



IN BRIEF



# RELIGION AND GENDER EQUALITY

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## The Role of Faith-Based Organizations, Institutions and Actors in Achieving Gender Equality Through the Implementation of Agenda 2030

UN Women collaborated with the World YWCA to convene a discussion on religion and gender equality at the 6th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Led by UN Women Executive Director, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, and moderated by the General Secretary of the World YWCA, Nyaradzai Gumbonzvanda, the discussion, building on the important work being done by faith actors and feminist faith organizations, sought to identify: (a) entry points for narratives of faith that foster the realization of gender equality; (b) strategies for building coalitions on faith and gender equality; and (c) ways to accelerate the implementation of Agenda 2030.

Invited speakers included Bani Dugal, Principal Representative of the Bahá'í International Community; Margareta Grape, Senior Advisor, Church of Sweden; Crystal Lee, Founder and Executive Director of United Natives, Inc.; Sarojini Nadar, Full Professor and Programme Leader of the Gender and Religion Programme, University of KwaZulu-Natal; and Marwa Sharafeldin, Musawah Board Member and Co-Founder of the Network for Women's Rights Organizations in Egypt. Respondents were Ulrich Nitschke, Head of Sector, Program on Values, Religion, and Development, GIZ and Head of PARD Secretariat, the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development; and Omair Paul, UN Representative for Muslims for Progressive Values.

This document outlines the key issues discussed, the challenges that remain to be addressed, and puts forward recommendations for UN Women's engagement with faith-based actors as critical partners in the achievement of Agenda 2030.

## Setting the Stage for a New Conversation

Over two decades have passed since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action. Despite legislative, social and economic gains for women, no country has achieved gender equality. No country provides the same opportunities to its girls and women as it does to boys and men. As the nations of the world embark on the ambitious task of implementing Agenda 2030, an unprecedented body of resources, both human and material, will be needed to see it through.

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**“Agenda 2030 is about people and planet: the sum total of what creation is about. Both are under severe threat. The people are under a lot of stress—in some cases, because of what has been committed, and in others, because of what has been omitted. But in both cases, faith-based organizations and actors are at the center.”**  
-Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director,  
UN Women

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With its focus on full and timely implementation of the gender equality agenda, UN Women is engaging critical partners across all sectors of society, including youth, men and boys, academics, and the media. It is also engaging faith-based organizations, institutions, and actors—building on a record of fruitful collaboration between these actors and UN agencies over the past two decades. This collaboration is rooted in the understanding that in today’s world, where 8 out of 10 people identify as members of a religious or spiritual community, religion exerts a tremendous influence on women’s and men’s identity, behavior, and beliefs.

Faith-based organizations are among the oldest providers of social and humanitarian assistance, with networks and resources reaching every corner of the globe. Notwithstanding their long history and impressive record, faith-based actors have not yet succeeded in challenging the patriarchal structures, beliefs, and practices that have perpetuated inequality and discrimination against women and girls. While they have promoted spiritual, social, and physical wellbeing, faith-based actors have not always fully engaged in the work of structural transformation required to secure equity and justice for all.

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**“Faith-based organizations, institutions, and communities have a pivotal role to play in both interrogating, challenging and proposing alternative power structures so that we can work across race, class, and gender so as to leave no one behind.”**

**-Lopa Banerjee, Chief, Civil Society Section, UN Women**

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Today, a growing number of feminist faith activists are leading the way in re-examining religious teachings and laws, and advocating for women’s rightful participation in the interpretation of religious doctrine. They are generating new narratives about the role of religion and faith in achieving full equality. UN Women is strategically positioned to facilitate and strengthen the role and contribution of these feminist faith-based actors in the gender responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In collaboration with the UN system and other stakeholders UN women is committed to expanding opportunities for feminist faith-based organizations, institutions and actors to become an integral voice in the social justice movement to achieve gender equality.

## Religion and Gender Equality— The State of Play

The relationship between religion and gender equality is a complex one. Religion plays a vital role in shaping cultural, social, economic, and political norms in many parts of the world. Similarly, gender roles and the status of women and men in society are deeply tied to the manner in which religious texts have been interpreted for centuries by those in positions of authority—positions held predominantly by men. Yet, in sharp contrast to their marked absence at the highest levels of decision-making in religious communities, women play a pivotal role in religious life. Within the family and the community, they implement and embody religious teachings and traditions, and pass these on to future generations.

The role of faith-based organizations, institutions and actors in the gender equality agenda is equally multifaceted: while often rooted in patriarchal traditions, they are also among the powerful agents of social change. The language of faith reaches to the deepest roots of human motivation, mobilizing individuals and communities to sacrifice comfort and material wealth in pursuit of higher goals. In addition, faith-based organizations and institutions are among the largest, most stable, and well-resourced social networks. Many of these networks transcend political, ethnic, and socio-economic boundaries, and have the capacity to coordinate and execute large-scale social action. In many regions of the world, faith-based organizations and institutions, by virtue of their long-standing presence and service in diverse communities, have come to command the trust and respect of local populations.



Faith-based actors have, for many years, engaged in various facets of gender equality work. In the area of gender-based violence, they have worked to raise awareness of the scale and wide-reaching implications of such violence; they have worked on violence prevention, and provided survivors with services such as counseling, shelter, and legal assistance. In their efforts to eliminate harmful practices, including female genital mutilation and child marriage, they have worked with institutional and community-based religious leaders to influence attitudes and behaviors, and to advocate for girls' and women's health and security. In the field of maternal and child health, faith-based actors have been among the primary providers of basic health care and obstetric services in underserved and remote areas, and in regions facing conflict and humanitarian crises.

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**“We have ignored faiths in the development world for more than 60 years. We said, ‘Leave your faith outside if you want to negotiate development with us.’ Now we have to shift. We say, ‘We take seriously what your beliefs are.’” -Ulrich Nitschke, Head of Sector, Program on Values, Religion, and Development, GIZ and Head of PARD Secretariat, the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development**

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The World Health Organization estimates that faith-based groups provide as much as 30%-70% of health care in Africa. Such groups have been pivotal in the provision of HIV related services, have been a major source of funding and HIV health care and treatment. In humanitarian crises, faith-based organizations have engaged in reconciliation and peace-building activities, facilitated humanitarian access, supported refugee resettlement, and provided legal counseling, among others. In the field of human trafficking, they have provided care to survivors and endeavored to raise awareness, including within their own faith communities of the scale of modern-day slavery and sexual exploitation.

Yet, despite this level of commitment and engagement across a range of issues related to the wellbeing of women and girls, a number of significant challenges remain. Together, they limit the tremendous potential

of faith-based actors to fully promote the equality of women and men. These challenges include:

**Failure to adequately challenge the structural determinants of gender inequality:** Faith-based actors have worked predominantly within existing cultural and legal frameworks. While the work of faith-based actors has expanded beyond service provision to encompass advocacy efforts, these efforts have not impacted policy and legislation at national and global levels.

**The absence of women in positions of religious authority:** Despite the widespread engagement of women in their religious communities, religious leaders and those authorized to interpret religious doctrine are predominantly men. As such, the processes of the production of religious knowledge largely exclude women. Because of lack of will, capacity, and/or confidence, male leaders have not fully acknowledged or confronted gender inequality and its many implications within their faith communities.

**Alliance between conservative religious forces and political elites:** The proliferation of extremist political ideologies and movements has strengthened patriarchal structures and instrumentalized religion to legitimize discrimination against women and girls. Extremist movements have wielded political and cultural influence to restrict women's freedoms and rights including legal, property, sexual and reproductive rights, their access to education and social services, as well as their right to full participation in civic and political life.



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**Reluctance of secular development organizations to collaborate with feminist faith-based actors:** Despite the effective work of faith-based actors, there is a continuing suspicion and mistrust of these actors by

secular organizations. The highly organized and publicized efforts of faith-based opponents of women’s sexual health and reproductive rights, for example, have contributed to a perception of incompatibility between faith and gender equality, and between faith and human rights. Lack of documentation of feminist faith-based interventions has also hindered greater awareness of these efforts among secular development organizations.

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**“If you bring together those in formal religious leadership, you will not hear the feminist narrative. But if you invite women who can reflect on their situation, you will have a different one.” -Margareta Grape, Senior Advisor, Church of Sweden**

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**Lack of integration of human rights and development processes:** Human rights processes and development processes are not adequately integrated at the level of normative discourse and implementation. As such, human rights standards are not yet an integral part of the design and implementation of development efforts, including the efforts of faith-based and secular development actors.

## CHARTING THE WAY FORWARD

Key insights from the panel discussion staged by UN Women and the World YWCA concerned the role of women in the generation of religious knowledge, initial experiences in coalition building, and the formulation of advocacy strategies.

**Role of women in the generation of religious knowledge:** Throughout much of history, men have interpreted and implemented religious teachings. Today, more and more women are generating new readings of their scriptures, rooted in reflections on lived experience, informed by a human rights framework, and by legal and constitutional parameters. Working from within religious frameworks, women are promoting peace and countering fundamentalist interpretations of religion. Others are challenging women’s human rights abuses, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation, carried out in the name of religion. Their efforts are giving rise to new insights about the relationship between sacred text and human interpretation, and between religious law and human rights. As the pioneering work of movements such as Musawah demonstrates, human rights and religion

need not be at odds with one another. A new jurisprudence is necessary and possible.

**Coalition building:** Faith actors, feminists and social justice movements are forging new partnerships at all levels. Efforts are being made to overcome the barriers, misunderstandings, and mutual suspicion between faith and secular actors in order to tap into the rich possibilities for collaboration. The Faith and Feminism Working Group to the UN, formed with the support of UN Women and UNFPA, has begun a dialogue to forge new avenues for this discussion at the global level. Similarly, the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development, launched in Berlin in February 2016, aims to strengthen and institutionalize cooperation among governments, NGOs, academia and religious actors working on development, peace, and humanitarian assistance. A key task for emerging coalitions is to bridge the international agenda and decision-making with the lived reality of millions of women and girls. Coalitions must also seek to more systematically engage men and boys, not only as agents of gender equality but as its co-beneficiaries.

**Advocacy strategies:** There is wide recognition that civil society will drive the change needed to shift attitudes, policy, and practice in the direction of gender equality. Efforts to influence intergovernmental processes and targeted advocacy will need to address local, national and international-level normative discourse as well as implementation measures. Faith actors will need to interrogate existing power structures and address barriers to gender equality, including poverty, unpaid care work, unequal pay, and social marginalization.

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**“All of our work has a long way to go. How, then, do we allow the giftedness of both perspectives to come to the table—aware of the history and the scope of the work on both sides?” - Harriet Olson, General Secretary, United Methodist Women**

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The Faith and Feminism Working Group to the UN, for example, is targeting the identification of structural barriers to gender equality. By bringing together feminist and faith actors, it seeks to expand the space for constructive dialogue and to foster more effective analysis, strategy, and advocacy for the implementation of Agenda 2030. As the Executive Director of UN Women noted, “If we have a policy and an intervention that works for women—it will work for everybody.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

The Sustainable Development Goals constitute a bold, visionary, and universal agenda for an interconnected global community. Gender equality is an overarching and foundational element of all of the Goals, and one that will require unprecedented social transformation to be fully realized. The religions of the world, embodying a rich heritage of values, teachings, and symbols, represent one of the most powerful cultural and motivational resources for the achievement of this transformation. As such, the articulation of the ideal of gender equality from within the frameworks of the world's diverse religious and faith traditions will be central to the universal achievement of the SDGs. It is imperative, then, to deepen and broaden the engagement with faith movements, organizations, and initiatives that are challenging patriarchal norms and advancing narratives of gender equality—rooted in the ideals of faith and human rights.

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**“We need to democratize the process of producing religious knowledge today. It’s not enough for lawmakers to say ‘This is divine law,’ and then close the discussion.” -Marwa Sharafeldin, Musawah Board Member, Co-Founder – Network of Women’s Rights Organizations in Egypt**

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**Recommendation 1:** Identify, document, and disseminate the work of feminist faith organizations, institutions, and actors who are successfully challenging patriarchal norms and ideologies, and are generating new interpretations of religious beliefs that support the equality of women and men.

**Recommendation 2:** Support knowledge creation and cross-fertilization by bringing together feminist faith actors with secular women’s and social justice organizations to share insights from their experience of challenging patriarchal norms within cultures and legal frameworks.

**Recommendation 3:** Support the integration of efforts on critical aspects of the gender equality agenda by facilitating dialogue and collaboration between feminist faith actors and diverse constituencies, and by

creating opportunities for global, regional, and national secular-faith collaboration.

**Recommendation 4:** Strengthen the capacity of feminist faith actors to translate their insights and experience into policy recommendations that respond to political contexts and realities. Support the unique contributions of faith-based youth advocates for gender equality, noting their particular strengths in intergenerational and multi-sectoral coalition building, as well as their innovative and effective use of social media.

**Recommendation 5:** Build the capacity of feminist faith actors to influence key UN processes such as the Human Rights Council, CEDAW, the High Level Political Forum, and the Universal Periodic Review. Support feminist faith actors to build stronger progressive relationships with Member States and to collaborate with civil society constituencies in the UN spaces and beyond.

**Recommendation 6:** Convene an official side event during annual sessions of the UN Commission on the Status of Women to share and reflect on efforts and accomplishments of faith-based actors in the gender-responsive implementation of Agenda 2030.



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**Recommendation 7:** Create a female religious leadership platform, representative of diverse faith traditions and geographic regions, and one that demonstrates a commitment to the promotion of gender equality. Support the efforts of feminist faith leaders and activists to engage effectively with traditional and on-line media.

## SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE

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### BOX 1

#### Faith and Feminism Working Group to the United Nations

The Faith and Feminism Working Group to the UN brings together feminist and faith-based civil society organizations in order to foster a new discourse— informed by faith and secular perspectives—about the means for the transformation of structures and attitudes that sustain gender inequality. The group grew out of a series of discussions about the intersection between religion and gender equality, which began in 2014 as a joint effort of UNFPA, UN Women, World YWCA and the Bahá’í International Community. The group, formed in 2015 with the support of UN Women and UNFPA, seeks to expand the space for constructive and collaborative discourse among faith-based, feminist, secular, academic and social justice organizations on how to advance the gender equality goals of Agenda 2030. Members of the Working Group represent national, regional, as well as religious and cultural diversity. They support

relevant international human rights institutions and agreements and have a track record of work in the area of gender equality. At CSW 60, the Working Group organized parallel events addressing the faith-feminism divide, faith and feminist advocacy at the UN, women in social media, and reflection on bringing faith and feminist advocacy at CSW 60. For further information, please see the Working Group’s Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/faithfemworkgroup> and Twitter hashtag #FaithFem.

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**“We are moving the 2030 Agenda forward and building a new culture of gender equality to counter the culture of patriarchy. And faith, from which much of the world derives its inspiration, has to be a core part of building that new culture.” - Lopa Banerjee, Chief, Civil Society Section, UN Women**

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### BOX 2

#### Musawah

Musawah (‘equality’ in Arabic) is a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family. Launched in 2009 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Musawah brings together NGOs, activists, scholars, legal practitioners, policy makers and grassroots women and men to promote and protect equality and justice in the family and in society. The movement is led by Muslim women, who seek to publicly reclaim Islam’s spirit of justice. It uses a framework that integrates Islamic teachings, universal human rights, national constitutional guarantees of equality, and the lived realities of women and men. Musawah’s objectives are: to build and share knowledge that supports equality and justice in the Muslim; to build a critical mass of organisations, groups, and individuals that support, use, and promote the Musawah Framework for Action and are empowered to engage in the public discourse on Islam and women’s rights; and to support the work of human rights mechanisms as well as groups and individuals working with these processes at the international, regional, and national levels to advance equality and justice in the Muslim family. “You do not need to be an expert in religious discourse to contribute to the production of this new religious narrative,” says

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Marwa Sharafeldin, Musawah Board Member. “Just by virtue of being a citizen, these laws and policies are affecting your life and you are thus empowered to contribute.” For more information, please see: [www.musawah.org](http://www.musawah.org).



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### BOX 3

#### International Partnership for Religion and Development

The International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) aims to strengthen and institutionalize cooperation between governments, multilateral organisations, NGOs, academia, and religious actors working in the fields of development, peace, interreligious dialogue and humanitarian assistance. PaRD was launched during in February 2016 at the Berlin conference, “Partners for Change: Religions and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” The strategy to partner with religious communities was the outcome of a broad national and international dialogue launched by Gerd Müller, German Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, shortly after assuming office in 2013. The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, in consultation with civil society, religious communities, the United Nations, and the World Bank, created a strategy to guide its cooperation with religious communities. At the launch of the PaRD, Minister Müller stated that, “In these times when religion is used as an argument to justify terrorism and violence, we need to improve cooperation with all

religious communities. We must not leave the field clear for the extremists. Rather, we need to strengthen those who are working for peace and development.” Members of PaRD include the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, UN agencies (UNDP, UN Women, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNAIDS, the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, the World Bank), the World Bank, and national development agencies (USAID, UKAID, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD)). For more information, please see: [www.partner-religion-development.org](http://www.partner-religion-development.org).

**“We would like to have this ongoing conversation and dialogue. We would like to be supported and free from stigma and discrimination and anything that inhibits our female rights and youth participation.”**

**-Crystal Lee, Founder and Executive Director, United Natives Inc.**

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