



Side by Side Advocacy Briefing

The Role of Faith Leaders in Achieving Gender Justice

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Cover image:

Side by Side East Africa Symposium, Nairobi, November 2015

Side by Side is a growing global faith movement pursuing transformational change for gender justice. We are people of faith, faith leaders and faith-based organisations across the world committed to partnering together to **challenge barriers to gender justice**. We are united by our belief that each person is made in the image of God and has intrinsic value and dignity. At local, national and international levels, we partner together wherever possible to work towards gender justice, where everyone is valued equally and able to **share equitably in the distribution of power, knowledge and resources**. We acknowledge that religious teachings have often endorsed social and cultural norms that perpetuate gender injustice, and recognise that people of faith and our religious leaders have a responsibility to revisit sacred texts and promote **faith values of love, dignity and gender justice**.

Linking up with others is essential to achieve change. Side by Side seeks opportunities to **collaborate with other movements** and networks such as the World Council of Churches and the ACT Alliance, as well as PaRD - the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development.

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Introduction

This short paper is produced by Side by Side, a global movement of faith leaders and communities, faith-based organisations and individuals of faith, who are committed to removing barriers to gender justice. It is offered as a contribution to the emerging conversation about the distinctive role of faith representatives in advocating for gender justice. It sets out the context and the challenges to be addressed, and then shows with examples how faith leaders have been, and can be, part of the solution rather than part of the problem. It concludes with recommendations to faith leaders, governments and inter-governmental organisations.

Eighty-four per cent of the world's population self-identify as members of a faith group.^[1] Faith leaders play a key role in shaping people's values, norms of acceptable behaviour, life roles and understanding of what constitutes 'a good life'. For people of faith, this faith identity is core to the development of many of the laws, policies, programmes and relationships which shape and govern the societies in which we all live.

The potentially transformational role of faith leaders and people of faith in tackling root causes of gender inequality and speaking out against gender injustice, raising the issue as a political as well as moral concern, is often not fully appreciated. While we must acknowledge at the outset that faith leaders can be part of the problem of gender injustice, they can be and are increasingly part of the solution, as this paper explains.

Eighty-four per cent of the world's population self-identify as members of a faith group.^[1]

A definition of gender justice

(based on definitions from Side by Side and ACT Alliance)

Gender justice is achieved when women and men, girls and boys have equal enjoyment of human rights, responsibilities, life prospects and opportunities, and the power and resources to shape their own lives and contribute to society, irrespective of gender or sex. Gender justice seeks to see all people free from cultural and interpersonal systems of privilege and oppression, and from violence and repression based on gender.



Image 1: Side by Side West Africa Conference, Accra, May 2018

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It is worth highlighting the particular position of female faith leaders. Without underestimating the deep commitment of many male faith leaders to gender justice, and without denying the fact that not all women are committed to gender justice, female faith leaders are key to promoting gender justice within and outside faith institutions. Although they are fewer in number, and often invisible in highly patriarchal religious institutions, many have encouraged their faith institutions to implement programmes challenging patriarchal attitudes, beliefs and practices, while female theologians can be influential actors in interpreting religious scriptures in a liberating way for women.

It is well-documented, and not controversial, that faith groups across the world are highly effective deliverers of services, for instance, in the areas of health and education.^[2] What is far less well recognised and valued is that at local, national, regional and global levels faith leaders can, and do, speak into decision-making, policy-making and legislative processes. Despite the challenge of regressive religious voices, there are examples throughout the world of faith leaders and groups advocating powerfully and effectively for outcomes which promote gender justice.

Political, economic, religious, educational, cultural, judicial, and administrative structures can create and reinforce gender inequalities. Gender advocacy is understood as the challenging and changing of these structures and systems that privilege one gender and marginalize another, through the influencing of the policies and practices of the powerful. At its core, advocacy is about transformation and justice. Faith leaders can speak with a unique moral authority and credibility and represent often very

large numbers of people. At community and congregation level, where they have a permanent presence, and often at national and even international levels as well, they hold respected positions; they are listened to. ^[3] They have many opportunities to teach and influence their congregations, including through their sermons, and reach into their wider communities. Depending on their national constitutional arrangements they can have formal as well as informal political influence.

Definition of the problem

The term 'gender injustice' describes the unequal power relationship between women and men. While women and girls suffer the most from gender injustice, it is a concern for men, women, boys and girls and society as a whole, including faith leaders.

Gender injustice is deep-rooted in social norms. Social norms are the values defined by a group and to which members of the group are expected to comply, otherwise risking disapproval, marginalization and/or exclusion. Social norms change over time and are in constant evolution. Religion and culture have a strong influence on the definition of social norms, including those relating to gender. Guardians of customs, including faith leaders, must therefore play a core role in shifting from discriminatory social norms that condone gender injustice to positive social norms that uphold equal rights and condemn gender-based violence.

Gender injustice is pervasive in all spheres of society and all parts of the world, from the inter-personal level to the socio-political level, from beliefs and attitudes to structures and policies. Even where progressive international and national principles have been legally established, as in the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the equality legislation found in many countries, gender justice is still not guaranteed in practice as the norms underlying gender injustice are hard to change. Faith leaders (women as well as men) may reinforce the status quo. For example, in Mali, the Islamic Council and the National Union of Muslim Women successfully led a mass mobilisation against the revised Family Code in 2011. As a result, the version of the Code adopted was much lighter in terms of women's rights and has been broadly criticized for aspects relating to the legal age of marriage, custody of children and inheritance, which are discriminatory against women. In Uganda, the Divorce and Marriage Bill was blocked for decades by Christian faith leaders, until women's movements and faith leaders found a way to enter into dialogues and agree a solution.

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There are many reasons why faith leaders may not acknowledge the problem of gender injustice and hence fail to advocate for gender justice. The next section identifies some of these.

A definition of patriarchy

(definition from the London Feminist Network)

Patriarchy is the term used to describe the society in which we live today, characterised by current and historic unequal power relations between women and men whereby women are systematically disadvantaged and oppressed. This takes place across almost every sphere of life but is particularly noticeable in women's under-representation in key state (and faith) institutions, in decision-making positions and in employment and industry. Male violence against women is also a key feature of patriarchy. Women in minority groups face multiple oppressions in this society, as race, class and sexuality intersect with sexism for example.

The major world religions emerged in patriarchal cultures which influenced the development and interpretation of religious scriptures.

Barriers faced by faith leaders:

- Interaction between religion and culture has led to an “unholy alliance between [patriarchal] culture and religion”.^[4] The major world religions emerged in patriarchal cultures which influenced the development and interpretation of religious scriptures. Because of this history, religion has often been used, either deliberately or unwittingly, as a tool to oppress women and girls. Patriarchal interpretation of religious scriptures over time has contributed to the development of religious norms intimately tangled with harmful cultural beliefs and practices. Deference to religious norms renders it even more difficult to dismantle the “unholy alliance”.
- Religious landscapes can be complex. All major religions are divided into various groups and subgroups with different interpretations and views. There is a whole range of faith leaders with a whole range of perspectives. This complexity means that it can be difficult to identify progressive faith leaders who would be willing to advocate for gender justice.

- Faith leaders benefit from high status within their communities. People look up to them as the repositories of God's word and as role models in society. Challenging unjust religious narratives can therefore be misinterpreted as an attempt to undermine faith leaders or to impose a dominant western culture that 'pollutes' what is seen as the authentic version of a particular religion. It may be misunderstood as an attempt to destroy the established structure of the community.
- Tokenism often presents a challenge to the realization of gender justice, and religious institutions are no exception in this. For example, faith leaders may appoint gender focal points (single individuals in charge of all gender-related work and issues) or set up gender desks, but if they do not personally commit to tackling gender injustices, then the gender focal points and gender desks will have limited impact. Similarly, faith leaders may delegate the work of striving for gender justice to women's groups, which may perpetuate the view that this is solely a 'women's issue'.
- The human rights discourse promoting women's and girls' rights has often been confronted with religious narratives affirming the superiority of male over female. It is a common perception that human rights narratives and religious narratives are separate and incompatible discourses. However, religious discourses can, and do, promote women's rights and gender justice on the basis of progressive interpretations of religious writings.^[5] The values-based approach promoted by religious institutions is not incompatible with a rights-based approach. By bridging faith and human rights, faith leaders can transform social and religious norms throughout their communities and wider societies. Given the backlash against women's rights in the last ten years, this has become increasingly urgent.

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Image 2: Side by Side Scotland Exhibition, Edinburgh, March 2018



Image 3: Side by Side West Africa Conference, Accra, May 2018

Faith leaders as part of the solution

“Religious leaders ... have a strong potential to influence the lives and behaviour of those who follow their faith and share their beliefs. When they speak out, their messages can have a strong and wide-ranging impact”.^[6]

The moral authority of faith leaders and their consistent presence and influence at individual, family, community, national, regional and international levels, are important factors. “Religious leaders ... have a strong potential to influence the lives and behaviour of those who follow their faith and share their beliefs. When they speak out, their messages can have a strong and wide-ranging impact”.^[6] There are two aspects to this. First is the ability of faith leaders to change the attitudes and norms of their congregations and wider communities, and indeed of their peers. Second is their ability to speak into the public arena, influencing public policy and practice. This influence can be brought to bear in different ways. In the public arena, faith leaders have religious and moral authority to advocate for gender justice, if they choose to do so. They can also have a role in holding authorities accountable for the existence, relevance and efficiency of measures taken to implement laws, policies and international conventions. They can challenge abuse of power by the authorities, and this can include taking a public stand against gender injustice wherever they see it.

In some contexts, progressive faith leaders may first need to challenge peers with regressive views to affirm and accompany the State’s efforts towards gender justice. In other contexts, they will need to direct their advocacy for gender justice towards the governmental and legislative authorities, sometimes with opposition from their less progressive faith counterparts.

The following examples show how effective faith leaders can be in challenging gender injustice and achieving positive change for women and girls in very different contexts.

Case study 1:

Anglican Church strengthening Brazilian local authorities' capacities to implement the law

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a global problem. In Brazil, until recently, it remained invisible and was even regarded as normal; an issue of the private domain. Churches were largely complicit in this 'invisibility'. The Maria da Penha Law, passed in 2006, was designed to protect women from domestic violence. But its enforcement is not automatic, and a large percentage of women still do not know about their legal rights. Lack of awareness, political will and funding mean that the law is not fully implemented and that women continue to suffer violence with impunity.

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Christian Aid's partner Anglican Service for Diaconia and Development (SADD) established a project, 'Churches preventing GBV', to raise awareness of the issue within the churches and offer practical assistance to women affected by GBV. A safe house was set up in Ariquemes to provide protection, support and advice to women affected by GBV. Before then there were no refuges available for women who experienced domestic violence and who could not safely stay in their homes. As the refuge became more established the need for advocacy with the city authorities over their public policies became clear. The safe house is now responsible for the coordination of the city's public services related to women, including education, health, and social services. The local police had previously shown little understanding of the issues around GBV and made little effort to address them. A Christian Aid staff member visiting the city recalls "the psychologist lady saying the police would constantly be asking the women what they had done to provoke violence against them".^[7] The safe house offered training, challenging the police to engage in GBV prevention, presenting improved public policy on GBV and explaining how to respond when a woman alleges domestic violence. Now there is a group of police officers committed to and supportive of the work of the safe house, and competent to respond well to women coming to them to report GBV.

SADD's awareness-raising about the prevalence of GBV and the law relating to it, combined with biblical reflection and teaching, transformed the ethos of the Episcopal Anglican Church in Brazil so that it became a safe space to discuss and challenge GBV. It also enabled SADD to engage in advocacy towards the city authorities, with dramatic results.

Case study 2:

Pakistani religious leaders speak and act in favour of women's rights in Mansehra District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, and Shaheed Benazirabad and Mirpurkhas Districts, Sindh Province

In Pakistan, 381 religious leaders have advocated for women's rights, their support being critical to ensure women's constitutional rights. More than 11,000 sermons and statements on gender justice (especially on the issue of brides' and grooms' consent to marriage and women's right to inheritance) have been delivered by religious leaders, and have resulted in changed attitudes and behaviour of communities in relation to GBV. Nikah Khuwah (Muslim marriage solemnisers) have taken 636 brides' consents to marriage in a period of two and a half years and they have also ensured Haq Maher (dowry money pledged to a bride at the time of the marriage ceremony, in case of divorce) for women and girls. With GBV programme support from NCA Pakistan, implementing partners Khwendo Kor (KK) and South Asia Partnership Pakistan (SAP-PK) have sensitized and built the capacities of religious leaders in the Muslim community and other minorities, including the Hindu community, on various gender justice issues.

The project focused particularly on the right to consent in marriages, discouraging early and child marriages, supporting women's rights to inheritance, tackling domestic violence, and encouraging girls' education and positive masculinities. Through sermons, Muslim religious leaders have reached out to broad audiences. Attendance at Friday sermons is compulsory in Pakistan, so men receive these teachings when gathered at the mosques, and women listen to them through loudspeakers from their neighbouring mosques. In project areas, religious leaders were mobilized to deliver three Friday sermons every month on gender justice-related topics.

Such results were made possible through the delivery of comprehensive capacity-building interventions for religious leaders, looking at Pakistani legislation guaranteeing women's rights, and how these laws are consistent with the teachings of Islam and other faiths. It has taken time to build up trust in order to convince Muslim religious leaders to speak up on these sensitive topics, and overcome wrong perceptions that NGOs have ulterior motives. The local partners brought together religious leaders from Muslim sects, for example, Shia and Sunni, and from Hindu and Christian communities. This helped to address similar, contentious issues in different communities and ensure they were handled sensitively and without conflict based on religion.

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Case study 3:

Ethiopia: faith-based actors tackle FGM/C hand in hand with national authorities

Over the last decade, faith-based organizations in Ethiopia have made significant strides to end harmful practices and gender-based violence with continuous support from NCA Ethiopia. Faith-based organizations proactively engaged in creating dialogue about female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). In reaching consensus and making declarations against the practice, they have worked closely with governmental stakeholders (building relationships) and facilitated events on FGM/C which helped motivate policy-makers to take steps on the issue at national, regional and local levels. Achievements in Ethiopia are offered as an example of how faith leaders can have an impact on policies and structures.

Between 2009 and 2015, major denominations and groups such as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia, and the Ethiopian Catholic Church publicly declared against female genital mutilation and other harmful practices. They have taken steps to mobilize their respective faith communities and to develop theological reflections and other materials addressing the issue of FGM/C. The Islamic Supreme Council of Ethiopia has also facilitated national and regional level dialogues on the Islamic view of FGM/C. Faith leaders played a key role in raising these issues and educating communities during sermons, mass rallies, and through their media and dialogue forums. As a result, faith-based organizations and institutions have incorporated the issues of harmful practices and gender-based violence in their respective curricula in theological colleges, Bible schools and clergy centres.

In parallel, faith-based organizations and faith leaders have continuously engaged the government in their consultations and dialogue forums on the issue of FGM/C. This has resulted in two remarkable achievements. The declarations of faith-based organizations against FGM/C have been recognized in the National Strategy on Harmful Practices, which bans the practice. The recognition of the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia as the lead agency to coordinate FBOs' engagement in Ethiopia, especially on issues of FGM/C and child marriage, has confirmed the partnership between national authorities and faith leaders. These two achievements demonstrate how faith actors can influence policies through strong collaboration between the government and faith-based organizations.

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Image 4: AACC delegation at African Union (AU) Headquarters in Addis Ababa, January 2016

Case study 4:

AACC brings in the faith perspective in AU gender-related policy process

The only reference to religion in the initial draft of the strategy was negative, highlighting religious narratives that oppress women and girls. Faith representatives were not initially included in the official consultations.

The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) is a fellowship of Christian churches which accounts for over 120 million Christians across the African continent. The AACC has a long history of engagement with the African Union (AU) and, with the African Union Commission co-organised consultations with faith-based organizations on Agenda 2063, the strategic framework for the socio-economic transformation of the continent over the next 50 years. The AACC regularly engages on issues of migration, peace and human trafficking at the AU level.

In 2016, the AACC embarked on a journey to advocate towards the AU on issues of gender justice for the first time. The development of a new African Union Gender Strategy was identified as an important opportunity and entry point. The only reference to religion in the initial draft of the strategy was negative, highlighting religious narratives that oppress women and girls. Faith representatives were not initially included in the official consultations. However, through informal engagement with and

continuous lobbying towards the AU Women, Gender and Development Directorate (WGDD) and Gender Links, responsible for writing the draft Strategy, the AACC was invited to contribute in the official consultations.

AACC engagement has also prompted the organization of an official interfaith consultation on the draft strategy, which was not part of the original plans. As a result of that two-day consultation, together with AACC participation in other off- and online consultations and its continuous lobbying towards the WGDD and Gender Links, input from faith representatives was incorporated into the draft strategy. This was a great success and augurs well for the future engagement of faith leaders with the AU.

Gender justice is achieved when women and men, girls and boys have equal enjoyment of human rights, responsibilities, life prospects and opportunities, and the power and resources to shape their own lives and contribute to society, irrespective of gender or sex.

Recommendations

Gender justice is achieved when women and men, girls and boys have equal enjoyment of human rights, responsibilities, life prospects and opportunities, and the power and resources to shape their own lives and contribute to society, irrespective of gender or sex. This paper has described and given examples of how faith leaders have the potential, the responsibility and the opportunities to enable positive movement towards gender justice. To increase the momentum and scope of this movement, the following are required:

- The re-visiting of religious texts to challenge oppressive narratives and explore and share the potential of religion to liberate women and girls, men and boys from harmful gender stereotypes and gender injustice;
- Advocacy by faith leaders, female and male, at all levels – in their congregations, communities, wider societies and internationally – to challenge and hold to account policy- and decision-makers and promote and defend gender justice;
- Increasing collaboration and cooperation among faith leaders, including those of different faiths, supporting, informing and encouraging each other and acting and speaking together with one voice to challenge gender injustice wherever they find it;
- More governments and development actors enrolling faith leaders and supporting their potential to become key actors in achieving gender justice.



Image 5: Side by Side East Africa Symposium, Nairobi, November 2015

Endnotes

[1] <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/> [2] See for instance “Humanitarian crises and the role of faith”, *Oxfam The politics of poverty*, January 2017: <https://politicsofpoverty.oxfamamerica.org/2017/01/humanitarian-crises-and-the-role-of-faith/>

[3] See for instance “Religion and Diplomacy”, John Kerry, *America*, September 2015: <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/religion-and-diplomacy>

[4] Expression used by Rev. Dr. Lydia Mwaniki, Head of Theology, Family Values and Gender Justice Department at the All Africa Conference of Churches, during her official presentation on a panel on “Young People Working to Change Gender Stereotypes” at the 2017 9th African Union Gender Pre-Summit, in Addis Ababa.

[5] Tools such as the “Tamar Campaign” and “Created in God’s Image: from Hegemony to Partnership” have been developed to promote gender justice in Christianity. NCA is currently supporting the development of a tool like the “Tamar Campaign” but based on Islam for use in Mali and in Somalia.

Link to the Tamar manual: <http://sidebysidegender.org/library/tamar-campaign-contextual-bible-study-manual-on-gender-based-violence/>

Link to “Created in God’s Image: from Hegemony to Partnership”: <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/created-in-god-s-image-from-hegemony-to-partnership>

[6] UN Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes, p.6:

http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/publications-and-resources/Plan%20of%20Action_Religious_Prevent-Incite-WEB-rev3.pdf

[7] Christine Jadav, Christian Aid Regional Co-ordinator, Cornwall.