

Strengthening advocacy for women's human rights



Demonstrators sing and chant as they march through the streets of Durban, South Africa, demanding better funding for HIV and AIDS treatment around the world. The demonstration took place at the International AIDS Conference in Durban. Photo:Paul Jeffrey

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Delegates from around the world will this week explore strategies that lay and religious leaders and other civil society actors can use to increase the impact of faith-based advocacy for women's human rights.

The 50 participants in the annual faith-based organizations' (FBOs) advocacy training on women's human rights at the Ecumenical Center in Geneva will discuss protection challenges faced by human rights' activists and FBO's response. The role of women in radicalized contexts, the rise of fundamentalism and the instrumentalization of religion will also feature at the 4-7 July training, coinciding like each year, with a session of the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), Church of Sweden, Finn Church Aid, Mission 21, Swiss Peace and the World Council of Churches are co-hosting the event.

Panelists will interact with participants around the impact of religious fundamentalism on human rights' advocacy and exchange best practice initiatives by FBOs.

The president of the Guatemala Lutheran Church Rev. José Pilar Alvarez Cabrera, a long-standing human rights' defender in his home country, will present the church's experiences and commitment to advocacy for human rights.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are on the training agenda. The aim is to establish common ground in understanding how to strengthen women's agency and build capacity among FBOs to create safe spaces and offer a theological perspective on this often sensitive matter.

Participants will also explore how to engage men and boys in confronting traditions and practices that lock women and men in gender roles that lead to discriminatory and harmful practices. Discussion on gender diversity within FBOs will complete the SRHR focus.

In its third year, the advocacy training is aimed at getting local FBOs acquainted with UN mechanisms such as the CEDAW Convention and the processes of drafting shadow reports. Staff from the LWF, the WCC and other host organizations will accompany delegates to the UN offices in Geneva for a review of the situation of women's human rights in Thailand, at the 67th CEDAW session, taking place 3-21 July.

"One of the important discussions this year will be the changing trends in women's human rights' protection and how civil society can hold states accountable for the engagement taken within the UN framework," says Maria-Cristina Rendón, program assistant at the LWF Women in Church and Society program.

"With every training, we enlarge the circle of activists, religious leaders and staff working with FBOs to understand that advocacy and civil society initiatives on the one hand and faith and religious beliefs on the other can and must dialogue. It takes the strength of both dimensions to ensure that concepts like 'tradition' or 'culture' can be challenged to ensure human dignity and justice for women and men," Rendón added.

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