



Church of Sweden 

United Nations Population Fund



Women, Faith and Human Rights

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Buddhist woman praying in a temple complex, Sri Lanka
Walter Keller / third-eye-photography.de



Introduction

Women, Faith and Human Rights: At the Intersection of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Population Dynamics

Women's rights in general, and sexual and reproductive health and rights in particular, continue to be among the most contentious national, regional and global issues. They are especially so in intergovernmental settings where texts of agreements, outcome documents and statements have to be affirmed by multiple national delegations. The Programme of Action from the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (1994), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action from the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), the annual Commission on the Status of Women and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) are constantly and increasingly challenged by some governmental positions, as well as by some vocal religiously inspired advocacy groups interacting with the UN system.

Issues relating to women, families, children or sexual identity often cause prolonged debates, both in formal discussions among UN Member States and with civil society representatives. The global political space for initiatives aiming at expanding women's human rights, which has certainly expanded since the UN World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985, appears increasingly to be filling with voices that would detract from and attack the agenda of gender equality and women's empowerment. In fact, momentum has grown behind limiting what is regarded as a "secular," "Western-driven" and "liberal" rights agenda.

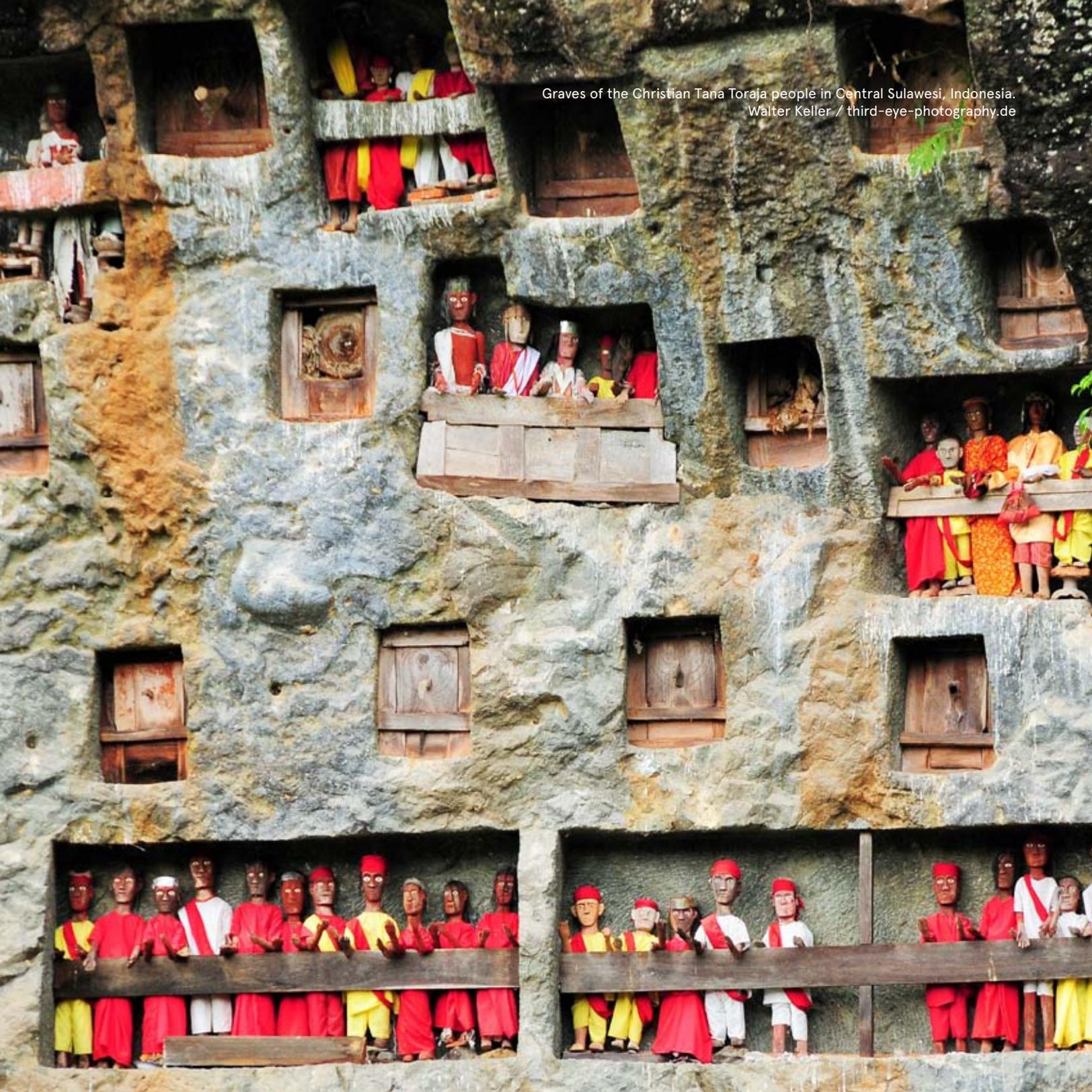
Yet many women and men of faith—believers in their respective religious traditions—do not agree with those who advocate for backing down from the Beijing and Cairo commitments. Many also do not agree with those

who advocate for limitations on women's participation and rights in the recently endorsed global 2030 Agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In fact, religious women advocates of the human rights agenda are rarely heard in global intergovernmental dialogues and negotiations, and when they are present, their voices and perspectives are often on the sidelines rather than integrated within official events. This happens in spite of the important contributions they can—and do—make in public spaces and religious narratives.

The language of faith matters to many, if not most, of the world's peoples. And the language of human rights underpins all international agreements that frame engagement and accountability within and between nations. It is therefore critical to ensure that there is a time and place deliberately set aside for various faith traditions to engage in serious reflections on the interlinkages between human rights and faith, based on solid theological and sociological knowledge, and grounded in actual experiences in human development.

Thanks to the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has been systematically engaging with faith-based partner organizations and religious leaders since December 2013. In 2015, the Church of Sweden and UNFPA co-convened a consultation on "Women, Faith and Human Rights" from 25–26 November, at the Sigtuna Foundation near Stockholm. Participants reviewed a series of papers expressing the knowledge of diverse actors, herein compiled, as part of efforts to mobilize a broad constituency of faith actors who clearly support the human rights agenda—especially sexual and reproductive health issues.

Graves of the Christian Tana Toraja people in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia.
Walter Keller / third-eye-photography.de



“Religious women advocates of the human rights agenda are rarely heard in global dialogues and negotiations, and when they are present, their voices and perspectives are often on the margins of these intergovernmental fora, rather than integrated within the official spaces and events. This happens in spite of the important contributions they can – and do – make in public spaces and in religious narratives.”

“Women, Faith and Human Rights: At the Intersection of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Population Dynamics.” By Margareta Grape and Azza Karam

These faith-based actors were also convened during key intergovernmental moments, around the nexus of religion, sexual and reproductive health, and women's human rights.

The need to position sexual and reproductive health and rights as a critical component of the agenda of diverse religious actors as they work to realize the new development agenda has increasingly emerged as requiring specific and deliberate focus by both secular and faith-based governmental and non-governmental proponents. The consultation enabled a convening of men and women of faith, from different regions, religions and professional backgrounds (theologians, development practitioners, religious leaders, diplomats, human rights activists) to critically assess the nexus between women's rights, human rights and religious values. The discussions and presentations had the following objectives:

- To contribute to a broader and deeper understanding of the relation between faith and human rights, particularly around issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights, and population dynamics.
- To challenge the notion that there is a conflict between faith and human rights in general and women's rights in particular.
- To make the positions of faith-based women in leadership visible, and to convey their experiences and views to UN missions and UN agencies.

- To inspire women leaders to build networks that add an important voice to the global women's movement engaged in active UN advocacy around gender equality and women's and girls' rights.

Written reflections were requested to address four key and recurrent themes: the dissonance between religious institutions and frameworks, and human rights; the links between notions of family and religious values; the extent to which faith-based language could be seen to oppose or to endorse human rights; and the specific role that faith-based actors play in the debates around sexual and reproductive health and rights.

- I -

Religious Traditions or Human Rights?

At times, arguments are put forward suggesting that there is an intrinsic conflict between universal human rights and religious values. This notion is present in the general debates in and around the United Nations on sexual and reproductive health and rights, and also with regard to children's rights.

Combining and contrasting perspectives of academics, community leaders, educators and women religious leaders working from within their respective religious traditions would add value, particularly in contributing to a deeper understanding of how a global normative system interacts with religious values, both positively and negatively.



Muslims in Western Sri Lanka (Puttalam)
Walter Keller / third-eye-photography.de

“Gender equality is therefore a central and explicit component of Bahá’í religious understanding, one which every believer, man and woman alike, strives to understand more deeply and exhibit more fully in his or her life. But the implications of this principle are not confined to the personal and theological alone. Indeed, the Bahá’í writings clearly relate the equality of women and men to social, institutional and legal conditions.”

“The Baha’i Faith and Gender Equality.”

By Bani Dugal

“The right to life, autonomy and equal respect are three of the most basic components of the theological concept of human dignity. Without life, no person can possess dignity or exercise rights. These three components, reflected in a multitude of manners in religious scriptures and traditions, are really the basis of human rights as we understand them today.”

“Hinduism and Women’s Rights: A Dowry of Knowledge.”

By Meera Khanna



“We cannot change the way Jewish women were perceived and the way they lived in the past—but we must change the way they live in the future. This can be done only through contextualizing the past and giving students a way of coping with its difficulties. Changing Jewish education in a direction more sensitive to feminist issues must involve the men as well as the women, the boys as well as the girls. Much more work must be done in rabbinic preparation and in teacher education—both pre-service and in-service training—in order to deal with this challenge.”

“A Jewish Perspective.”
By Deborah Weissman

Family and Religious Values

There are some voices who are actively challenging the UN rights agenda¹. Among them are those who demand that the United Nations adopt the concept of the “natural family.”² They suggest that there has to be a specified reading of Article 16(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and State.”

Historically, “families” have come in many shapes and sizes and forms, and continue to do so. Instances

include grandparents living with grandchildren, extended families, widows or widowers living in family units with children or relatives, polygamous families, rainbow families, and single mom or dad families. Even religious communes are examples of how “family units” are constituted in real life. Those who advocate for the “natural family” want to reduce the rights of those living in other family constellations. Given different perspectives, participants reflected on some of the intersections between religious discourse and family realities.

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1. See the Scanteam report provided to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on February 2013, entitled “Lobbying for Faith and Family: A Study of Religious NGOs at the United Nations.”
 2. A resolution on “Protection of the Family” was brought forward by a core group of 12 Member States (Bangladesh, Belarus, China, Côte d’Ivoire, Egypt, El Salvador, Mauritania, Morocco, Qatar, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia) as a follow-up to a voted resolution

adopted at the Human Rights Council in June 2014. Deliberations on the resolution, which was eventually adopted, proved highly contentious, with some governments arguing that it sets back the advancement of the human rights of individuals, as it seeks to elevate the family as an institution in need of protection, without acknowledging the harms and human rights abuses that are known to occur within families, or recognizing that diverse forms of family exist.

“This model of male authority and female submission contradicts contemporary notions of justice and human rights norms, and cannot be justified on religious grounds. In addition, it is inefficient and unworkable given present day economic and social realities. Many men are unable or unwilling to protect and provide for their families. Women often serve as the protectors of their families, provide essential income for their families and contribute through unpaid labour.”

**“A Muslim Perspective on Challenging the Gap
Between Text, Interpretation and Praxis.”**

By Zainah Anwar

Christian community in Cambodia
Walter Keller / third-eye-photography.de



“There are many networks, organizations and conferences working to find ways of making women’s voices heard in the Catholic Church. Women theologians have been working on change of structures as well as on a new theological discourse since the Second Vatican Council. In my opinion, very little has been obtained on a structural and institutional level. On the other hand, all these women are each day adding new insights, new language and new praxis to the tradition of Christian thought, doctrine and life. And we must not forget that the Church has always been a mirror of the surrounding society. This means that social and political work is urgently needed as well, in order to realize full equality between the sexes.”

“Swedish, Dominance and Woman.”

By Madeleine Fredell

“The following are critical ‘to do’s’ for national, regional and global actors: Recognize that resistance to reform of Muslim family laws persists not simply because of religion, but for other reasons, e.g., patriarchy and political pressure; recognize the diversity of voices within the Muslim community; highlight the egalitarian, gender-sensitive and progressive provisions found in various Muslim family laws; build the capacity and knowledge of state officials and activists on the reformist Islamic discourses that encourage gender-sensitive reforms in Muslim family laws that reflect the new realities of Muslim women and men today..”

“CEDAW and Muslim Family Laws Glocally: Interaction and Common Ground.”

By Marwa Sharafeldin

- III -

Faith-Based Language— Opposing or Endorsing Human Rights?

Questions covered here include what obstacles and possibilities there are for secular and faith-based human rights discourses to become mutually supportive, and to what extent there is value-in faith-based communities' capacities to strengthen the discourse of universal human rights. Some scepticism remains, particularly on behalf of some in the secular

international development world, as to whether local and national leadership of faith-based institutions and communities can indeed join forces to realize rights-based justice work, particularly where it concerns more sensitive issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights.



Buddhist women on their way to the temple
Walter Keller / third-eye-photography.de

“In recent years, the language of gender, reproduction and sexual health has become increasingly coded and polarized ... Gender-based analysis has been seen as an invaluable tool for analysing sociological, economic and political factors related to whether one is born a woman or a man. Today, in many circles, it is just as likely to refer to LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender) rights, or to a view that one’s sex (being born male or female) is not a biological given at all, but rather is determined by cultural factors...”

“Negotiating a Language of Gender.”

By Gillian Patterson

The ancient Buddhist temple of Borobudur, Central Java, Indonesia
(in the picture Muslim school girls visiting the temple)
Walter Keller / third-eye-photography.de



- IV -

Role of Faith-Based Actors to Promote Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and the Development Agenda

There is a debate in some countries on the unique contribution faith-based organizations can offer to promote development. Mainly male faith-based actors are being heard, however, in discussions or reflections with international secular organizations. Women directly involved in faith-based social service work and the bulk of those actually providing developmental services should also have chances to offer their views.

After all, those within faith-based or faith-inspired organizations with “hands-on” experience of service delivery and actual community-rooted activism provide unique perspectives based on their contextual understandings of how they relate their faith to their daily work for justice and health. The question remains: How can women of faith have a voice and a key role in the realization of the 2030 Agenda?



Pilgrim leaving the ancient Hindu Tempel at Prambanan, Central Java, Indonesia
Walter Keller / third-eye-photography.de

“The faith-based institutions will benefit from a deep study of their homogeneity and exclusionist leadership culture, which excludes not only women, but many men too. They will benefit from re-examining the perception of what constitutes excellence in leadership and challenging the norms that determine leadership eligibility. It needs to be asked if there is an alignment of leadership and managerial attributes with gender stereotypes. All diversity initiatives, core to the overall strategy, will help faith-based organizations. But above all, what helps is honesty. This needs to be accompanied by constant and effective communication or a change to honesty and transparency will be resisted by both men and women.”

“Religious Institutions, Power and Female Leadership.”

By Pauliina Parhiala



Indian Women on a beach in India
Walter Keller / third-eye-photography.de

“Contemporary religious dynamics around sexual and reproductive health and rights indicate some progress... [An] example is how feminist theology has brought critical contributions to gender equality and a less sexist reading of Christianity’s sacred texts through simultaneously deconstructing distorted values, patriarchal interpretations of the sacred texts and various aspects of Christian praxis. While these instances and actions record important advances in reflection and action on issues of gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights, there are backlashes consisting of an ever wider range of conservative initiatives on the subject of sexuality among the decision-makers of the Christian churches as well as in the general public.”

“Sexual and Reproductive Rights: Building a Consensus between and among Christian Churches.” By Darli Alves de Souza

Realizing a Faith-Inspired Human Rights Agenda of Sexual and Reproductive Health: Some Reflections and Recommendations

Human dignity—human rights

Many of the participants reflected on the concepts of human dignity and human rights. There is an ambiguity attached to how the concepts are used. Sometimes there is a tendency to talk about human dignity instead of human rights. Over the last years, this has been a noticeable argument in contexts where tradition, culture and religion are stressed as the parameters within which to understand and interpret human rights.

But human dignity is also referenced by those who want to underline that there is no fundamental difference between a religious understanding of human dignity and what is codified in the global frameworks as human rights. This line of argument maintains that all human beings are, by their close relation to the highest, God, the creator, the lord of the Universe, meant to live in dignity. To violate the dignity of a human being is thus equivalent to violating the Divine/God/the creator. In other words, human rights are part of the gift of being human, God-given and an indivisible part of the essence of humanness.

Some would argue that this is a strong justification for non-discriminatory understanding of every

human being's fundamental rights. According to this understanding, the discourse on human dignity has the potential to strengthen the concept of universal rights, rather than to undermine them. The justification for universal human rights is thus to be found not in a negotiated text between treaty parties, but in the basic patterns for what human beings are supposed to be, and with that comes the responsibility to protect the rights and, indeed, dignity, of all human beings.

Fostering a nuanced discussion on the links between human rights and human dignity is a complicated and complex endeavour. Conflicting interests between nations and peoples in rich and poor countries, systematic prejudices such as patriarchy, and ongoing struggles for egalitarian societies charge the atmosphere around such discussion with a general air of distrust. Against the backdrop of critique against the religious (conservative) right's agenda at almost all UN-related meetings, there is a legitimate fear that a more tentative discussion on the relation between human rights and human dignity could strengthen those who aim at limiting the universality of human rights for women, children, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people.

Indeed, religion may well have the potential to give legitimacy to the conservative right's agenda. More often than not, discrimination against women, children and LGBT people is being justified by relating to religion and tradition. But the interaction between tradition, culture and religion is not static. Religion can also have the opposite effect: that of strengthening the argument for human dignity and freedom.

At the heart of the discussion is the question as to whether the discourse on human rights is compatible with that on human dignity. Are human rights instrumental to promote and uphold human dignity, or is the discourse on human dignity a way for those who want to limit the universality of human rights (for women, children and LGBT persons) to justify their opposition to universal and indivisible human rights for all? Or is there a yet-to-be-explored possibility to bridge the alleged Western discourse on human rights and the religiously rooted discourse on human dignity? Could there be a space for jointly exploring if and how universal human dignity (as perceived in many religious traditions) and universal human rights (as codified in the global frameworks) can, in fact, have the potential to express the same fundamental values, although in slightly different languages?

In many ways these questions are a journey of constant exploration. For just as understandings of human rights and their applicability to myriad issues expands, so too do the contexts in which human dignity is demanded continue to evolve and change. To address these issues, therefore, requires the creation of spaces where scholars and faith leaders with deep understanding and knowledge of faith, theology and gender may

get together with human rights experts and political scientists for in-depth discussions.

The tentative conclusion was that all religious teachings, pending interpretation and contextualization, can and do strengthen universal human rights. At the same time, religion is being used to undermine some of these universal rights. It takes systematic work to challenge the discourse on tradition, religion and culture both within the faith communities, and in and around the global meetings where issues related to human rights and human dignity are discussed.

Safe spaces

Many actors who seek to bridge the rights and faith discourses find themselves being constantly questioned. In "secular" spaces, their faith is questioned, while in religious contexts, feminist commitments are questioned. The gathering in Sigtuna had participants from some of the major religious traditions (Christian, both Catholic and Protestant; Muslim; Hindu; Jewish and Bahá'í) and the need for "safe spaces" was expressed by all.

Many emphasized that such spaces allowed for tentative discussions, for voicing and sharing ideas that are not yet totally thought through, for expressing frustrations, but also for sharing discursive and pragmatic successes in argumentation and implementation. Many expressed the need for laboratories and workshops to build and try new alliances, and to articulate new initiatives. Negotiating a position requires reaching joint language and confirming a shared narrative, with all that may entail in terms of compromise. A safe space does not substitute for the policy tables where positions are



Health Center for Dékpo Zone, Aplahoué. District-Dékpo, Benin.
UNFPA/Ollivier Girard

carved and eventually adopted—whether in academia, the NGO world or indeed international development contexts. But it can be a space to jointly test lines of argumentation, with a view to strengthening the discourse supporting women’s rights as it is challenged by religious perspectives and narratives.

Who is invited to speak?

It is not controversial to argue that it is necessary to make the voices of religious leaders heard in and around UN-related processes, including when human rights are discussed and positions are negotiated. There are many initiatives linked to faith and culture to which religious leaders are invited to address some of the crucial issues at stake.

The formal religious leadership is important, and valuable dialogue between global organizations and influential religious leaders should get space and attention. If global organizations only listen to the voices of those who hold formal leadership positions, however, people who can speak to many of the lived realities of faith communities will be absent, and thus, silenced.

Religious communities are organized in different ways, from rather monarchical structures to more independent local entities; some are even corporate look-alikes. Yet, in spite of these differing structures, it is men who predominantly—and formally—govern faith communities. Women, let alone their perspectives and lived realities, are either not present or only minimally so when religious leaders gather around the world to reflect on topical issues. While this may not necessarily reflect a willing lack of inclusion, the fact remains that the absence of women in rooms and tables where

doctrine is shaped, and where statements based on faith are being drafted, will inevitably lead to rather myopic views on the realities of those who are not present or represented around the table.

In many ways governance structures in faith communities are not that different from other male-dominated power structures. The added challenge generated in religious power structures is that they often give legitimacy to positions that confuse theology and cultural traditions, particularly where issues concerning women’s empowerment and gender are involved.

Secular women’s organizations have played a critical role—and continue to—in and around the meetings of the UN Commission on the Status of Women and the CEDAW Committee. There are those who would maintain that the progress of two UN agencies (UN Women and UNFPA) would not have been possible had the women’s movement not been so present and vocal on the global stage over the last 20 years. The formal leadership of Member States of the United Nations would arguably not have agreed on many gender-related issues if they had not been challenged by women’s organizations in their own countries as well as in New York and Geneva.

While women in religious organizations are and have been present in and around the United Nations, they often speak to the “victimhood” and oppression suffered by women, or on idealistic roles and responsibilities of women and men. It remains a rare occurrence to see such women in UN and other international developmental fora who actually occupy

leadership positions as scholars, religious leaders or writers—or any other position that allows them to be “norm shapers.” These women are seldom invited to interact with UN Member States or the general women’s movement. Women leaders with roots in faith communities tend to be seen with suspicion by both the faith leadership and the secular women’s movement. Faith leaders often do not approve of their way of challenging theology and tradition, and at times “secular” feminists tend to suspect they want to undermine the struggle for women’s rights.

Women in faith communities can offer added value in relation to formal religious leadership. At best, some religious leaders can be persuaded to support a women’s agenda, as elaborated by the United Nations. Women religious leaders have the ability to bridge theological and rights language, and should be invited to take an active part in panels, dialogues, working groups and such in order to contribute “from within” to challenging discourses allegedly based on a contradiction between universal human rights and respect for freedom of religion.

The need for religious literacy

During the discussions, the issue of literacy came up several times. Some pointed out that the secularization in the Nordic hemisphere has eroded general religious literacy among civil servants in development agencies of the United Nations and of Member States. The problem was not described as the absence of religious faith or that secularism has turned people away from religious beliefs and traditions. Rather, the challenge is the increasing inability to analyse and understand the nature of faith, and the role faith plays in shaping not

only the identity of individuals but also communities. Yet it would seem self-evident that for civil servants, diplomats and development practitioners, knowledge about religion and the role it plays in 80 per cent of people’s lives is quintessential.

The knowledge of religious narratives and shaping of lived realities is pivotal for understanding when religion plays a negative and oppressive role, as well as when it inspires people to claim justice and equality. To be able to effectively implement the newly adopted SDGs, therefore, it is important to actively promote religious literacy among those who will be involved in development initiatives, globally and regionally. Indeed, there was a stark warning leveraged in the discussions: If actors in the “development industry” deliberately ignore the role of religion, they may, by default, contribute to strengthening the more conservative and fundamentalist versions of religious traditions. There is an imminent risk that the most conservative religious readings become normative, if they are not challenged and put into perspective. The ones who will have to pay for this are poorer women and girls in patriarchic societies. Women in the North, where stronger and relatively more accountable legal and social systems prevail, are far less likely to be affected by a polarization between women’s rights and respect for conservative expressions of religious beliefs.

There are scholars around the world who actively contribute to increasing religious literacy among staff in organizations promoting the universal human right’s agenda. *Mutatis mutandi* they have a role to play in encouraging women in faith communities to revisit their religious texts and traditions in order to find bridges

between their faiths and the universal human rights agenda. Several examples of this are offered in the following papers. Universities, international agencies, civil society organizations, national development organizations and others should cooperate in initiatives for building capacity and literacy in the field of religion.

Continuing to work together

Based on a literature overview and discussions which have taken place including at the meeting in Sigtuna, between various constituencies regionally and globally, two concrete and actionable recommendations have emerged.



UNFPA/Sami Sallinen

- **Establish an NGO for joint reflection and action directed at the United Nations and other intergovernmental fora.**

There is a general perception that a safe space is needed where experts in theology, feminism and development praxis can dialogue and jointly address challenges related to women's rights and religion as they unfold in intergovernmental settings. An non-governmental organization (NGO) would support this objective. With or without an NGO, however, there is a keen sense that moments such as the UN Commission on the Status of Women are important for these same experts to systematically, and in an organized and deliberate fashion, set up side events and convene dialogues around religion and women's human rights.

- **Create initiatives for joint studies and increased religious developmental literacy.**

Some the experts who contributed to these recommendations are experienced researchers with access to broad academic networks. It was suggested that some themes related to women and religion could be jointly researched through an interreligious lens. One theme mentioned was how *Shari'ah* law and Canon law relate to scripture, context and tradition. A case was strongly made for jointly organized seminars on the nexus of religion and development, to be simultaneously informed by the *mélange* of experts on theology, human rights and social development. This form of religious developmental literacy should take into account the lived reality of religion and faith traditions, but should not be focused on or confused with an introductory theological discourse. Rather, geared for

civil servants in global and national organizations, its purpose would be to review and inform on why and how religious considerations influence—and can be influenced by—development praxis.

The papers in the full length version of this publication have been minimally edited. Instead, they are presented in the words of their authors/speakers, articulating perspectives that are often rarely voiced in one space. All opinions expressed are entirely those of the authors and do not represent any institutional position. They are the perspectives of informed and learned voices and actors, who are working in the midst of one of the most volatile intersections of human rights, gender equality and faith—the domain of sexual and reproductive health and rights.



The quotes in this publication are taken from the papers in the full length version of the publication "Women, Faith and Human Rights". To access the full length version, please use the QR code or go to www.svenskakyrkan.se/default.aspx?id=1485228



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