Keeping the Faith in Development: Gender, Religion and Health
September 20, 12:00 – 2:00 pm; Salvation Army Auditorium
CONCEPT NOTE

Background

Women’s health is a starting point for any developmental reality, as it undergirds the social, economic, and political fabric of any community. Enabling both men and women to attain the highest standards of health, therefore, including sexual and reproductive health, is a prerequisite for the overall well-being of any society and nation. And yet the terrain of women’s health – and their bodies - is one of the most politically contested. The contestations are often, correctly or incorrectly, linked to cultural – including religious – notions and understandings. They are also invariably connected not only to women’s own lived realities, but are intertwined with norms and values about gender identities and relations. A realistic discussion is called for of sexual and reproductive health for both women and men, that addresses health challenges for both - as equal sexual partners - not only with regard to the mechanics of reproduction, but also, in relation to the social norms which put women at risk of sexual violence, and the socialization process for boys, which also places their health at risk.

In 2016 alone, 3 different reports have emerged to tackle the nexus between religion and sexuality – each attempting to review the connections and contestations between human rights and lived theology. While different in approach, argumentation and analysis, and with recommendations to very diverse constituencies, the reports share one critical feature in common: they deal with the most challenging and taboo issues with a determination to remain true to the tenets of the faith traditions. The reports show how important the entire issue of faith, or belief, has become in the realization of human development, and how faith communities are developing theological and practical responses to the sexual and reproductive health challenges of our times.

Religion, Women’s Health and Rights: Points of Contention, Paths of Opportunities (a joint UNFPA –NORAD Paper) looks at this critical nexus of religion and sexuality through the lens of 5 different faith traditions as they are juxtaposed against diverse sensitive areas such as contraception, child marriage, gender-based violence – to name but a few. The Report reviews some of the religious challenges these issues raise in diverse contexts, but it also showcases how faith-based and faith-inspired narratives and initiatives affirm the human rights entailed.
*Dignity Freedom and Grace: Christian Perspectives on HIV, AIDS and Human Rights* (Paterson and Long, 2016) is published by the World Council of Churches. Written from a Christian standpoint, many of the issues raised are equally relevant to religiously motivated groups and individuals from other backgrounds. The report brings together a diverse, international team of writers, all professionally or personally involved with global, national or local responses to HIV. While it is clearly rooted in human rights thinking, its writers are fully realistic about the painful challenges sometimes faced by religiously-motivated people in living out their faith in the context of the social, ethical and cultural issues they encounter in a human rights response to HIV and AIDS.

*Promoting good health & good conscience - The Ethics of Using Contraceptives* gathers scholarship from prominent Catholic theologians, ethicists and physicians to provide a re-assessment of the ethics of using contraception. It is the most comprehensive collection of expert analysis since *Humanae Vitae* was published 50 years ago. The report examines how the responsible use of modern contraceptives fits within the moral framework of the Catholic faith and supports efforts to respectfully navigate the relationship between religious belief and women's health.

Each of these texts helps address misunderstandings and misrepresentations which often play out in many settings, within the academe, in intergovernmental fora during negotiations of statements and outcomes, and in the intersecting social and cultural spaces where girls and boys and women and men live day-to-day.

**The Symposium**

Given the timeliness of the UN General Assembly, and the simultaneous presence of multiple actors congregated in one space (the United Nations), and the fact that UNAIDS will be cohosting an Interfaith Prayer Breakfast on September 20, on HIV and AIDS, UNFPA, UNAIDS, UNWomen, together with the World Council of Churches and the Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research, will co-host a two-hour Symposium, on the occasion of the UN General Assembly as a Side Event. The symposium will bring together some of the Report authors, editors, and producers, as well as religious scholars, faith leaders and faith-based organizations.

**The Purpose of the Symposium will be:**

1. To showcase the content of the three reports;
2. To discuss some of the points of contention raised by each and resonating among them and the “faith-full” ways of resolving the contentions;
3. To assess some of the most critical recommendations for action which these Reports point to, for the UN system, for academia, and for civil society organizations working to realize the Sustainable Development Goals’ Agenda.

**The Format:**

- An interactive interview style dialogue with a Moderator/Interviewer.
• The panel of interviewees will include a representative mix of authors and contributors, UN agencies, religious voices, young women and/or a PLWHIV.

**Schedule/Run of Show:**

1. Introduction to the Symposium purpose, format and introduction of the Interviewer/Moderator
2. Interviewer/Moderator asks panelists total of 3 questions and ensures that each of the three reports are described, and then discussed among the panelists led by questions from the interviewer and in response to one another;
3. Interviewer then opens the floor for audience questions and comments and manages;
4. Interviewer sums up and invites religious leaders for concluding prayers