RE: The 65th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (Priority theme: Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls; Review theme: Women's empowerment and the link to sustainable development)

Written Statement from the Anglican Consultative Council, March 2021

The Anglican Communion is the world's third largest Christian communion, comprised of forty-one provinces across 165 countries representing 85 million members, all working in various capacities to transform unjust structures of society, challenge violence, pursue peace and reconciliation, safeguard creation and act in loving service. The Anglican Consultative Council welcomes the theme of the 65th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

2020 has seen widespread regression in gender equality. COVID-19 exposed a 'shadow pandemic' of domestic violence, with many women forced to isolate with their abusers. Socioeconomic impacts have eroded women's rights further, hindering progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and placing women's and girls' lives at risk.

Gender justice and equality are inherent in our Christian value of upholding human dignity, and our churches are a living witness to our belief that all are equally made in the image of God and should enjoy the same freedoms and rights. The Anglican Communion remains committed to challenging the erosion of women and girls' rights and supporting Agenda 2030's vision of leaving no one behind. We submit the following priorities and recommendations to the Commission:

Engaging with faith communities

Faith plays a role in the lives of 80 percent of the world's population. Faith leaders have social and spiritual capital and are often trusted by communities as sources of information and support, which has been crucial during the COVID-19 crisis. Partnership with faith actors positively influencing and supporting their communities is of increasing importance.

Rising levels of domestic abuse and economic insecurity, unaffordable or inaccessible health care and services, and the risk of misinformation is a toxic combination that marginalises further those impacted by gender injustice and other forms of oppression. Faith communities and places of worship are often central to communities, providing refuge, education and services that transform the lives of individuals and address harmful behaviours and attitudes. Churches may exist in communities isolated from other state and civic organisations, making them important partners of governments and international organizations in reaching all sections of society, achieving gender justice, and addressing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Women's full and effective participation and decision-making: a church perspective

Barriers to women's inclusion in decision-making exist across society and are exacerbated in times of crisis. Gendered attitudes, assumptions, stereotypes and expectations can shape negative behaviours and impose burdens on all people. UN Women recently reported that women and girls have faced unique hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic, yet they are excluded from decision-making in response and recovery efforts.

The full and effective inclusion of women in institutions and leadership is an active conversation within many faith communities, including the Anglican Communion. Churches can be examples of including women in public life and decision-making. The Anglican Consultative Council works to ensure equal representation of women in all decision-making bodies, and in 2019 theologians from six continents produced study materials for theological education institutions on just relationships between women and men, girls and boys.

Anglican networks uplift women's leadership at different levels of church structures. The International Anglican Women's Network consists of grassroots Anglicans working towards the equal participation, safety and wellbeing of women by fostering best practices and connection. The Mothers' Union - the world's oldest and largest women's movement with four million members - has its roots in the Anglican Communion and is integrated within church structures. Parishes in the Province of Aotearoa, Polynesia, and New Zealand engage younger congregants, particularly girls, in church activities, including decision-making bodies, from a young age to normalise the inclusion of women. Churches also set quotas for women and girl representatives in committees and leadership positions.

Ending gender-based violence: combating the shadow pandemic

Women and girls have experienced increased vulnerability and gender-based violence during the pandemic, including rising domestic abuse, teenage pregnancy and early and forced child marriage. Faith actors have taken responsibility to inform their communities' responses to these challenges. For example, the secretariat of the Anglican Consultative Council published a resource titled, Domestic Abuse and COVID-19: How Churches can respond, which equips Anglican churches to identify, support, and resolve issues of domestic abuse.

Combatting and preventing gender-based violence is not new to the Anglican Communion. Churches host spiritual recovery workshops for survivors of abuse or trauma and provide psychosocial support in conflict or post-conflict communities. The Anglican Diocese of Melbourne established a Primary Prevention programme to equip church leaders and communities to respond to and help prevent violence against women through training, mentorship, and addressing the drivers of violence. The Episcopal Anglican Church in Brazil published a primer on preventing and combating gender-based violence, which was translated into three languages and adapted for digital use during lockdown. The Anglican Consultative

Council and the Mothers' Union recently submitted a report to the Special Rapporteur on violence against women on gender-based violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Women and sustainable development: responding to human need

COVID-19 threatens to reverse years of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, and women and girls will be impacted by setbacks in all areas of Agenda 2030. As decent work is compromised and women's economic insecurity rises, women may take on a greater part of the care burden, both on the frontlines as essential workers and within their families, and are more prone to domestic abuse. This risks pushing women back into regressive gender norms and domestic roles.

The sustainable development agenda cannot be achieved without the fulfilment of women's rights and gender justice. Anglicans are called to respond to human need by loving service and caring for those most left behind, as highlighted in our Five Marks of Mission. Through churches, communities, and development agencies, Anglicans seek to be a blessing to the world, including through our contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Women Development and Service Society of the Diocese of Raiwind in Pakistan has been providing vocational and midwifery training to young and married women for the last thirty-one years, building women's capacity to access the job market, or start their own businesses, bringing transformational change to their families and communities. The Anglican Church of Southern Africa held a consultation on the Sustainable Development Goals in 2020 to explore synergies between the Goals and Anglican mission. The outcome was a resolution calling all dioceses to increase engagement with Agenda 2030, particularly in combatting gender-based violence (Goal 5) and climate change (Goal 13).

Many states, including Small Island Developing States, are dealing with concurrent pandemics: climate change and COVID-19. In 2020, Melanesia experienced Cyclone Harold, causing extensive damage and loss of life. The Anglican Church activated its Emergency Operations Centre, cleaning debris and deploying medical teams to provide COVID-19 awareness and spiritual encouragement to survivors. Climate change affects all parts of the Anglican Communion and is a core concern in our work to safeguard the integrity of God's creation. Ensuring that women, especially indigenous women, are on the frontlines of responses to climate change is vital.

Recommendations

We urge Member States, UN agencies, and civil society to:

1. Implement fully the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and all other existing agreements and commitments for gender equality and the protection of women's rights with no regression or exception.

2. Recognise the positive role of faith communities building gender just relationships, transforming social norms and achieving gender equality; consider them key stakeholders and partners in humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts as well as in combating the multi-faceted impacts of COVID-19.

3. Eliminate barriers for women's full and equal representation in leadership and decision-making, including ending discrimination and gender biases in local and national laws, policies, and customs, and eradicating harmful practices that perpetuate violence against women and girls.

4. Invest in prevention of and response to violence against women and girls, including addressing underlying root causes of violence, like patriarchy, misogyny, and discrimination; challenging societal structures that benefit from the systemic oppression of women and girls; and providing safe and accessible spaces where women and girls can seek refuge and take legal action against their abusers.

5. Implement special measures and preferential financing to support women and girls particularly vulnerable to climate change, including in Small Island Developing States, by providing social protection systems, education, employment opportunities, and training in adaptation and mitigation.

6. Include Agenda 2030 in national development plans, paying increased attention to the needs of women and girls, especially indigenous women and women living in poverty, and renew commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals.