

RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT

Dialogue on Gender,
Rights and Sensitive Issues

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REPORT

Background

On May 20, 2016, Norad, UNFPA and Norwegian faith-based actors, under the leadership of The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities and The Christian Council of Norway in cooperation with Church of Norway Council on International and Ecumenical Relations, Digni, and Norwegian Church Aid, organized the conference Religion and Development: Dialogue on Gender, Rights and Sensitive Issues.

Religion can influence politics and acts as both a driver of and an impediment to development. Religious actors are often seen as a barrier to development by condoning cultural and religious norms and practices upholding gender discrimination on sensitive issues related to marriage, family, sexuality, reproductive health and women's empowerment, but they are also the key change agents able to influence behaviour and attitudes.

The conference aimed to provide an arena to critically examine the role of religion and diverse religious/faith-based actors (e.g. religious leaders, faith-based NGOs) in promoting gender equality and the rights of girls and women, with a focus on protection and prevention of gender based violence and promotion of sexual and reproductive health rights.

Content

In the following, there is a short description of the content of each session. One of the reports that were presented and several of the presentations are available for download. Note that the presentations were prepared in advance, and the panellists in some cases deviated substantially from the manuscripts that they shared with the organizers for this report. The presentations that are available for download do not necessarily reflect exactly what was said in the conference.

This report does not contain the program as such. [Click here for the program.](#)

Opening Session:

In the opening session, opening remarks were delivered by the Director General of Norad, Jon Lomøy, Azza Karam on behalf of UNFPA, and Bushra Ishaq, a writer from the Norwegian migrant community.

The opening speakers underlined the importance of the topic, not least of addressing all the misconceptions relating to religion on the one hand, and human rights, gender equality, sexual and reproductive health on the other hand.

Religions are not static, even if they are often presented as such; they are dynamic and change with time and cultural influences. However, issues linked to gender and sexuality are often the most complex and sensitive to handle.

Dialogue means that we need to respect the position of the other, which does not mean that we accept the positions of the other in all aspects.

The UN has had an Inter-agency Task Force (IATF) on faith and faith-based actors since 2010, headed by UNFPA. The UN agencies engage with the faith sector in different ways, and there is no common guideline to the engagement, it differs a lot between and within the different agencies. The Ebola crisis was for many an eye-opener, as it taught us that in order to reach communities and establish trust in times of crisis, one has to go through the religious communities and faith leaders, as they are cultural gate-keepers.

It was underlined that religion might not be a determining factor for people's behaviour; people make individual choices based on a range of factors, and they should be held accountable for them. For example, among Muslim women in Norway, who are largely from immigrant families, more take higher education than among Norwegian ("ethnic Norwegian") women.

Launch of Discussion Paper:

Religion, Women's Health and Rights: Points of Contention and Paths of Opportunities

This session launched the joint NORAD-UNFPA discussion paper, with a presentation of the paper followed by a panel discussion.

Available resources from this session:

- The joint NORAD-UNFPA discussion paper on [*Religion, Women's Health and Rights: Points of Contention and Paths of Opportunities*](#).
- [Presentation of the discussion paper](#) by Katherine Marshall, Professor of the Practice of Development, Conflict, and Religion, Georgetown University.

From Katherine Marshall's presentation of the report: "The Norad/UNFPA Discussion Paper was inspired by a path-breaking meeting in September 2014 at UNFPA in New York. A diverse group of religious scholars and leaders debated the underlying issues and agreed on a common declaration whose central theme is "not in our name", followed by the many ills and risks associated with denying women's reproductive rights. A meeting outcome was a recommendation that the international rights framework be reviewed in relation to reproductive health and related issues, alongside a review of the positions and practice of religious institutions on these topics. The paper is the result."

After the presentation of the paper, panellists with a background in Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism discussed religious and cultural norms, teachings and practices on issues relating to gender roles, politics, and culture.¹ The panellists discussed how religion may promote gender equality and the rights of girls and women, with a focus on protection and prevention of gender based violence and promotion of sexual and reproductive health rights.

Panellists were:

- Fulata L. Moyo, Programme Executive, World Council of Churches
- Shereen El Feki, Senior Fellow, Promundo
- Michael Gritzman, Member of the Board of the Jewish Community of Oslo
- Phramaha Boonchuay Doojai, Lecturer, Chiang Mai Campus, Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University

The session was moderated by Azza Karam, Senior Advisor, Culture, UNFPA.

¹ The Hindu panelist was prevented from coming because she did not receive her visa in time.

Parallel Session A: Faith, Sexuality, HIV and Rights.

Launch of book:

Dignity, Freedom and Grace: Christian Perspectives on HIV, AIDS and Human Rights

Available resources from this session:

- [Web page of the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance Report: Dignity, Freedom and Grace: Christian Perspectives on HIV, AIDS and Human Rights](#), including information on where to purchase the report.
- [Presentation of the report by Gillian Paterson](#), Research Fellow, Heythrop College, University of London.
- [Presentation by Roseanne Rajema](#), Branch Manager, YWCA Kisumu

Message and challenge to the plenary from this session:

1) Human rights language is not always understood by faith communities, or has become associated with concepts that are challenging within their teachings or traditions. It is important to find language that draws on theological concepts of dignity and justice in talking about human rights with religious leaders and communities of faith to build a common platform for action.

2) Similarly, the term 'Key Populations' is also not familiar to faith communities. It is important to discuss concerns around the social and economic drivers of HIV, and issues of vulnerability, agency and consent, which are embedded in culture and religion. These provide entry points for faith based organizations to make a positive change.

3) When the discourse is tense and polarized around sexual and reproductive health issues and HIV, it is important to find ways to create safe spaces for dialogue. Some initiatives outlined in the book *Dignity, Freedom and Grace* provide excellent models of how to create these safe spaces for dialogue, and move the discussion forward.

Presenters in this session were:

- Gillian Paterson, Research Fellow, Heythrop College, University of London
- Roseanne Rajema, Branch Manager, YWCA Kisumu
- JP Mokgethi-Heath, Policy Advisor on HIV and Theology, Church of Sweden

Parallel Session B: Family Values and Reproductive Rights.

Available resource from this session:

- [Presentation by Kidist Bealyneh](#), Program Manager, Norwegian Church Aid Ethiopia

Message and challenge to the plenary from this session:

Challenge:

On matters of family values and reproductive rights, there is need to address the gaps of understanding/analysis between:

- 1) Faith communities in their diversity and with their lived experiences.
- 2) Religious leadership, dogma and public positions.

- 3) "Secular" development agendas and their perception of what are the most important issues/obstacles to change.

Examples:

Catholics and abortion: High-level discussions at the UN on reproductive rights tend to be polarized and alienating, leading to need for religious actors, including the Catholic Church, to reaffirm its conservative position on issues such as abortion. This has an impeding effect on social engagement of many faith-based organizations as it affects the flexibility of the organizations to work on related issues – including gender equality, child marriages and domestic violence.

Research in a Master's programme in Religious Studies at UKZN in South Africa, by Mariam Bibi Khan (2016 UKZN), showed how women in some Muslim communities in South Africa negotiate contraceptive choices through a faith-based analysis of what is best for their sexual and emotional state of health. Contrary to secular development analysis, acceptance of contraceptives is not only informed by scriptural positions. In this same community, it was found that the more sensitive and more difficult issue for women is negotiating sex with their husbands. They go along with traditional understandings of sexual availability in order to keep peace in the family.

Recommendations:

- 1) There is need for more "religious literacy" among secular development actors – to appreciate religious diversity (intra-faith as important as inter-faith) in different contexts in order to better understand the spaces for negotiating change.
- 2) There is need to recognize the importance of supporting alternative voices within religious communities – and not just formal religious leaders. In this context, there is need to support spaces for critical enquiry of existing theologies at a meeting point with new and historical understandings of family traditions, practices and reproductive rights.
- 3) There is need to balance confessional approaches to development with an academic "religious studies" approach to understand the sociology of religion or how religions are actually working in society – and to better understand the inherent ambivalence in religious resources. *People* decide if these resources are mobilized as a positive resource for change or as an obstacle to human and reproductive rights.

Presenters in this session were:

- Fatima Seedat, Lecturer and Co-ordinator, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal
- Alexander Golding, Head of Domestic Department, Caritas Norway
- Kidist Bealyneh, Program Manager, Norwegian Church Aid Ethiopia

Parallel Session C: Gender Justice: Challenging Gender Roles and Fighting Gender-Based Violence.

Available resources from this session:

- [Presentation by Elaine Neuenfeldt](#), Women in Church and Society Secretary, Department for Theology and Public Witness, The Lutheran World Federation
- [Notes of Patrick Godana](#), Government and Media Liaison, Sonke Gender Justice
- [Presentation by Sivananthi Thanenthiran](#), Director, Arrow.

The session discussed how the monotheistic religions had all developed a paradigm of hierarchical thinking based on a patriarchal understanding of male being above female. This understanding of a "sacred hierarchy" has made it difficult to challenge traditional gender role understandings in religious communities, and to address gender inequality and gender based violence and suppression of women. Feminist theologians have challenged the hierarchical theological understanding, by introducing alternative interpretations.

Using the right language and words to describe problems and solutions has been important. For instance, a theological approach to GBV will be more fruitful when GBV is called by its theological name: Sin. Furthermore, culturally acceptable language enables good processes on sensitive issues.

Message and challenge to the plenary from this session:

Message:

Religious actors are already strongly involved in work on the ground combatting gender-based violence. In session C we heard about religious initiatives on the international level, as well as examples from work in Africa, Asia and Latin America. We need to amplify this work by contributing to making it heard and seen by many.

Across the three regions discussed in this session there is a recurrent crisis of governance/democracy with corrupt leaders who use and misuse ethnocentric and nationalist versions of religion which is not conducive for the work of respect for diversity; minorities and gender-justice.

Challenge:

We must work both with the political and religious environments. We must challenge the political misuse of religion. And we must address our own religious communities by challenging structures of authority within our traditions in order to combat harmful practices and theologies that one way or the other contribute to gender-based violence.

Presenters in this session were:

- Elaine Neuenfeldt, Women in Church and Society Secretary, Department for Theology and Public Witness, The Lutheran World Federation
- Patrick Godana, Government and Media Liaison, Sonke Gender Justice
- Sivananthi Thanenthiran, Director, Arrow

Challenges to Religious Communities and Development Actors.

Bishop Atle Sommerfeldt of the Church of Norway raised challenges based on his experience as both development actor and religious leader. Some of his main points:

- Religious communities must constantly improve the ability to listen to experiences of violence and oppression, see the realities and change traditions and positions accordingly.
- We have to evaluate our practice in light of the centre in religion: God's creation of all human beings and the belief that we encounter the divine in the other person.
- Decisions by government bodies, including UN-bodies, are not above critical analysis by religious communities. At the same time, religious communities have to recognize that major insights in terms of an inclusive understanding of human dignity and human rights have been promoted first by political and social movements.
- Governmental development actors cannot demand more consistence in the attitude and action of religious actors than they demand from their own governments.

- Changes in the practice of religious communities are enhanced when local, national and global expressions of the religious community are linked. This implies that legitimate global expressions of religious communities must be financed and be part of the discussions on challenges and actions.

[Click here for Sommerfeldt's full statement.](#)

Panel discussion: The Need for New Development Partnerships in Addressing Women's Rights

Available resource from this session:

- [Statement by Mike Battcock](#), Leading on Faith in Development, Inclusive Societies Department, UK Department for International development (DFID)

The panellists were a group of highly experienced government, UN and church officials reacting to the discussions and statements made earlier in the day, and sharing from their experience of working with sensitive issues with religious and faith-based actors. There has been a tangible change in how government agencies now acknowledge the influence of religious actors, and how governments acknowledge the necessity and usefulness of cooperating with religious actors to foster much needed change. There is a growing understanding, which still has some way to go, of what religion is and how it affects society, politics and development. The creation of the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) is a result of this understanding, and it aims to improve coordination of different donor initiatives to partner with religious communities and to promote learning exchange, networking and dialogue and capacity building for the different partners.

There is also a need to be self-critical in this work and some challenges in the current focus on religion and development were raised, such as i) a possible over-emphasizing of religious leaders: there is a tendency to make religious leaders exemplify whole, vast traditions while in reality religious communities are very diverse internally. This tendency might also hamper women's inclusion and exclude gender equality from the discussion and ii) a tendency to "over-moralize" the development agenda; whereby the universality of human rights is compromised. Increasing the rhetoric of religion does not automatically lead to social inclusion.

The panellists were:

- Ulrich Nitschke, Head of Sector Program Values, Religion and Development, Head of PaRD Secretariat, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)
- Margareta Grape, Senior Adviser, Church of Sweden
- Mike Battcock, Leading on Faith in Development, Inclusive Societies Department, UK Department for International development (DFID)
- Azza Karam, Senior Advisor, Culture, UNFPA
- Fredrik Arthur, Ambassador for Women's Rights and Gender Equality, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The conversation was moderated by Anne Skjelmerud, Senior Adviser, Department for Global Health, Education and Research, Norad.

Closing remarks by Anne-Marie N. Helland, General Secretary, Norwegian Church Aid. Summary of the statement:

- The example of HIV/AIDS, which has always been a very sensitive issue. In some church circles, it has been very difficult to differentiate between HIV and sin. In 2004, the UN acknowledged the role of faith-based organizations in the fight against stigma.
- There have been many wrongdoings in the name of religion. Currently, there is a strong push against women's rights driven by a coalition of Catholics, Evangelicals and Muslims. We have to speak up and say "not in our name." Human rights are not an antidote to religion; they are brilliant tools to secure, protect and uphold the God-given dignity of all people, and we should use them.
- Theological reflection is key, and that is a lesson from the HIV response. Bring together people from different traditions, different stages of reflection and different experiences. Safe spaces are important, also for religious leaders; they must learn about issues of gender, health and rights. This has not necessarily been part of their training and they need safe opportunities to learn. You cannot expect a Cardinal to willingly make a fool of himself or be challenged on issues he is not comfortable with in public.
- Religious actors are often not the best or most progressive – but they are perhaps the most important in terms of generating change.

Links to relevant resources:

Interview with Fulata L. Moyo, World Council of Churches, on a number of issues including how to respond to sexually trafficked girls and women, Christian patriarchy, HIV/AIDS, human sexuality, and child marriage: <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/interviews/a-discussion-with-fulata-l-moyo-world-council-of-churches>

Interview with Kidist Belayneh, Norwegian Church Aid Ethiopia, on working with religious leaders to fight female genital mutilation: <https://youtu.be/qz644fDG-9E>

Blog post by Katherine Marshall, Senior Fellow, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/katherine-marshall/not-in-our-name-the-lies_b_10093642.html

The program of the conference, including names of all contributors: [Click here for the program.](#)