

Welcome and Introductions

Co-chaired by Marie-Christine Lecompte, Dr. Rachel Tavernor and Shahin Ashraf MBE

Ms. Marie-Christine Lecompte (Global Affairs Canada) commenced the discussions by highlighting that the COVID-19 pandemic is putting at risk gains made in the past decades towards gender justice. Evidence suggest that the pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities, slowing, if not reversing progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and highlighting vulnerability in health, social, economic and political systems.

Women and girls in all diversity are experiencing intersecting injustices, including discrimination based on gender, ability, class, age, sex, race and other identity markers. Civil Society Organisations, including FBOs/FIOs are at the forefront of responding to the pandemic. With the knowledge and expertise to further help in shaping the global efforts in responding to the pandemic in a way that protects and advances gender equality.

In the pause to 'business as usual' due to COVID-19, the pandemic presents an opportunity for all stakeholders to discern:

- How the COVID-19 pandemic can be catalyst for strong action towards Agenda 2030?
- What action is required for achieving a world rooted in equality and justice for all?
- Where are the partnerships and pathways for achieving Gender Equality and Empowerment (SDG5) by 2030?
- Why are faith actors a vital stakeholder in this roadmap?

Dr. Rachel Tavernor (Side by Side) shared that it is under this backdrop, on the 4th September 2020, the [PaRD](#) Gender Equality and Empowerment workstream launched a series of interactive dialogues -themed '*Visioning a Just World Post-COVID19: Religion, Sustainable Development and Gender Justice*'- that will be hosted throughout 2020/2021.

These dialogues will create a space for diverse stakeholders to engage on gender equality, religion and COVID-19. The launch brought together stakeholder from diverse backgrounds i.e. governmental entities, multilateral agencies, CSOs including FBOs/FIOs, local faith actors and academia, who shared perspectives on different themes ranging from the principle of 'leaving no one behind', faith, race, feminism and COVID-19 to economies, trade and financial flows; and partnerships with religious/fait actors.

Looking Back in order to Look Forward:

The Role of Religious Actors in Gender Equality since the Beijing Declaration

Dr. Nora Khalaf-Elledge, Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities

Dr. Nora Khalaf-Elledge introduced a new report commissioned by the PaRD Gender Equality and Empowerment workstream, which will be published in 2020. The report aims to review the roles religious actors have played in advancing and hindering gender equality since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995; identifying strategies to overcome current barriers; and understanding the roles attributed to religious actors in UN policy spaces.

Why is the report important?

Dr. Nora Khalaf-Elledge strongly asserted that in regards to religion and development, gender is the central issue because religions are deeply connected to gender norms. She added that whenever religion enters political spheres, they tend to orbit around gender-related issues. Religion in politics tends to focus, for example, around same-sex marriage, sexual, reproductive health and rights, or sex education. In some instances, religious arguments are used to condone domestic violence, child marriage, marital rape, sexual violence, and female genital mutilation.

She pointed out that the reasons why religion in politics rally around gender issues is because gender norms maintain the power structure of a community, they preserve traditional divisions of labour, which define the status quo. Political authorities around the world play into the idea that religion and patriarchy are inseparable. *"For example, patriarchal gender norms are packaged in the name of religion because it legitimises them. It makes them seem divinely ordained and unchangeable. There is a need for development practitioners to engage with the intersection of religion and gender"*, she emphasised.

What can we learn from the report?

Since the Beijing declaration, religions have inspired both patriarchal and emancipatory changes. Dr. Nora Khalaf-Elledge reinforced the importance of religious literacy as the skill to understand religions in their contexts and to make sense of the seemingly contradictory ways in which religion and gender interact. She emphasised that religious literacy does not mean 'being religious', but consists in an academic study that acknowledges that religions are diverse, context-specific and subject to interpretations.

Moreover, mechanisms need to be in place to check and correct biases. *"If you are secular, you are not automatically objective and if you are religious, you are not automatically subjective. Bias is everywhere, it is subtle, it is unconscious. It is saying something like 'moderate Muslim' or labelling feminism as Western"*, she affirmed.

Leave No One Behind
Pragya Adhikari, Islamic Relief Nepal

Ms. Pragya Adhikari acknowledged that COVID-19 could – and should – be a catalyst for building a just and equal world. She further acknowledged that at the core of the Sustainable Development Goals is the principle 'leaving no one behind'. This encompasses not only ensuring inclusion of marginalised communities, but also requires tackling all forms of discrimination and inequalities, including gender-based discriminations.

Islamic Relief has been working in Nepal to ensure that girls and women's needs are cared for, especially Muslim women in Nepal who are marginalised. Ms. Adhikari stated that, in Nepal, discrimination based on caste, lack of educational and livelihood opportunities for girls and women, patriarchy, social and cultural factors, and the geographical remoteness of some communities all lead to people being left behind or even pushed further back. Moreover, she alluded that, the COVID-19 outbreak in Nepal has added a new dimension to the problem, as poor and marginalised communities are accused of spreading the virus. Stirring up more prejudice and discrimination. *"In one district in which Islamic Relief works, local people boycotted Muslims, even refusing to buy from Muslim shopkeepers"* she added.

"To create a just world, we can start by making sure local stakeholders have a real role in humanitarian and development projects, right from the start", Pragya emphasised. From Islamic Relief's experience working in Nepal, when marginalised communities are equipped with skills, they can take step in influencing public planning and policies. To ensure that the furthest are reached, Islamic Relief Nepal is working towards the involvement of all stakeholders, including marginalised groups, in planning and designing of programmes.

Ms. Adhikari concluded by affirming that the commitment to 'Leaving No One Behind' should underpin all aspects of our work. Targeting policies should be inclusive. Financing policies should prioritise marginalised groups; and all programmes should have safe and accessible complaints mechanisms.

[Follow link](#) to read more on Pragya's input.

A just world through Economies, Trade and Financial Flows
Dr. Marianna Leite, Christian Aid

Dr. Marianna Leite shared how Christian Aid's "[Building Back with Justice](#)" report (published in July 2020) focuses on applying a human rights lens on recovery after COVID-19 pandemic. Our world now faces the deepest economic contractions, with millions of people pushed deeper into poverty. Falling incomes, disruption to trade and transport have made food increasingly unaffordable for many people in the poorest countries. Without swift and effective government intervention, human suffering will be prolonged, and individuals and societies will face a much bigger challenge in recovering from the pandemic.

COVID-19 has proven the need for strong health and social protection systems. Governments need to have in place measures that ensure all benefit from resources provided without any forms of discrimination. Dr. Leite highlighted that there is need for enabling systems that focus on human rights and include the intersectionality between gender equality and religion.

Christian Aid is part of discussions on *economy of life vs. the economy of death*. These discussions are focused on human rights centred economy rather than profits. Dr. Leite further pointed out the need for a wholistic human

rights definition of illicit financial flows. Illicit financial flows cause diversion of resources that could foster social inclusion and justice. The existence of a wholistic economy could help in the achievement of sustainable development by freeing resources and directing them where most needed. She concluded by reminding the participants the dire need to look at the colonial history and decolonise development.

SDGs, Religion and Partnerships

Mike Battcock, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Mr. Mike Battcock began by highlight that gender equality and empowerment is at the heart of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. He reiterated that gender equality and empowered girls and women are fundamental to building prosperous and resilient economics, stable and peaceful societies. *“Even though COVID-19 has increased the pre-existing gender inequalities, all should thrive to build back equally”* he added. Mr. Battcock pointed out that even though gender equality and religions are complex, faith actors and institutions can be champions for gender equality and empowerment at all levels.

Mr. Battcock acknowledged the importance of partnering with religious actors and their role in making significant changes on social norms. *“Faith groups can reach those who cannot reach, hold governments accountable, they are well positioned to empower people to stand up and fight for their rights”* he added.

The United Kingdom (UK) government has been creating safe spaces for difficult discussions with religious actors and supported faith literacy with development or secular organisations. Just to mention a few, the UK has involved faith groups in programme and projects design and delivery; included faith leader (both men and women) at the decision making at local, national, global level; supported faith groups to integrate gender assessment into all of their work, support capacity building for local faith actors, with faith groups to understand the context of behavioural change messages; and supported faith leaders to tackle intolerance and hatred.

Mr. Battcock, mentioned that the UK government is currently working in more than 130 faith groups in more than 200 programmes around the world. Through several programmes, they are harnessing the power and influence of faith actors and working with religious/faith actors to help end harmful practices like female genital mutilation, child marriages and also support the promotion to tolerance freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

Question and discussions

Moderated by Shahin Ashraf MBE, Islamic Relief Worldwide

First, the integration of faith leaders and institution at all policy making levels can be achieved by:

- Not only highlight the importance and role of religious leaders in such discussions; but also encouraging different government departments/stakeholders to involve/include religious actors in such discussions
- Building the capacity of religious leaders, so they are equipped to contribute to policy discussions and decision making to platforms
- Fostering unique collaborations i.e. between feminist groups and faith actors. Avoid silos.

Second, participants made caution on some of the hidden areas that are never addressed in gender and religion. Some of the issues includes:

- An assumption that higher income countries are progressive and have progressive thinking. Western development has to review how gender analysis are conducted.
- Intersectionality of injustices can sometimes be further hidden, there is a need to foster understanding and practices that are intersectional.
- A need to address issues on power dynamics. To shift from shareholder model to stakeholder models.
- There is need to consider how knowledge has been produced and ensure inclusion of voices from the global south.
- There is also need in decolonising development and promote feminist narratives.
- Understanding that redistribution of power can lead to backlashes. There is a need to develop strategies to counter such backlashes and creating an understanding that everyone will benefit from more equal societies.