

Girls in School; Girls with Dignity: Our commitment during the 16 Days and beyond

For the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence, we have joined together as a faith-based coalition to focus on ending violence against girls and young women in education, confident that all activism promoting equal and respectful relationship is good news, all year round, wherever and whoever we are.

The 16 Days begin on 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and end on 10 December, Human Rights Day.

Education provides the foundation for girls' development on their journey toward adult life. It plays a vital role in helping women realise their potential economically, politically and socially. But school is often not a safe place for a girl.

Girls in School

For girls around the world, exercising their right to education can be full of risk. They are at risk from violence on the journey to and from school and in the classroom itself. This violence may take the form of aggressive sexual behaviour, intimidation and physical assault by boys, sexual advances by male students and teachers, corporal punishment and verbal abuse.

In most parts of the world, our religious institutions are major contributors to education, providing schools, colleges, universities and theological seminaries. Our sacred texts and faith traditions give us stories that empower and give voice to women and girls. We have myriad opportunities to teach and embed values that recognise and promote the equal dignity of girls and boys, young women and young men.

Our schools and all our educational institutions can practice zero tolerance of sexual and gender-based violence and teach young women and men the full meaning of sexual and reproductive rights. We can work with families and wider communities to ensure that girls can complete their education, and are safe as they travel to and from school.

Girls out of School

Every girl has an inherent dignity as God's creation. Making sure that every girl has access to education honours that dignity. Yet in spite of promises made to children in many international conventions and national constitutions, one in five adolescents and one in 11 primary school-aged children are excluded from the classroom. Fifteen million girls are unlikely to set foot inside a classroom (UIS/UNICEF 2015). Girls who miss out on education or who leave school too soon are less likely to develop themselves and their families and communities. They are less likely to have any say in what happens to their lives and their bodies. They are more likely to live in poverty, be trafficked and prostituted, be exposed to HIV and sexually transmitted infections, be coerced into early marriage, have pregnancies at an early age, and to die or suffer serious physical injury during childbirth.

Faith leaders and the whole faith community have a vital role to play in advocating for compliance of the universal right to education and for national policy - adequately resourced - for the prevention and elimination of violence against girls in school. The new Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning) and 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) provide fresh impetus for this.

Thursdays in Black

Join us as we link with a growing global movement of women and men who lament violence against women and girls and show their solidarity and commitment to ending it by wearing black every Thursday. The Thursdays in Black website <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/thursdays-in-black-zero-tolerance-for-violence-against-women> link to information and tools to help us, including resources on girls' safety in and out of school.

We are using each of the three Thursdays during the 16 Days:

- to gather sacred narratives from the Christian and Islamic traditions that empower and give voice to girls and women
- to tell the stories of initiatives by our faith institutions or faith-based organisations to end violence against girls and women
- to promote a prayer of lament and confession and a prayer of blessing relating to the girl child.

Ending Early and Forced Marriage

We recognise the connection between early and forced marriage and the lack of access to education for girls. We seek to interact with faith leaders and schools both in Muslim and Christian contexts with a view to providing safe spaces for girls and support for families faced with the economic necessity and/or the tradition of marrying their daughters at an early age. The role that faith leaders and religious belief can play in raising awareness and protecting girls is at the core of our initiative. This will be reflected in a series of short videos, stories of local initiatives, and other resources that can be downloaded here: www.genderjustice-interfaith.net.

NoXcuse

The NoXcuse campaign gives an additional faith dimension to discussions around violence against women. Testimonies have been gathered from Church leaders that reflect both the negative and positive roles that the Church plays in addressing violence. See <http://www.worldywca.org/Events/Week-Without-Violence/2014-Week-Without-Violence-Toolkit> for the NoXcuses website and advocacy toolkit.

See here : www.genderjustice-interfaith.net for many other resources and updates throughout the 16 Days.

Anglican Communion, Church of Sweden, Finn Church Aid, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Lutheran World Federation, Mission 21, World Communion of Reformed Churches, World Council of Churches, World Young Christian Women's Association (YWCA).