermine the full truth of our scriptures; committing ourselves instead to transforming relationships between women and men, boys and girls, in all areas of life, as part of our discipleship to Christ.

Although the Beijing Declaration recognises the powerful contribution that faith plays in women and men realising their full potential in society and shaping its norms, some states threaten the right to freedom of religion and belief. Other states passively acknowledge this right, but do little to enable the moral, ethical, spiritual and intellectual flourishing of women. Very few states seek out communities of faith for active participation, especially of female leaders. Likewise, there is little recognition of how influential faith communities are in shaping perceptions of male-female relationships.

We call on all Member States to acknowledge the influence of faith communities and pursue partnerships with them to implement the Beijing Action Plan for the flourishing of all society.

Breakdown of relationship in the home

Global statistics still record that one in three women experience physical and / or sexual violence, mostly by an intimate partner. This remains unchanged since the Beijing Declaration. The continued global pandemic of domestic violence is a scourge on our societies and churches. Domestic violence fundamentally undermines progress to gender equality and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The Covid pandemic revealed how entrenched the abuse of power is in the home by men, as the numbers of women who were abused rose dramatically.

In Kenya, the Institute for Faith and Gender Empowerment started when one Anglican leader changed his own beliefs in the inferiority of women after reading theological books that explained the Biblical view of equality between men and women. He set out in equal partnership with his wife to work for the transformation of masculinities across his nation. The Institute he founded acknowledges that traditional depictions of women's inferiority can lead to early marriages, domestic and sexual abuse, and blame culture. The Institute now works with men to study the scriptures and demonstrate the equal value God gives to men and women. From that, they see values, perceptions and patterns of life change within and beyond the Church.

Through speaking the language of faith, they have been able to target the heart language and value systems that underpin healthy relationships within the home and beyond.

Breakdown of relationship in societal conflict

The most recent reporting from UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights in the Democratic Republic of Congo documented an 11 per cent increase in conflict-related sexual violence between June 2023 and May 2024, compared with the same period the previous year. Twenty seven per cent of this violence was committed by states actors. The rising violence and state culpability seen in more conflicts this year undermine the Beijing Action Plan, violating women's dignity and hopes for gender harmony.

In DRC, South Sudan and Burundi, Mothers' Union is working with women in conflict and post-conflict situations to run literacy, financial education and agriculture programmes, each of which have significant positive impacts on relationships between the genders. In Burundi, programmes have run over 20 years, during and after the civil war, as churches and church organisations have remained with their people, committed to bringing transformation. Over that period, the programme has accredited nearly 150 thousand people, 89 per cent of whom are women, as literate - a contribution of 2.9 per cent of the estimated adult population of Burundi who can read and write. 86 per cent of female and 90 per cent of male programme participants also reported reduced domestic violence.

In DRC and South Sudan, similar programmes have been used to change perceived acceptability of rape and the Church's readiness to speak out about systemic use of sexual violence in conflict. In South Sudan, Mothers' Union uses Bible studies to show the societal impact of rape and is already having a profound impact on attitudes and behaviours in men and women. In 2023, when the Archbishop of Canterbury made a Pilgrimage of Peace to South Sudan with the Pope and Moderator of the Church of Scotland, the value of women and the need to end sexual violence in conflict were major features of his sermon, delivered to 70,000 gathered community representatives and politicians.

Faith communities often reach where states and multilaterals cannot - particularly in situations of conflict. They provide shared, culturally-appropriate frameworks through which trust is built with participating women and men and transformation can take place. More of this transformative potential could impact our societies and the systemic norms of conflict if there was an increase in targeted and effective partnerships between faith communities and states.

Links between relationships in the home and wider society

Domestic and systemic violence against women are linked. Both have roots in patriarchal norms, compounded, in some cases, by the misreading of scripture. Domestic abuse impacts the children, wider family, community, Church and society, throughout the generations. There are life-long consequences of domestic violence, which erodes gender equality and justice, including the continuing power imbalance between women and men and exclusion from decision-making spaces. The World Health Organisation has also identified the increased risks of self and other-directed violence in children exposed to violence in the home, leading to repeated cycles of abuse. In each instance, the potential for society to live cohesively together and work as a flourishing democracy is dramatically impacted.

Positive connections between relationships in the home and society are also possible. In the Mothers' Union programmes in South Sudan, Burundi and DRC, the most reported improvement by the female participants was an increase in self-esteem

(noted by 99 per cent). This gave participants the confidence to run their households differently, earn and communicate their needs and hopes. This personal growth led to significant public influence for the majority of participating women, who adopted leadership positions in the community, public space or Church. These changes also translated into improvements in male-female relationships, because the programme worked with men within the same faith system, and offered women environments of mutual support, belonging and identity, which enhanced their resilience.

Effective partnership with communities of faith

Communities of faith are important actors in restoring broken relationships, including between women and men, because of the significant spiritual resources that are involved in truth-telling, justice-seeking, healing, hope, forgiveness and rebuilding. Yet states have often not drawn effectively on the potential contributions of faith communities and faith communities have sometimes viewed state-approved methodologies, timescales and outcomes with suspicion. Wisdom is needed in how each engages with the other. If wisdom is exercised and partnerships pursued, the impact can be that more men and women are reached, achieving sustainable outcomes and healthy relationships across multiple levels of society.

The Anglican Consultative Council, and its associated organisations and movements, stands ready to partner with states, and to convene other faith groups in similar partnerships, to act for the flourishing of all women and men, reversing the regression on outcomes from the Beijing Platform for Action. We call on all states to engage actively with faith actors at every level of society and recognise them publicly in implementation plans associated with the Beijing Platform for Action.
