

**Statement by
the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal
Church in the United States of America
to the 59th session of the
United Nations Commission on the Status of Women**

9 – 20 March 2015

The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, commonly known as The Episcopal Church, is a Christian denomination of two million members in 17 countries and a member province of the worldwide Anglican Communion. As Christians, we believe that all of humanity is created in God's image and that women and men are created equal before God. Our scriptures, the way of Jesus Christ and our Baptismal Covenant call us to "seek and serve Christ in all persons", regardless of gender.

These moral underpinnings lead us to applaud, affirm, support and uphold the efforts of member states and United Nations agencies in empowering women and girls, particularly through the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995 and other equally important instruments. Episcopalians have accompanied the United Nations in furthering this work before, at and since Beijing. Episcopalians have published, studied, gathered, advocated and campaigned on gender discrimination, domestic and gender violence, sex trafficking, gender budgeting, election advocacy, word studies, and gender parity, both within our Church and at the United Nations.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action brought progress to our societies by raising the level of consciousness and creating a foundational framework with twelve critical areas by which indicators for empowerment could be analyzed. This progress includes heightened awareness and more initiatives and legislation to address gender violence and in law enforcement and courts standing against domestic violence, reduction in female genital mutilation/cutting, greater access to primary education for girls within the context of the Millennium Development Goals, and more readily available and accessible health care, including for reproductive health. We applaud improved protection of human rights for women and girls in general and for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual individuals. We celebrate the improved treatment of girls and the greater access they enjoy to educational and career opportunities.

While celebrating these achievements, we soberly recognize that persistent gaps continue to impede gender equality and empowerment of women and girls in the following four Beijing critical areas, and request urgent action by member states.

Violence against women

Gender violence continues to plague societies worldwide. Despite advances in raising awareness, education is still needed about its prevalence and scope,

including but not limited to sexual violence; violence as a tactic of war; intimate partner/domestic violence; sex, labor and other forms of human trafficking; sexual exploitation and psychological, physical and sexual abuse. Education about the nature of gender violence must also include gender discrimination which, as a root cause, demeans and diminishes the full dignity of girls and women and increases their risk of violence. Particular attention is needed in communities where gender violence is pronounced: indigenous populations, ethnic minority communities, immigrants and the poor.

We observe the detrimental influence of media, advertising, entertainment and fashion industries in indirectly promoting or glorifying gender violence through sexual commodification, objectification and trivialization of girls and women; distorting portrayals of women with disabilities, women of color, minorities and indigenous women; glorifying violence; and underreporting or distorted reporting of incidents of violence, especially domestic violence.

We ask member states to:

- partner with the United Nations and civil society in conducting awareness and educational campaigns about gender violence and its prevalence, including root causes such as social and cultural beliefs and sexism;
- strengthen and extend protection to all victims of violence, increase funding to victim support programs and shelters in local communities, train law enforcement personnel on appropriate responses to domestic violence and ensure effectiveness of restraining orders;
- ensure speedy and just intervention by law enforcement and the judicial system in communities where domestic violence is particularly pronounced, including but not limited to indigenous, minority, immigrant and poor populations;
- prioritize responses to human trafficking and continue collaboration with international and national agencies and civil society;
- universally eradicate female genital mutilation/cutting;
- universally ratify and implement measures related to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and its Optional Protocol;
- study and report on the ways in which media, advertising, entertainment and fashion industries exacerbate violence against women and girls and support campaigns to educate and advocate against this culture of violence.

Education and training of women

While we applaud the progress in access to primary education, some factors still prevent access to education and thus women and girls reaching their full flourishing as individuals and as contributors to their societies. Lack of education is a contributing factor leading to and resulting from gender discrimination. Many countries lack funding for public education. Even in developed countries, higher, tertiary-level education is financially out of reach or affordable to only the upper socio-economic echelons. Girls often are required to drop out of school earlier than

boys because of family needs to stay at home and help with unpaid domestic work, or else they must leave school at an early age to marry.

We urge member states to:

- create educational policies and awareness campaigns promoting education for women and girls;
- increase public education funding for women and girls;
- invest in distance learning educational models for women and girls unable to access formal schooling facilities due to distance, disability or inability to leave home;
- require education addressing gender discrimination and demonstrating the cultural and socio-economic well-being that results from women's and girls' education, with leadership training for women and girls and cultural awareness training for men and boys;
- offer economic incentives to needy families who might otherwise pull girls out of school to attend to unmet domestic needs.

Women and health

Access to affordable health care is another challenge for women and girls. Unemployed, poor, elderly and rural women may find health care programs inaccessible and the cost of medications beyond their means. Women with disabilities, with diseases such as HIV/AIDS, undocumented migrants and refugee women and ethnic minorities may find that medical care is denied or withheld. Cultural, religious and societal beliefs threaten to deny women the ability to participate in choices related to their bodies and in particular, their sexual and reproductive health. As a result, laws and programs are being rolled back or restricted in some areas. Addressing underlying beliefs through education and messaging must accompany financial and programmatic support for health care. In some areas, resource extraction, such as mining, endangers the health of women and girls and their families.

We urge member states to:

- prioritize funding for health care for women and girls;
- extend health care and medical care facilities to vulnerable or marginalized communities through investment and improved access;
- ban environmental practices affecting the health of women and girls;
- improve access to full sexual and reproductive health provisions, including family planning and disease prevention;
- promote public health awareness and education to reduce stereotypes and discrimination.

Women in power and decision-making positions

Although access to education and health care for women and girls has improved, major obstacles persist in realizing women's leadership in political, commercial and academic realms. Women seeking professional advancement may be held back by financial barriers, insufficient resources for single-family households, undervaluing and lack of recognition of women's unpaid work contributions to society, lack of affordable childcare and income inequality between women and men. Those who succeed are subject to personalized attacks based on physical attributes and perceived suitability as a wife and mother rather than for their competence. As a result of these gaps in representation, women are unable to effectively represent themselves and their needs, fewer role models emerge to encourage their advancement and women remain dependent on men, which affects their ability to provide for their families and, when necessary, leave violent and abusive relationships.

We ask member states to:

- continually educate citizens regarding gender discrimination, which demeans and diminishes the full dignity of women and girls and negatively impacts all of society;
- reduce the gaps in representation by women leaders at all levels and in all sectors, including through the establishment of quotas;
- investigate and provide statistical reports on the gaps in economic parity between women and men and close remuneration gaps.

As people of faith, Episcopalians especially are called to lift up women and girls who frequently are marginalized or forgotten: women with disabilities, women of color, women from ethnic minorities, women refugees and immigrants, girls displaced by war or sent abroad by themselves, lesbians and transgender individuals, indigenous women, older women, enslaved and trafficked women, women who are heads of single-family households, and women in developing countries. We are also called to prophetically witness to unjust systems of oppression, often interlocking, which affect all people, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation. We call upon member states and the United Nations to continue the progress realized since Beijing and uphold the values, principles, legislation and implementation of programs for gender justice and gender equality, which ultimately benefit all of humanity.