**G20 Interfaith Forum, October 15th**

**Plenary 3: “Empowerment of youth, women, and vulnerable people”**

**Moderator:** Dr. Agnes Abuom (Moderator of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches)

**Speakers: H.E. Rev. Kjell Magne Bondevik** (Former Prime Minister of Norway and Founder and Executive Chair of the Oslo Center), followed by **Mr. Ahmad Alhendawi** (Secretary-General of the World Organization of the Scout Movement), **Dr. Hala Al-Tuwaijri** (Secretary General of the Family Affairs Council, The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Head of the Women’s Empowerment Team at G20 Riyadh), **Prof. Ursula Basset** (Professor at Pontificia Unviversidad Católica, Argentina), **Chief Rabbi Schlomo Hofmeister** (Chief Rabbi of the Jewish Community in Vienna, Austria), **Prof. Dr. Azza Karam** (Secretary General of Religions for Peace), **H.E. Mahmoud Mohieldin** (UN Envoy for Financing for Development), **H.E. Pramila Patten** (Special Representative of the UN Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict), and **H.E. Dr. Aminata Touré** (Former Prime Minister of Senegal).

**Panel description**: This plenary focuses on the role and potential of religious actors and communities to contribute to the creation of structures which more effectively contribute to the empowerment of marginalized and vulnerable groups, particularly women and youth. It will also explore how religious communities are collaborating with political decision-makers to develop and implement policies that promote equality of opportunity, especially for underserved groups. Equal opportunities for all will allow for a thriving global society. However, persistent social and economic inequalities between men and women continue to shape the reality in education, economic independence, health provision and security. Religious communities and institutions are influential partners when it comes to shaping these areas and have, in some cases, a long history to draw upon

**Summary and highlights**

Forum speakers from religious, civil society and governmental institutions urgently called for action on issues of unemployment, financial exclusion, domestic violence and lack of empowerment which particularly impact women, youth and minority communities. Many echoed that this can be achieved with the help of interfaith dialogue and collaboration.

**Dr. Agnes Aboum**

* Conflict has many sources and when religion is involved it is a lie because it is a misuse of religion.
* The issue of gender at WCC has been challenging and policies have been put in place – but you cannot force a member to abide – but we have put these things forward.

**Dr. Hala Al-Tuwaijri**

* Highlighted the pressing need for financial inclusion of women in order to allow them to “live, work and thrive.”
* Religious institutions are a motor that enhances and consolidates values and ethics in societies which contributes to the process of development and progress of society.
* “980 million women around the globe are not able to receive access to basic financial services,”
* “Countries will not be able to achieve their economic development goals without the overall participation of women in all areas.”

**Mr. Ahmad Alhendawi**,

* Many of the problems facing the world today – rising inequalities, loss of jobs, unequal access to education and the threat of climate-related disasters – will fall on the next generation.
* Policies must include young voices and ideas.
* “This is a youthful problem. Half of the world’s population are under the age of the 25. We have seen how young people are taking to the streets voicing their concerns and forming a global movement that this is a time for action and a time to prioritize the SDGs.”

**Prof. Ursula Basset**

* Well intentioned, gender empowerment narratives are too limited, not allowing for diverse forms of feminism and freedom of choice
* Not all women subscribe to feminism or empowerment lessons, but those too should be included and spoken to in policy and advocacy
* “We owe it to women to have real equality. Empowerment means to empower every woman, taking her for what she is and not depriving her of her religious values or beliefs, valuing the uniqueness in every domain and not downplaying the role of women who do not conform to the norm.”

**Azza Karam**

* When religions come together, they can boost the momentum of women’s empowerment, “a lesson we learnt over decades of work.”
* It’s important to see women as more than just “victims” but rather as a significant portion of the population which possesses immense strength and capability.
* “I happen to think that women are not always the most vulnerable or the most victimized all the time.”
* Women are also a remarkable power potential and some of the most critical actors in the civic space and the intergovernmental space.
* Social cohesion is one of the first things to go during a major crisis like the pandemic

**Rabbi Schlomo Hofmeister**

* Redistribution of power is needed to ensure that all members of society – including women, youth, minority and marginalized communities - are given a say in their future.
* “Empowering those who suffer from inequality because of an unequal distribution of power can only be achieved when those claiming power and supremacy over others are willing and prepared to give it up.”
* Various and unrelated cultural phenomena which are wrongly identified as part of religion found in populism must be refocused onto true values and ideals to contribute to the empowerment of those most disadvantaged

**H.E. Dr. Aminata Touré**

* In Africa the continent that has been less infected so far, opposite of what people predicted.
* The catastrophic scenario that was announced did not happen, it was expected Africa could not handle it
* This resulted from African leadership building on our experience of managing pandemics in the past

**Recommendations**

* Participants called for governments, faith-based and civil society organizations to collaborate together to fight racism and gender discrimination issues, many of which are endemic of deep-rooted structural issues and human rights violations.
* Faith-based organizations, speakers said, have a crucial role to play in fighting discrimination as most religions acknowledge equality among human beings.
* Participants acknowledged that textbooks in classrooms are critical, as the authors’ biases - and those of their superiors - will be woven into the fabric of the curriculum
* To counter this, emphasis must be put on improving teachers’ religious literacy, broadening their view beyond their own personal experiences.
* Both private, public, and religious schools should have an interfaith focus and class offerings
* Religious leaders to support and fund the development of one-page lesson plans in multiple languages which explore diverse academic, spiritual texts, inviting teachers and school systems to use them in their classrooms.

**What’s missing**

* No mention of LQBTQ community
* Not much talk on engaging boys and men in gender and women’s empowerment issues
* Need concrete examples of how progressive moderates of faith can combat religious extremism and fundamentalism (particularly that puts women and vulnerable groups at risk)
* How to engage faith leaders and orgs in speaking out fervently against rising GBV in their nation and communities
* When talking about GBV, the issue of consent is missing. Youth should be taught in schools from a young age what it is to respect another person and their bodily autonomy.