



30 Years On from The Beijing Platform for Action:
**Faith-Based Actors as
Catalyst Towards Positive
Norm Change**



Acknowledgements

To mark the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, the ACT Alliance Global Gender Justice Programme embarked on a journey with members to evidence the contributions of faith-based actors in contributing to the implementation of the framework. A focus on social norm change was identified as a space where faith-based actors have significant influence, however, is often not robustly evidenced.

The research was produced in close collaboration with ACT Alliance members and forums, who are implementing the Global Gender Justice Programme in national, regional and global spaces. The advisory group included a diversity of faith-based actors, from grassroots organisations to some of the largest International Non-Governmental Organisations. Together, the group engaged in deep dialogue, reflection and analysis to share insights from our work over the past three decades.

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Executive Summary

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The Beijing Platform for Action, adopted at the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, remains one of the most significant ‘blueprint’ in the global advancement of women’s rights. Its impact on the promotion of women's rights has been immense and enduring. Over the past 30 years it has been a catalyst for progress, but also serves as a reminder of the continuous need to affirm the human rights of women and girls in all their diversity worldwide.

Faith leaders and communities can be powerful drivers of change, particularly as trusted voices from within their own communities. Many faith-based actors have contributed a significant role in promoting equality and justice, they can be advocates for human rights, duty bearers, service providers for health and education and legislators. Crucially, faith-based actors have real-life influence on social norms that shape the uptake and acceptability of gender equality laws, policies and practices. Around the world, many faith leaders are active agents for change, in dismantling harmful social norms and promoting justice, equality, and human rights.

Over the last 30 years, we have also witnessed how faith-based actors have contributed to maintaining patriarchal structures and practices and pushing back against gender equality. Faith communities have the potential to either promote or restrict progress towards advancing gender equality and the human rights for women and girls. Due to the diversity of faith-based actors and the subsequent diverse ways that they can contribute to the Beijing Platform for Action, faith-based actors are a critical stakeholder.

This report focuses on how faith-based actors are provoking social norm change to advance human rights and gender equality. Social norms profoundly shape the behaviour and thinking of our societies, and they are an essential part of cultural and religious life. It is crucial to understand how social norms influence practices and how locally led faith-based action can play a transformative role.

The report spotlights the work by ACT Alliance members and partners, who are using faith-based methodologies to promote gender equality. Specifically, we focus on how faith communities can be a transformative force in ensuring human rights and dismantling patriarchal power. The report concludes with a series of recommendations and calls to actions to Member States, UN Agencies, and wider civil society, including faith-based actors, to catalyse collective action for sustainable development.

Our aim and hope for this report is to be a conversation starter, in both advocacy and programmatic spaces, to strengthen partnerships with faith-based actors, who are strategically advancing gender equality and human rights. As this report evidenced, sometimes we need to shine a light on the social norms and beliefs that fuel ‘taboos’ to be able to unlock the power for collective and transformative change.

The Contexts of a Global Framework

The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action (BPfA) were adopted unanimously by 189 countries in 1995. Over the past three decades, the world has experienced profound demographic, political, and social changes that have driven advancements in human rights, gender equality and economic development. Efforts to reduce poverty and inequality have expanded access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities.¹

Faith and religion in the private and public spheres have also experienced a changing religious landscape. By 2050 the number of Christians in sub-Saharan Africa is expected to double, but their share of the population will decrease from 63% in 2010 to 58% in 2050.² In contrast, during this period the Muslim population is projected to grow from 23% to 29%. Many Christians and Muslims, for example in sub-Saharan Africa, also retain beliefs and rituals that are characteristic of traditional African religions.³ In Latin America and the Caribbean, Christians will remain the majority at 89% of the population in 2050, a slight decline from 90% in 2010. Meanwhile, the global religiously unaffiliated population⁴ is expected to decrease from 16% in 2010 to 13% by 2050 while the absolute number will increase, due to the world's overall population growth.⁵ The world remains deeply religious.

Religious diversity and the shifting religious landscape play a significant role in efforts to achieve gender equality. As faith traditions evolve and intersect with cultural and societal changes, they continue to impact the beliefs, values, and practices that define gender roles and shape power relations. Locally rooted, context-sensitive approaches—such as those informed by intersectional⁶ and decolonial approaches that prioritise the recognition of diverse contexts and lived experiences, are required to address systemic inequalities and power dynamics.⁷ While these perspectives provide pathways for progress, faith-based actors are not a homogenous group, and there is significant and growing opposition from conservative faith-based actors who deliberately challenge the legitimacy of human rights.⁸ Disinformation is spread through aggressive campaigns to create a “moral panic”. Gender equality, feminism and LGBTQI+ rights are being represented as external enemies of the patriarchal heteronormative nuclear family model.⁹ ¹⁰ A clear anti-rights political agenda and stronger alliances across political divides have resulted in a rollback on women's rights related to women's political participation, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and LGBTQI+ rights.¹¹

Policy progress has nevertheless been made. The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (The Maputo Protocol) calls on all Member States to give greater attention to the realisation of women's rights in order to eliminate all forms of discrimination and gender

¹ Mark R. M. (2008). The Urban Transformation of the Developing World. *Science* 319,761-764. doi:[10.1126/science.1153012](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1153012)

² Wormald, B. (2015, April 2). The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ The religiously unaffiliated, often referred to as “nones,” encompass individuals who identify as atheists, agnostics, or those who consider their religion to be “nothing in particular.” However, some within this group still maintain religious or spiritual beliefs.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Intersectionality, a concept popularized by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, underscores the importance of understanding how various forms of discrimination overlap, especially for women who belong to multiple marginalized groups.

⁷ Townsend-Bell, E. (2021). Breaking hegemony: coalition as decolonial-intersectional praxis. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 4(2), 235-253.

⁸ U.N.H.R.C. Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls (2024). *Escalating backlash against gender equality and urgency of reaffirming substantive equality and the human rights of women and girls: Report of the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls*. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4051227>

⁹ Roggeband, C., & Krizsán, A. (2020). Democratic backsliding and the backlash against women's rights: Understanding the current challenges for feminist politics. *UN Women Discussion Papers*.

¹⁰ Bárcenas Barajas, K. (2021). La violencia simbólica en el discurso sobre la ‘ideología de género’: una perspectiva desde la dominación simbólica a través del pánico moral y la posverdad. *Intersticios sociales*, (21), 125-150.

¹¹ Ibid.

based violence against women.¹² Similarly, in Latin America and the Caribbean the “Regional Agenda on Gender” focuses on greater action to address care systems, gender data, and systemic inequality.¹³ Yet protocols, institutions and systems alone cannot ensure policies are implemented or drive action on the ground.

UN Women recognises the importance of traditional and faith leaders in advancing gender equality, particularly in the roles they play as ‘custodians of cultural practices within their communities’.¹⁴ For example, UN Women, through the Spotlight Initiative Africa Regional Program (SIARP), in collaboration with the African Union Commission and in partnership with the EU Delegation to the AU, have created "Partnership Guidelines to Support Strengthened Engagement between the African Union, Regional Faith-Based Organisations and Communities of Traditional Leaders for the Prevention of and Response to Gender-Based Violence in Africa".¹⁵

Alongside regional efforts, global initiatives have been playing a key role in influencing policy and driving norm change that holds the potential to translate commitments into action. Networks and initiatives are vital in bridging policy with action and driving norms change. The Rabat Plan of Action (2012)¹⁶ included faith leaders’ core responsibilities against incitement to hatred, including incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. The Beirut Declaration on *Faith for Rights* (2017) further emphasises how ‘individual and communal expression of religions or beliefs thrive and flourish in environments where human rights are protected’.¹⁷ The declaration is supported by a ‘#Faith4Rights’ (2020) toolkit, issued by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) also fosters collaboration between faith-based actors, governments, academia and UN agencies to promote sustainable development, including gender equality and empowerment (SDG5). Through global dialogue, learning, sharing of good practices and evidence, and collaboration to better inform policy and practices, PaRD integrates faith-based perspectives into global development efforts.

The commitment of people and communities must support gender equality policies; without this the gap between policy and practice will continue to negatively impact the lives of women and girls. Men and boys contribute multiple roles, as contributors to inequalities, but also as critical allies in defending human rights and gender equality. Securing the human rights of women and girls is fundamental to building inclusive, just, peaceful, and equitable societies. Moreover, it needs also to be acknowledged that men and boys are also affected by gender inequalities, not only as brothers, fathers, and partners, but also as those who are silenced and targets of violence from other men.¹⁸

This report explores how faith-based actors in all their diversity contribute to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. The report explores case studies and empirical evidence, gathered from ACT Alliance members, forums and partners, to demonstrate how faith-based actors, including religious institutions, faith communities, and faith leaders, have specifically contributed to social norm change to advance gender equality. The report largely reflects a Christian framework, although some of the faith-

¹² Maputo Protocol is available at <http://www.achpr.org/files/instruments/women_protocol/achpr_instr_proto_women_eng.pdf>.

¹³ CEPAL, N. (2022). Informe de la Reunión Extraordinaria de la Mesa Directiva de la Conferencia Regional sobre la Mujer de América Latina y el Caribe.

¹⁴ <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/11/guidelines-to-support-engagement-with-traditional-and-religious-leaders>

¹⁵ <https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/UNWOMEN-Guidelines%20AUC%20English.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/freedom-of-expression>

¹⁷ <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/40/58>

¹⁸ Jewkes, R., Flood, M., & Lang, J. (2015). From work with men and boys to changes of social norms and reduction of inequities in gender relations: A conceptual shift in prevention of violence against women and girls. *Lancet (London, England)*, 385(9977), 1580–1589. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)61683-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61683-4)

based actors featured partners and implemented in interfaith contexts. When religious teachings and leadership promote equality and justice, they provide powerful moral foundations that can challenge discriminatory norms, inspire behavioural change, and support policy change at every level as well as the implementation within communities.¹⁹

The nexus between social norms and gender inequalities

Social norms are the unwritten rules that guide behaviour within a given community, shaping expectations of what is acceptable and influencing individual and collective actions.²⁰ Gender-related social norms have often been embedded in patriarchal systems that define power hierarchies and perpetuate intersecting inequalities.²¹ These systems can be reinforced through cultural traditions, religious teachings and ceremonies, as well as discriminatory legislation and social institutions. Colonial rule played a significant role in reinforcing rigid gender roles. The intersection of religion and patriarchy in many contexts has granted moral legitimacy to restrictive gender norms, embedding them within legal, social and cultural frameworks. However, these norms are not static. Faith and behaviour exist in a dialectical relationship — while faith influences conduct, human actions also reinterpret and redefine faith over time. This dynamic allows for the transformation of both social norms and religious understanding.

Social norms often emerge, and are sustained over time, through a bottom-up process in which individuals' attitudes and behaviours are shaped by ideas and beliefs (and vice versa) stemming from religion and culture, and more recently, science.²² These social fields, along with the institutions that govern them, are key variables that shape one of the most important subsets of social norms: gender norms. Gender norms often dictate what is considered appropriate behaviour based on assumed gender roles and socially constructed perceptions, behaviours and norms of femininity and masculinity, perpetuating inequitable roles and relationships.²³

Although attitudes and norms are connected, they work differently: attitudes come from individual motivations, while norms are driven by social expectations and reflect the perceived will of the group.²⁴ In this sense, within the nuclear family the process of socialisation of girls and boys by adults (i.e. parents, uncles, grandparents) is a powerful engine for the intergenerational reproduction of inequalities but also offers fertile ground for transforming gender norms. Roles associated with masculinity and femininity have shifted over time. In some pre-colonial societies, gender was understood as a spectrum rather than a binary, with many genders holding significance, including sacred or spiritual roles in traditional communities.²⁵

Over the past three decades multiple initiatives involving faith leaders in advancing gender equality, including ending gender-based violence and promoting girls' education, have demonstrated how faith can be an ally in tackling gender inequalities.^{26 27} Feminist movements have also played a critical role in

¹⁹ Khalaf-Elledge, N. (2021). *The Religion–Gender Nexus in Development: Policy and Practice Considerations*. Routledge.

²⁰ Cialdini, Robert B., Raymond R. Reno, and Carl A. Kallgren. 1990. "A focus theory of normative conduct: Recycling the concept of norms to reduce littering in public places," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58(6): 1015-1026, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.58.6.1015>.

²¹ Institute for Reproductive Health. 2019. *Social Norms and AYSRH: Building a Bridge from Theory to Program Design*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University.

²² Comino, J. L., & Cazarin, R. (2023). Gender and sexuality meet science and religion. *ISA eSymposium for Sociology*.

²³ Connell, R. W. (2005). Change among the gatekeepers: Men, masculinities, and gender equality in the global arena. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30(3), 1801–1825.

²⁴ Ajzen, I. (1991). The Theory of Planned Behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 179–211.

²⁵ Chaudhuri, M. (2004). *Feminism in India*.

²⁶ Istratii, R., & Ali, P. (2022). A multi-sectoral evidence synthesis on religious beliefs, intimate partner violence and faith-based interventions.

²⁷ Le Roux, E., & Pertek, S. I. (2023). *On the significance of religion in violence against women and girls* (p. 195). Taylor & Francis.

resisting and reshaping restrictive gender norms, including in religious contexts. By advocating for alternative interpretations and questioning patriarchal traditions, faith-based gender equality advocates have contributed to promoting understandings that gender norms are not fixed but can be redefined to promote justice and equality.

Conforming to social norms often results in social acceptance, while deviating from these norms can lead to exclusion or even violence. In Sierra Leone (see case study section), for example, faith leaders advocating for an end to female genital mutilation (FGM) initially faced intense societal resistance. This was due to the practice being deeply tied to social belonging and acceptance. Women who rejected FGM were often seen as violating cultural and religious expectations and risked isolation. To navigate these challenges, faith leaders reframed their message, emphasising scriptural principles of dignity and bodily integrity rather than directly opposing FGM. By positioning their advocacy within religious teachings, rather than against, they were able to mitigate backlash while gradually shifting perceptions.

In Nepal’s Tharu Community, challenging harmful practices and rigid social norms has proven essential in advancing gender equality, particularly for women and girls. When influential leaders advocate for change, they contribute to reshaping norms and fostering more inclusive and just societies. But what exactly are social norms, and how do they shape our lives?

In the heart of Nepal’s Tharu community, spiritual leaders like Chaudhary have long been seen as the keepers of tradition. Revered as spiritual guides and problem-solvers, they perform sacred rituals, heal illnesses, and uphold customs that have shaped community life for generations. For years, Chaudhary followed this path without question, reinforcing practices that defined rigid roles for men and women. But everything changed after he attended a two-day training on gender equality, organised by *Digo Bikash Samaj*: “I never thought my role could extend beyond rituals and healing,” he admitted. “The training showed me the inequalities buried in our traditions—and the power I had to change them.” Inspired, Chaudhary began to condemn rumours of witchcraft towards women, actively encourage regular health check-ups for pregnant women, and break taboos by supporting women to read sacred texts and lead religious ceremonies. The effects rippled across the village. Women who were once excluded from leadership and told that change would bring misfortune were embraced in leadership roles.

The Beijing Platform for Action: 12 Critical Areas

Women and the environment



Violence against women



The girl child



Women and the economy



Institutional mechanisms



Women and armed conflict



Human rights of women



Education and training of women



Women and poverty



Women in power and decision-making



Women and health



Women and the media



The “Development Taboo”: from problem to solution

The BPfA identifies 12 critical areas of concern that serve as a global framework for advancing gender equality. While presented as distinct critical areas, it is important to note and promote how interconnected all of the critical areas are. Each outlines strategic objectives aimed at dismantling systemic gender inequalities. Religion and faith, deeply embedded in cultural contexts, are pivotal in shaping the social norms that influence these 12 critical areas. Alongside the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, the BPfA critical areas have shaped guiding principles for strategic plans of development organisations, governments and civil society working for gender equality.

Religion, and its interplay with patriarchy, have historically reinforced gender inequalities, with often male-dominated institutions using religious doctrines to justify discriminatory norms. This dynamic has led different streams of feminist movements and institutional development actors to resist engaging with faith-based actors and religion, perceived as only part of the ‘problem’ rather than solution for gender equality.²⁸ A global secularisation process also reinforces distinctions between secular and religious positions in politics and public life.²⁹ Despite efforts by faith-based actors working for gender equality for recognition in global policy spaces as strategic allies, its practical integration remains limited and often left to individual discretion.³⁰

Faith-based actors, theologians and religious leaders are leading efforts to re-examine religious teachings and practices to advocate for key issues concerning gender equality in their communities, institutions and wider society.³¹ ³² Scholars of development evidence at least three arguments that support the value of these faith-based collaborations:

1. The extensive reach of faith communities provides a unique, trusted and effective platform for disseminating new ideas and practices across diverse cultures and belief systems, including challenging discriminatory legislation, ideas, norms and practices.³³
2. Behaviours such as violence against women are often intertwined with religious and cultural interpretations upheld by faith communities, including notions of family honour, sexual purity and dominant masculinity.³⁴ ³⁵
3. Survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) frequently seek solace in religious support systems, where faith leaders and communities are ‘first responders’ providing counselling, social support groups and access to essential resources.³⁶ ³⁷

²⁸ Beek, K. A. V. (2000). Spirituality: A development taboo. *Development in Practice*, 10(1), 31–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520052484>

²⁹ Burchardt, M., Wohlrab-Sahr, M., & Middell, M. (2015). *Multiple Secularities Beyond the West: Religion and Modernity in the Global Age*. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.

³⁰ Le Roux, E. (2021) *Religion and Gender in Donor Policies and Practice*.

³¹ Jakobsen, W. T., & Pillay, M. N. (2022). Remembering Tutu’s liberation theology: Toward gender justice from theo-ethical feminist perspectives. *Anglican Theological Review*, 104(3), 330-340.

³² Radford, W. (2017). Meaning in the margins: Postcolonial feminist methodologies in practical theology. *Practical Theology*, 10(2), 118-132.

³³ Clarke, G., & Jennings, M. (2008). *Development, civil society and faith-based organizations: Bridging the sacred and the secular*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://books.google.es/books?id=eBW5AAAAIAAJ>

³⁴ Emmett, T., & Butchart, A. (2000). *Behind the Mask: Getting to Grips with Crime and Violence in South Africa: Getting to Grips with Crime and Violence in SA*.

³⁵ Pillay, R. (2003). *The role of transport in accessing social services for women (Child Support Grant beneficiaries) in rural areas: A case study of the Lions River pay point*. [Thesis]. <https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/handle/10413/3962>

³⁶ Cazarin, R., & Cossa, E. (2017). Spiritual brokers: African Pastors and the mediation of migratory processes. *Critical African Studies*, 9(2), 226-240.

³⁷ Tankink, M. (2007). ‘The Moment I Became Born-again the Pain Disappeared’: The Healing of Devastating War Memories in Born-again Churches in Mbarara District, Southwest Uganda. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 44(2), 203–231. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461507077723>

Breaking the ‘taboo’ around religion in development is not just about shifting strategies—it is about reshaping narratives that connect with deeply held beliefs. When space for faith and spirituality is created in advocacy and sustainable development, there is potential for action to resonate with communities on a more comprehensive and holistic level. Contextual and community-led approaches invite dialogue, a key practice in the pursuit of justice. Justice is intrinsically part of many religious traditions, including dignity, ethics, self-determination, liberation, and overall mental and physical wellbeing. Justice is embedded in sacred texts and can enable people of faith to understand better the interconnected injustices that undermine human rights and dignity.

By seeing faith-based actors as a partner rather than a barrier, development actors can gain powerful allies in the struggle for gender equality. Faith-based actors, who affirm human rights, can also be strategic stakeholders for engaging in countering the backlashes on gender equality, especially when religion is used to block progress.

Religion and Social Norm Change:

How are religion and faith framed in Beijing Platform for Action?

Religion, spirituality and belief play a central role in the lives of millions of women and men, in the way they live and, in the aspirations, they have for the future. The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is inalienable and must be universally enjoyed. This right includes the freedom to have or to adopt the religion or belief of their choice worship, observance, practice and teaching. In order to realize equality, development and peace, there is a need to respect these rights and freedoms fully. Religion, thought, conscience and belief may, and can, contribute to fulfilling women’s and men’s moral, ethical and spiritual needs and to realizing their full potential in society. However, it is acknowledged that any form of extremism may have a negative impact on and can lead to violence and discrimination.

Beijing Platform for Action, Chapter 2 “Global Framework”, Paragraph 24

The Beijing Platform for Action underscores the role of religion, spirituality, and belief in shaping lives and aspirations. It affirms the universal rights to religion, freedom of thought, and conscience and belief. These rights are fundamental to achieving equality, development and peace and include the freedom to practice and express beliefs both individually and collectively. As illustrated in the extract from the BPfA, the document recognises the potential of religion to fulfil moral, ethical and spiritual needs while cautioning against the dangers of extremism, which can lead to violence and discrimination.

The BPfA frames ‘religion, spirituality and belief’ in three ways. First, religion can be a source of empowerment. Second, it can act as a barrier to gender equality. Third, it reveals the challenge of balancing religious diversity with human rights. These themes show the complex connection between religion and gender equality and emphasises the need for thoughtful engagement with religious values and for collaboration among faith leaders, policymakers and advocates to drive progress:

1. Religion as a Source of Empowerment

One of the themes identified in the BPfA is the potential for religion to act as a source of empowerment. The Beijing Declaration emphasises how the right to freedom of thought, con science, religion and belief, guarantees women the possibility of realising their full potential in society, while the BPfA highlights the

transformative role of religious teachings aligned with gender equality.^{38 39} Faith-based traditions, when interpreted to emphasise justice, compassion, and the dignity of all individuals, can catalyse social change and advance human rights for women and girls. The BPfA underscores how engaging faith leaders can amplify initiatives for gender equality. By emphasising that religious teachings can be compatible with human rights principles, such efforts can foster both individual and collective empowerment. The BPfA emphasises the importance of meaningful inclusion of women's voices within religious institutions, acknowledging that their representation in decision-making is critical to leveraging faith-based actors' potential to advance gender equality.⁴⁰ Men's overrepresentation in leadership roles within many religious institutions remains a significant obstacle.

2. Religion as a Barrier to Equality

Religion can act as a barrier to gender equality, particularly when some doctrines are used by faith-based actors to perpetuate discriminatory practices. The BPfA highlights the danger of rigidly applied religious norms that restrict the human rights of women and girls and reinforce patriarchal systems.⁴¹ Specific references in the document draw attention to areas where religion intersects with legal systems, such as family law, inheritance rights, and personal autonomy, which can disadvantage women and girls. In many societies, religiously derived laws and practices governing marriage, custody, and inheritance have contributed to systemic inequality.

The BPfA acknowledges calls for religiously derived laws and practices to align with gender equality principles. This process often involves collaboration between faith leaders, policymakers, and advocacy groups to address legal and cultural barriers. For example, as demonstrated in countries that have successfully addressed issues like early and forced child marriage. This is possible when leaders recognise this social problem in their own faith communities and as a concern for their own theologies. These dialogue processes deeply enrich the theologies and contextual community interventions. Faith does not inherently conflict with gender equality; rather, it is often in the interpretation and application of religious scriptures and doctrines. Therefore, creating space for critical examination from within communities is critical to transform discriminatory interpretations, interpretations and practices.

3. Religion and Pluralism within Human Rights Frameworks

The BPfA underscores the importance of respecting cultural and religious diversity while safeguarding universal human rights.⁴² This includes the necessity and complexity of religious freedom with promoting gender equality.⁴³ Pluralistic societies can face the challenge of reconciling religious traditions with the principles of equality that are enshrined in human rights frameworks. For instance, the BPfA suggests that interfaith dialogues and culturally sensitive approaches to policy development can contribute to upholding religious freedoms while ensuring that the human rights of women and girls are not compromised. Pluralistic frameworks can bridge the gap between tradition and equality by fostering inclusive dialogue and encouraging seeking mutual respect and common ground.

The call for normative change has inspired significant progress in gender equality efforts. Governments and civil society actors can challenge discriminatory practices and create inclusive systems that affirm

³⁸ (page 9, paragraph 12)

³⁹ (pages 23-24, paragraph 24)

⁴⁰ (page 23)

⁴¹ (page 32, paragraph 46)

⁴² (page 19, paragraph 9)

⁴³ (pages 23-24, paragraph 24)

human rights frameworks. This requires strong religious sensitivity and literacy, to navigate the complexities of cultural and religious contexts and collaboration.

Critical Areas for Gender Transformative and Faith-Based Approaches to Social Norms Change

In the last three decades, gender equality programmes focused on transforming social norms have gained traction. For this work to be successful requires reflective practices, creating a critical consciousness to liberate ourselves and the world from injustice.⁴⁴ Gender-transformative approaches involve an analysis of power dynamics and the promotion of equitable relations, which includes challenging harmful social norms especially gender norms.⁴⁵

Power is often understood as the ability to influence others, but in religious contexts, it operates through social structures, collective identity and ideological frameworks, many of which have been shaped by colonial history.⁴⁶ Rather than being a fixed or purely coercive force, power in faith communities is fluid—shaped by religious leaders, institutional norms, and the agency of individuals and groups.⁴⁷ Faith actors can reinforce hierarchies or drive social change, but power is not one-sided; communities and individuals can also negotiate, challenge, and reshape religious influence. This dynamic interplay highlights how power in religion is not imposed in a singular way but continually shifts in response to broader social, cultural, and political forces.

Key terms like “harmful” and “power dynamics” are often not defined, and can differ in contexts, sometimes limiting clarity in practice. Equally complex is the task to identify “where” and “how” transformation happens, and to develop the tools used to monitor this progress.⁴⁸ Transformation is as much a process as it is a goal.⁴⁹ Gender transformative approaches focus on power shifts, which are required when changing social norms both at individual and collective levels. Faith-based actors, due to the trust of their communities, can provoke journeys of transformation, and support community members as they address gender unjust power relationships and redistribute power in more equitable ways.

Many gender programmes operate within institutional structures - national policies, intergovernmental agencies, religious, philanthropic and civil society organisations - which shape implementation. Some advocate for a “top-down” policy-driven approach, while others emphasise “bottom-up” strategies that centre community knowledge and leadership, and still others a combination of both.⁵⁰ Faith-based actors working for gender justice can offer a unique bridge between these models, as in addition to their rootedness in communities they often have access to formal policy spaces, influencing decision-makers as well as grassroots communities. Their guidance across religious experiences, community trust, and

⁴⁴ for a discussion on the importance of Freirean principles see: Cornwall, A. (2003). Whose Voices? Whose Choices? Reflections on Gender and Participatory Development. *World Development*, 31(8), 1325–1342. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X\(03\)00086-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(03)00086-X)

⁴⁵ Gupta, G. R. (2000). Gender, sexuality, and HIV/AIDS: The what, the why, and the how. *Canadian HIV/AIDS Policy & Law Review*, 5(4), 86–93.

⁴⁶ Hamar, A. K. (1996). Some Understandings of Power in Feminist Liberation Theologies. *Feminist Theology*, 4(12), 10-20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/096673509600001202>

⁴⁷ Turner, J. C. (2005). Explaining the nature of power: A three-process theory. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 35(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.244>

⁴⁸ Cazarin, R. (2024). Behind the Numbers: Intersectional Negotiations in Gender-transformative Programmes with Religious Leaders in Southern Africa. *Progress in Development Studies*, 24(4), 357-371.

⁴⁹ Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women’s empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal 1. *Gender & Development*, 13(1), 13–24.

⁵⁰ Moser, C. O. N. (2017). Gender transformation in a new global urban agenda: Challenges for Habitat III and beyond. *Environment and Urbanization*, 29(1), 221–236. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247816662573>

cultural embeddedness position them as potential facilitators of social norm change, able to translate transformative gender equality principles into locally resonant narratives. While secularist approaches in development policies and practices have at times conflated ‘religion’ and ‘culture’, and pitted ‘tradition’ against ‘modernity’,⁵¹ - it is of critical importance that cultural change initiatives include faith-based actors.

The definition of gender transformation varies across political, cultural, and religious contexts, shaping how change is understood and implemented.⁵² Faith-based actors can play a crucial role in ensuring gender-transformative approaches are both meaningful and contextual. Furthermore, their sustained presence in communities and their intergenerational influence ensure that gender transformation is not merely a policy agenda, or siloed to one development programme, but an ongoing, deeply embedded process.

The BPfA provides a clear framework towards achieving gender equality which includes social norm change. Yet, incorporating the intersectional and decolonial approaches is essential for ensuring the meaning and relevance of social norm change in diverse communities, particularly in the global south.⁵³ These frameworks go beyond surface-level interventions towards advocating for process-oriented solutions that address the historical and societal roots of oppression.⁵⁴ By exploring the intersecting dimensions of discrimination - the need for context-specific approaches that address gendered power dynamics and uplift local leadership is highlighted, challenging the dominance of Western colonial frameworks of analysis. Such approaches not only target the root causes of inequality but also ensure that social transformations are sustainable and leave no one behind.

The report will examine the BPfA’s critical areas through four key approaches identified from the analysis of the case studies, showcasing how faith communities, leaders and institutions influence social norms, can challenge systemic inequalities and contribute to transformative gender equality policies and practices.

1. Faith-Based Community Action for Transformative Change

Faith leaders and organisations, who have deep connections to communities, are uniquely positioned to mobilise transformative change towards gender equality.

Faith leaders have the potential to participate in transformative processes by being in dialogue with their communities, contributing to the change processes from within, while also being able to exercise their spiritual authority by speaking out on behalf of their communities. For many people, their faith identity is strongly connected to their values and beliefs that inform how they participate in, build, and interact with their families and society at large.⁵⁵ The depth of such engagements connecting individual and collective experiences, and addressing root causes of inequalities, has been the guiding principle of gender transformative work promoted by faith-based organisations. Yet, while individual awareness and personal growth are essential in driving transformation, feminist scholars have long emphasised that lasting change is more effectively achieved through collective action.⁵⁶

⁵¹ https://pure.rug.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/245839542/10.4324_9781003246046_1_chapterpdf.pdf

⁵² Prügl, E., & Lustgarten, A. (2006). Mainstreaming gender in international organizations. In *Women and gender equity in development theory and practice* (pp. 53–70). Duke University Press.

⁵³ Townsend-Bell, E. (2021). Breaking hegemony: coalition as decolonial-intersectional praxis. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 4(2), 235-253.

⁵⁴ hooks, bell. (2014). *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics*.

⁵⁵ Brabant, S. and Brown, J. (2018). *Advocacy Briefing: The Role of Faith Leaders in Achieving Gender Justice, Side by Side*

⁵⁶ Moser, C. O. N. (2017). Gender transformation in a new global urban agenda: challenges for Habitat III and beyond. *Environment and Urbanization*, 29(1), 221-236. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247816662573>

The area of **Women and the Economy** underscores systemic barriers such as women's limited access to financial services, property and formal employment. Women continue to face inequality in accessing paid work, due to discriminatory social norms causing gendered patterns of unpaid care and domestic work. Faith leaders including Pope Francis have advocated for reforms of global financial systems to reduce rising economic inequality, including mobilisation of their faith communities to advocate for debt justice.⁵⁷ Faith-based initiatives have in a myriad of ways shown their ability to leverage the power of their community presence. For example, faith-based actors have implemented rights-based microfinance programmes, which have enabled Indigenous women to access resources traditionally denied them.⁵⁸ Vocational training programmes implemented by faith-based actors have reached marginalised women in rural areas where sometimes states fail to reach, contributing to breaking free from poverty cycles.⁵⁹ Economic programmes have enabled individuals and communities to create financial independence and foster social capital, which shift power relations within communities. However, women and girls continue to be disproportionately responsible for unpaid care work, which continues to be a barrier to access to formal markets. Alongside macro-level policy changes to address unpaid care work, social norm change is critical for advancing women's access to economic participation.⁶⁰

In **Argentina**, the Evangelical Church of the River Plate established the "Pastoral Listening Guards," offering confidential support to women experiencing violence. While this programme successfully engaged men as allies in gender justice, implementing partners pointed out that systemic barriers, such as discriminatory labour laws and lack of access to financial capital, continue to limit women's ability to exit violent relationships. Addressing these deeper structural issues requires extending engagement in community-based interventions to influence policy informed by lived experiences.

Community acceptance of discriminatory cultural practices like early and forced child marriage, can be exacerbated by economic drivers of poverty. Cultural practices persist, despite violating international human rights laws, due to being deeply ingrained in cultural and traditional social norms. From grassroots leaders and local communities to high-level religious and political figures, moral justifications are often presented by those who uphold them. Faith-based actors, including faith leaders and religious institutions, can create interconnected networks to advance gender equality with a presence at community, national, regional and global levels.⁶¹

Faith-based actors have continuous presence and long-standing service in communities, often with strong understanding of the needs of the communities and their consequent ability to contextualise programmes. Faith-based actors are also large service providers, including in education and health, and importantly shape the agendas of places of worship and communities.⁶² For example, the work of "*Ecumenicas por el Derecho a Decidir*" engaged faith leaders in ecumenical dialogues on emergency contraception. The introduction of issues as such into faith communities across the country has ultimately influenced a key parliamentary vote on decriminalising its use. This major victory contributes to implementing the BPfA critical area of **Women and Health**.

⁵⁷ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-02/pope-francis-pass-inclusion-workshop-finance.html#:~:text=Rising%20inequality,-%E2%80%9CThe%20world%20is&text=Around%205%20million%20children%20will,%2C%20prostitution%2C%20and%20organ%20trafficking>

⁵⁸ Hoda, N., & Gupta, S. L. (2015). Faith-based organizations and microfinance: A literature review. *Asian Social Science*, 11(9), 245-254.

⁵⁹ Piper, K. N., Fuller, T. J., Ayers, A. A., Lambert, D. N., Sales, J. M., & Wingood, G. M. (2020). A qualitative exploration of religion, gender norms, and sexual decision-making within African American faith-based communities. *Sex Roles*, 82, 189-205.

⁶⁰ Karam, Azza, and Katherine Marshall. "Religion, Human Rights, and Development: Focusing on Health." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 14.3 (2016): 106-109.

⁶¹ Wood, H. J. (2019). Gender inequality: The problem of harmful, patriarchal, traditional and cultural gender practices in the church. *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 75(1).

⁶² Hidalgo, I., & Fernández, J. (2020). El papel de España en la cooperación para el desarrollo en materia de turismo en América Latina y el Caribe, 29, 1057-1075.

Education and Training of Women is one of the critical areas of the BPfA, which identifies significant educational disparities between boys and girls. In many regions, social norms still prioritise boys' over girls' education. Girls with disabilities are further marginalised, due to discriminatory norms and many educational systems failing to make the necessary adjustments effectively.^{63 64} Faith-based actors have promoted inclusive schooling practices for children with disabilities in contexts where significant gaps in state support remain. For example, in **Ethiopia**, FELM have worked to include sign-language interpretation in schools and partnered with faith leaders to address social stigmas that exclude girls with disabilities from community life. Religious training can also be a strategic space for strengthening the capacity of faith leaders to protect the rights of women and girls. Multi-stakeholder strategies that drive change at every level - from households to communities to broader societal structures with policies (i.e. social grants, affirmative action) are critical to ensuring transformative change.

2. Religious Frameworks Challenging Harmful Gender Norms

Religious frameworks offer a unique lens through which harmful gender norms can be challenged. Religious traditions, teachings and doctrines can promote equality and justice, offering a foundation for social norm change within communities.

Sustainable change begins with shifting consciousness. Faith-based actors, deeply embedded within their communities, possess a unique capacity to foster understanding, disseminate information and challenge deeply ingrained harmful gender norms. Faith-based actors have especially been committed to advocating to end violence against women, early and forced child marriage and female genital mutilation. By cultivating shared understandings of religious frameworks that are guided by values of equality and justice, harmful practices can be challenged by communities. In this line, liberation theology, including feminist liberation theology, has been a powerful framework for advocating women's rights, for example, in countries such as **Brazil** and **Mexico**.⁶⁵ This approach reframes women's rights not as 'foreign concepts' but as intrinsic to faith-based principles, thereby fostering dialogue and community ownership.

The Beijing Platform for Action identified the **Human Rights of Women** as a critical area. In regions such as Latin America and the Caribbean higher rates of GBV are experienced by Indigenous and Afro-descendant women, especially those practising minority religions.⁶⁶ In this context, gender equality values and freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) can be mutually reinforcing: FoRB ensures that all individuals—including women and girls—can practice their faith freely, while gender equality frameworks prevent religious interpretations from justifying discrimination or violence.

Patriarchal power reinforces the subjugation of women and girls that alienate them from decision-making processes on property rights and perpetuate cycles of inequality.⁶⁷ A perception that has enabled patriarchal social norms to persist both in society and global policy is the narrative that human rights and gender equality are external impositions that conflict with local traditions. The undermining of women's human rights results, for example, in significant obstacles for women in accessing justice and claiming

⁶³ Abdullahi, A. M. (2023). The challenges of advancing inclusive education: The case of Somalia's higher education. *Journal of Law and Sustainable Development*, 11(2), e422-e422.

⁶⁴ Arenas, D. S., & Cervantes, A. O. (2021). Los estereotipos de género y sus limitaciones en el ejercicio de la participación de la infancia en la escuela. *Revista Educación*, 45(2), 1-14.

⁶⁵ Gebara, I. (2023). *Caminhos para compreender a teologia feminista*, editora recriar, Sao Paulo

⁶⁶ Lezama, P. (2022). Studies on Demographics and Social Indicators: Afrodescendants in Latin America and their Sociodemographic Realities. In *Routledge Handbook of Afro-Latin American Studies* (pp. 329-343). Routledge.

⁶⁷ Ezeilo, J. N. (2021). Rethinking women and customary inheritance in Nigeria. *Commonwealth Law Bulletin*, 47(4), 706-718.

land rights, both of which are essential components of their economic independence and empowerment.⁶⁸

The BPfA's critical area of **Violence Against Women** (VAW) remains one of the most persistent barriers to gender equality, deeply entrenched in social norms that normalise abuse and silence survivors from seeking justice.⁶⁹ Girls are at increased risk of GBV, as highlighted within the **The Girl-Child** critical area. Across diverse contexts, faith-based actors, especially faith leaders and theologians, including feminist and queer theologians, have revisited sacred texts that shape religious teachings to challenge social norms and cultural beliefs that perpetuate VAW alongside harmful cultural practices. This includes strengthening the capacity of communities to distinguish cultural practices from religious teachings.

In **Kenya**, Indigenous Resource Management Organization (IREMO), a local NGO based in Marsabit county, collaborated with Yaa elders of the Gabra community and Rendile- Nabo, custodians of local culture and tradition, to conduct participatory training sessions and community forums. These activities highlighted the physical, psychological, and social impacts of early and forced child marriage, encouraging communities to prioritise girls' education, promote girls' wellbeing, and delay marriage until adulthood. In such a context, faith leaders were able to amplify these messages in spaces of worship, emphasising how harmful traditional practices conflict with religious principles that promote justice and dignity.

Harmful gender norms are also obstacles to advancements on SRHRs, a crucial section within the critical area of **Women and Health**. The BPfA promotes bodily autonomy and access to health services and information, this is further affirmed in the Sustainable Development Goals with the Indicator 5.6.1 measuring women's ability to exercise bodily autonomy and reshaped the discourse on reproductive health and rights.⁷⁰ Anti-rights actors have weaponised patriarchal interpretations to reinforce harmful gender norms, which has created significant obstacles in advancing global commitments, for example, at the UN Commission on Population and Development.⁷¹ ⁷² Anti-rights movements, who position themselves as anti 'gender ideology' continue to gain traction with the ability to oppose human rights and gender equality, specifically targeting SRHR, and LGBTQI+ rights.⁷³

In **Kenya**, Christian Aid has worked in Narok county with the Maasai, as Indigenous Southern people, where there is a high prevalence of GBV and high rates of maternal and child health mortality and morbidity, malnutrition and early marriages of girls. Many health concerns are influenced by social norms, religious beliefs and practices, and perpetuated through structural and systemic injustices. Christian Aid's Faith for Life Approach created pathways by which faith leaders challenged the harmful social norms using their own faith doctrines and affirmed Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights for women and girls. In **Malawi**, the Norwegian Church Aid Faith Actors Motivating Empowerment (FAME) toolkit guided faith leaders in creating dialogues among men, women and youth to address pressing issues such as teenage pregnancy and child marriage. Faith leaders as a trusted source of information for faith communities, provided influential voices in Kenya and Malawi that reached widely into their communities to tackle systemic gendered health inequalities.

⁶⁸ Sieder, R. (2021). Anthropological Contributions to International Legal Approaches to Violence Against Indigenous Women.

⁶⁹ Le Roux, E., & Du Toit, N. B. (2021). Exploring Tensions: Gender and Religion in Sub-Saharan Africa. In *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Gender and Society* (pp. 551-565). Routledge.

⁷⁰ <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/csw69-expert-group-meeting-three-decades-of-beijing-platform-for-action-a-closer-look-at-sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights-of-women-and-girls.pdf>

⁷¹ Forman-Rabinovici, A., & Sommer, U. (2018). An impediment to gender equality? Religion's influence on development and reproductive policy. *World Development*, 105, 48–58. DOI: 10.1016/J.WORLDDEV.2017.12.024.

⁷² Para-Mallam, F. J. (2010). Promoting gender equality in the context of Nigerian cultural and religious expression: beyond increasing female access to education. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 40(4), 459–477. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2010.490370>

⁷³ Sosa, L. (2021). Beyond gender equality? Anti-gender campaigns and the erosion of human rights and democracy. *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, 39, 3 - 10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0924051921996697>.

3. Transforming Masculinities and Dismantling Patriarchy

Faith leaders can challenge entrenched power structures, strengthening the engagement of men and boys to dismantle patriarchal values that perpetuate inequality and discrimination against women and girls, and people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.

Transforming gender norms requires collective struggles for justice. Gender inequality is not solely a “woman's issue” or the responsibility of the “women’s desk” in an organisation. Faith-based initiatives are engaging men and boys in addressing several critical areas of the BPfA that contribute to dismantling patriarchal social norms and contribute to ending **Violence Against Women**. Societal change requires the active engagement of all genders, including men and boys. For example, a diversity of initiatives encourages men to redefine their roles and responsibilities within their families and communities, contributing to shared responsibilities and recognition for unpaid care work. Harmful ideals of manhood among male leaders can suppress men and boys who speak up for gender justice.⁷⁴

Despite some faith-based actors operating within patriarchal power structures, they hold potential to foster inclusive and equitable institutions and communities. Recognising the influence of faith leaders in shaping social norms around masculinities, the United Nations has identified them as key allies in the fight against GBV worldwide.⁷⁵ A critical component of this approach is engaging men and boys of faith, from ordained clergy to lay leaders, in addressing GBV through religious structures, sermons, dialogues and fellowships.⁷⁶ The Engaging Men in Accountable Practices (EMAP) initiative in **South Sudan** led by Messianic Jewish Aid, explored power dynamics and gender roles with couples. By integrating transformative masculinity frameworks that connect to religious texts and faith-based practices, they have promoted contextualised gender equality and provoked change from within communities.

The digital sphere is gendered and plays a central role in shaping and reinforcing power hierarchies. Technology-based gender-based violence (TGBV) is a growing phenomenon that reinforces existing harmful dynamics between men and women which are often exacerbated by ‘toxic’ models of masculinities. Women and girls increasingly encounter cyber harassment, online stalking and other forms of digital abuse that attempt to limit their ability to participate in public and professional life fully. Moreover, prophetic faith leaders, who have spoken out for gender equality have also been subjected to social media attacks to silence them. This form of violence often mirrors offline patriarchal structures and is exacerbated by inadequate legal protections and accountability measures.

Thirty years on, the critical area of **Women and the Media** looks different, with digital technologies and social media creating opportunities for gender equality. However, systemic barriers rooted in patriarchy—including the digital divide, online violence, and gendered media portrayals—continue to limit progress towards gender equality. Faith-based actors have a vast reach through their own media channels (radio and TV shows, pastoral letters, digital spaces, etc.). The Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in **Brazil** launched the "For a Home Without Violence" campaign in collaboration with the Gender and Religion Programme of *Faculdades EST*.⁷⁷ The campaign raised awareness about domestic violence through social media cards, radio announcements, and local support networks, providing training on counselling and sheltering women at risk. This initiative emphasised that violence against women is a sin and called on faith communities and homes to support survivors and communities to challenge patriarchal social norms actively.

⁷⁴ Cazarin, R., & Davila, A. (2023). Entre el hablar y el silencio: la transformación de roles de género en espacios de activismo religioso-secular. *Disparidades. Revista de Antropología*, 78(1), e006-e006.

⁷⁵ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/8/religious-leaders-at-the-forefront-of-ending-gender-based-violence-in-ethiopia>

⁷⁶ <https://uganda.unfpa.org/en/news/unfpa-side-side-church-and-religious-leaders-end-gender-based-violence>

⁷⁷ <https://wicas.lutheranworld.org/content/time-teach-and-learn-diakonia-solidarity-131>

By amplifying women's voices, and openly encouraging men and boys to speak up against GBV and advocate for gender equality in media platforms, they can counteract stereotypes that perpetuate power imbalances. Campaigns like #NiUnaMenos and #IBelieveYou demonstrate how faith leaders can mobilise and influence for justice and systemic change. The data available shows that multi-level engagements with civil society, government and policymakers have potential to increase the engagement of men and boys, for example, in the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), the fight against homophobia and GBV.⁷⁸ These issues are of primary concern in several BPfA critical areas such as **Women and Health, Human Rights of Women, and Violence Against Women.**

Communities of faith and faith leaders can contribute to addressing the root causes of gendered inequalities as facilitators of the social agreements between gender norms, morality, attitudes and behaviours, all aspects that contribute to shaping perceptions of masculinity. By doing so, they can work towards changing discriminatory narratives of masculinity that perpetuate the subordination of women and people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Under this framework, individual change contributes to more remarkable systemic change. As a result, long term and sustainable programmes can be developed that significantly change, rather than just alter, the patriarchal systems that promote GBV and discrimination.

4. Advocacy for Structural and Policy Change

Faith leaders can advocate for policies to protect and promote gender equality, ensuring that progress is not only social but also institutionalised in policies and resources.

Faith-based actors hold a unique position to drive structural and policy change, with the ability to mobilise communities, hold governments accountable and ensure policy implementation. Faith leaders have positively reshaped policies and structures that perpetuate inequality. For instance, in **Sierra Leone**, faith leaders spearheaded the successful advocacy for the 2024 Child Rights Bill, which criminalised FGM of girls under 18. While politicians had supported FGM as a means of securing votes, faith and traditional leaders were able to create a collective voice for change. Faith-based actors were able to orientate the public discussion, using their own communication platforms to create counter-narratives to end FGM and push for progressive policy changes. Advocacy for legal and political reform also contributed to increased understanding in communities and transforming social norms to ensure both the passing of the Bill and then its implementation. This initiative addressed directly a powerful interconnection between the BPfA's critical areas of **The Girl-Child** and **Human Rights of Women.**

Weak institutional support for gender equality is reflected in the underfunding of gender programmes and the failure to enforce gender equality laws and policies. Strengthening these mechanisms is essential for sustained progress, which the critical area of **Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women** calls for. Faith-based actors, including religious institutions with their broad reach can advocate for the establishment and reinforcement of gender equality structures, using their access to policymakers to influence the uptake and effective implementation of gender-transformative policies and laws.

In **Zimbabwe**, the ACT Zimbabwe Forum has addressed patriarchal power dynamics by engaging faith leaders in redefining masculinity. For example, ACT Alliance national and international members trained faith leaders to be change agents for gender equality by equipping them as community monitors, developing a gender-responsive theological curriculum and conducting awareness campaigns. Key successes include legislation raising the legal age of marriage in Zimbabwe to 18, reducing child marriages in Marange and increasing commitment to advance gender justice in faith-based spaces.

⁷⁸ Peacock, D., & Levack, A. (2004). *The Men as Partners Program in South Africa: Reaching Men to End Gender-Based Violence and Promote Sexual and Reproductive Health - ProQuest*. <http://search.proquest.com/openview/0041c9cc6190a92e8f48d049a6d7149a/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=25645>

Some faith leaders were resistant to changing ingrained social norms, however, the project demonstrated the power of faith-based actors in challenging oppressive structures and both community and policy levels to increase accountability.

Women on the front line of the climate emergency are making important contributions as environmental human rights defenders, food producers, emergency responders, entrepreneurs and educators.⁷⁹ Transformative policies and social norms are required to affirm their leadership and advance the BPfA critical area of **Women and the Environment**. The Gwai Grandmothers' Group, who are women of faith supported by Felm in Zimbabwe, have built a water pipe in an area suffering from drought. The grandmothers assumed leadership roles, participated in the digging for the pipe and broke the stereotypes of 'women's work' to build resilience for their community.

At a time of increasing conflicts, **Women and Armed Conflict** remains an area of critical concern. Women face disproportionate violence and exclusion from peace processes due to social norms and structural inequalities that exclude women from leadership and decision-making spaces. The co-option of religious texts by politicians have contributed to rising conflicts by spreading hate and inciting violence towards minority groups, affecting particularly women and children. Faith leaders, who are held in deep trust within their communities, play a crucial role in countering these harmful narratives by guiding their communities towards values of dialogue, reconciliation, and peaceful relationships.

In **Colombia**, the GemPaz movement interwove faith-based feminist approaches to peacebuilding in conflict-affected areas. This included emphasising the need for collective care, feminist biblical interpretations and safe spaces for women. The GemPaz movement demonstrated how faith-based actors have significant impact in localised interventions. By using their influence, faith-based actors can work on long-term and sustainable peacemaking processes and transform social norms that limit the recognition of women as critical stakeholders.

The final critical area of BPfA to be discussed is **Women in Power and Decision-Making**. Ensuring women's full, equal, effective and meaningful participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision is crucial for increasing women's representation in all spheres of life. Faith leaders can model inclusive leadership, using their influence to promote the importance of women's participation in decision-making by creating gender-balanced governance, while fostering a culture of inclusivity and shared responsibility within faith institutions.

Leadership remains one of the most gendered issues globally, where women often encounter systemic barriers and patriarchal social norms that limit their presence and participation in decision-making processes and top hierarchical positions. These include faith-based leadership structures. Transforming leadership structures requires dismantling systemic barriers and fostering equitable opportunities. The argument for women's leadership extends beyond representation. Studies underscore how women leaders contribute to stronger families and communities, bringing perspectives that foster inclusive decision-making and equitable policies.⁸⁰ When women are included in leadership, governance structures become more representative and attuned to the needs of diverse populations.

⁷⁹ <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-08/women-on-the-front-line-final-report.pdf>

⁸⁰ Novotney, A. (2024, July 8). *Women leaders make work better. Here's the science behind how to promote them.* <https://www.apa.org/topics/women-girls/female-leaders-make-work-better>

Looking Back to Look Forward: What has the report evidenced?

Over the last three decades, around the world, reactionary forces are pushing back against democratic values, attempting to reverse progress on human rights and gender equality. The journey is far from over. New challenges emerge in digital spaces, political rhetoric and ongoing structural barriers, demanding ever-evolving strategies and unwavering commitment. However, amidst these tensions' faith-based actors in all their diversity have demonstrated the importance of partnering with them in collective struggles to advance the BPfA and to resist oppression.

Through four key avenues—transformative community-driven solutions, challenging harmful gender norms, engagement of men and boys, and policy advocacy — faith-based actors have contributed to shifts in social norms and systems alike. By engaging strategic allies, including men and boys, in dismantling patriarchy, they have created contextual cultural reckonings that extend far beyond places of worship.

Faith-based interventions breathe life into the BPfA's critical areas, embedding gender justice within both cultural traditions and institutional frameworks. From influencing local customs to shaping national policies, faith-based actors have advocated for transformative change, which addresses systemic inequalities. As interlocutors, who connect into the grassroots communities, and can influence national, regional and global policies to reform discriminatory laws and transform social norms.

The collaboration with faith-based actors has the potential to positively shape the next thirty years of action for gender equality - with hope for a future where justice and equality are not aspirations but realities. In the following section, the report makes a number of recommendations, which is then followed by diverse case studies collected from ACT Alliance members and partners that demonstrate the power of faith-driven social norm change.



Recommendations

Member States and UN Agencies Recommendations

1. *Promote inclusive policies that address multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination experienced by women and girls, to realise the transformative promise of Agenda 2030 to ‘Leave No One Behind’.*
2. *Recognise the diversity of faith-based actors and seek ways to partner with faith-based actors who can debunk the myths and misconceptions that faith and human rights are incompatible.*
3. *Establish and strengthen mechanisms to monitor the impact of social norm change by diverse stakeholders, including faith-based actors, to identify progress, gaps, and lessons to remain relevant and effective.*

Programmatic Recommendations

1. *Strengthen the capacity of faith-based actors, in particular faith leaders, with gender-transformative training and tools to address discriminatory social norms and practices.*

- 2. Amplify collective faith-based advocacy messages, where possible in interfaith alliances, to amplify messages and challenge religious misconceptions.*
- 3. Enable participatory community development approaches for social norm change at the local and district levels while also advocating for policy changes at the district, national, regional and global levels to improve accountability.*

Recommendations to Funders

- 1. Do not automatically exclude, but rather systematically consider, the possibility of partnering with and/or funding faith-based actors to advance gender equality and strategically counter backlashes on human rights.*
- 2. Affirm the value, importance and contribution of faith-based actors who are working to advance gender justice, by investing in long-term sustainable funding for locally-led action for social norm change.*
- 3. Invest in spaces for open dialogue, including intergenerational and interfaith dialogues, for community members to challenge discriminatory social norms and promote inclusivity, mutual respect, and gender equality.*

Recommendations to Faith-based Actors

- 1. Integrate gender equality, including SRHR, in theological education and curricula to prepare future faith leaders to contribute positively to advancing gender justice.*
- 2. Utilise cultural gatherings and festivals, including religious ceremonies, to promote wider community involvement in ending child marriage and awareness of legal protections.*
- 3. Collaborate and build partnerships with other stakeholders, including secular feminist movements, to strengthen community mobilisation for social norm change and enhance advocacy initiatives for gender equality.*

30 Case Studies:

Evidencing Social Norm Change

1.

Gender Equality for Ethnic Women by Leveraging Positive Social Norms

World Renew, Phonthong District in Lao PDR, implemented in 2021

Patriarchal social norms are deeply rooted among ethnic communities living in remote areas of Lao PDR, where 70% of the population reside. In 2012, World Renew began community development programs in Lao PDR, and in 2021 started working in the ethnically diverse Phonthong District, Luang Prabang Province, to address these deep-rooted gender inequalities. Through a comprehensive Gender Needs Assessment (GNA) in 16 villages (predominantly Hmong and Khmu), deeply embedded patriarchal social norms were identified. These norms can perpetuate harm towards women and limit women from making decisions on their own SRHR and reduce access to education. Social norms contribute to early and forced child marriages in Hmong communities, which leads to increased risks related to maternal health.

The results revealed that women in Hmong communities lacked decision-making power and faced barriers to justice due to patriarchal customary law and systemic inequalities, such as low literacy, costs, and fear of retaliation. World Renew's initiative combined participatory community development with a model of values-driven equity, justice, and inclusion. By working in community partnerships, including with trusted leaders and elders, who are often community gatekeepers, the initiative built mutual trust for transformative action within the Hmong clan system. This led to shifts in social norms, notably a reduced acceptance of harm towards women. This was further supported with national level engagement through the Lao Gender Working group, and discussions of findings from the GNA demonstrating how ethnic communities may fall outside of the justice system and how World Renew can support the government's continued progress advancing the Beijing Platform of Action.

Critical Areas: Violence Against Women, Women and Health, Women and Poverty.

2.

Bridging Generations and Faiths: Pushing for Progress for SRHR

ACT Ubumbano, Southern Africa, implemented between 2019 – 2023

Southern Africa's cultural and social norms are integral to the region's identity and community, which have been passed down through generations and shape the region's social fabric. Social norms and practices can create barriers to achieving gender equality, including limiting access to SRHR, early and forced marriages, and GBV. ACT Ubumbano with communities worked together to foster action between faith leaders from different traditions, and bridge generational divides. Through interfaith and

intergenerational dialogues, communities engaged in a powerful process, which invited people to reimagine gender roles and transform perceptions of SRHR.

Leaders from different faith traditions came together to identify shared values—justice, dignity, and health — creating a moral foundation for action. Faith leaders were equipped through reflective learning spaces, and policy briefs, to facilitate discussions on discriminatory social norms and topics, such as SRHR, and provoke change from within their communities. Communities were also encouraged to co-create strategies that address SRHR challenges, ensuring approaches were contextually relevant and resonated across age groups and faith traditions. These were documented through case studies and video voices of faith communities on SRHR and GBV.

The initiative contributed to addressing deep-rooted cultural and religious beliefs that reinforced gender inequalities and oppressed women and girls. Challenges included youth being hesitant to challenge authority. Older generations also demonstrated some resistance to new ideas on gender equality. Despite these challenges, the initiative enabled faith communities to reframe gender equality within the context of their faith values, making the conversation relatable to people of faith. The intergenerational engagement also fostered mutual learning, and this synergy created a space for both learning and unlearning to promote gender equality.

Critical Areas: Violence Against Women, Human Rights of Women

3.

Faith in Gender Justice: Transforming Social Norms to End FGM

Christian Council in Sierra Leone, Sierra Leone, 2017 – ongoing

In Sierra Leone, FGM is deeply entrenched in cultural and social norms, with an 83% prevalence rate. The practice is tied to cultural identity with widespread societal acceptance. FGM continues to be seen as essential for social acceptance and womanhood despite increased awareness of the health risks and human rights violations. Since 2017, the Christian Council in Sierra Leone has prioritised action to end FGM, a GBV that undermines gender equality, violates bodily autonomy and often disrupts girls' education.

Faith-based organisations have emerged as key agents of change in addressing FGM. Faith leaders from Islam and Christianity have used their trust and influence to transform deeply rooted social norms. During interfaith dialogues, shared values of justice, dignity, and equality are promoted and created a space to debunk misconceptions that FGM is a religious obligation. By using scripture and faith-based teachings, they have created messages that promote gender equality and challenge discriminatory cultural practices. As a result, the societal pressures tied to FGM have been reduced and support for girls to continue their education has been promoted, including empowering girls to pursue opportunities beyond traditional gender roles. Workshops with traditional leaders and former soweis have provided alternative livelihood opportunities, reducing economic dependence on FGM practices.

Community engagements were facilitated by faith-based actors, who provided safe spaces for both girls and boys to learn about positive masculinities. Interfaith community dialogues also introduced alternative rites of passage, empowering communities to embrace change while respecting cultural

traditions. The advocacy by faith-based made FGM a topic of public discourse and led to policy advancements, including a push for the 2024 Child Rights Bill, which seeks to criminalise FGM for anyone under the age of 18 years old.

Critical Areas: Violence Against Women, Women and Health, The Girl Child

4.

Gender and Faith Network: Transforming Masculinities for Gender Justice

ACT Zimbabwe Forum and Gender and Faith Network, Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, patriarchal social norms influence actions, beliefs and systems, contributing to a high prevalence of GBV. The ACT Zimbabwe Forum, through the Gender and Faith Network, established a project that engaged men and boys in a collective struggle for gender equality by focusing on transformative masculinities. The project aimed to shift the narrative around what it means to be a man and dismantle toxic masculinities that fuel violence.

Key strategies included training faith leaders in transformative masculinities and integrating gender-transformative teachings into church curricula. The Forum developed faith-specific resources to ensure buy-in from faith leaders and communities. Through interfaith collaboration, churches and faith leaders collaborated to promote a collective message to advance gender justice. Faith leaders led roadshows that were supported by the Ministry of Women Affairs and reached a broad audience, encouraging men to participate in dismantling patriarchal practices. Faith leaders also played a critical role in reporting child marriages and advocating for legal reforms. A major victory came when the legal age of marriage in Zimbabwe was raised from 16 to 18 years, following advocacy from faith leaders.

The project's impact was evident in the decline of child marriages in areas like Marange, where a female traditional leader actively outlawed the practice. Moreover, transformative masculinity narratives emerged in communities, where people began to view all individuals as equal, fostering a more supportive and equitable environment for women and girls. This approach also aligned with the broader goals of the BPfA, which promote women's health, access to education, and economic empowerment.

This initiative demonstrated a successful model for shifting social norms and sustainable change in Zimbabwe by engaging men and boys as critical stakeholders and leveraging the power of faith. Faith communities now integrate 16 Days of Activism into their calendar and are deepening their work for gender equality.

Critical Areas: Women and Violence, Women and Poverty, The Girl Child

5.

Transforming Maternal and Child Health Through Faith Leadership

Christian Aid, Narok County in Kenya, 2012 - 2016

Narok County in Kenya, home to the Maasai community, has high rates of maternal and child mortality, malnutrition, early and forced child marriages, and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Gender-based

violence (GBV) is widespread, and many social and religious norms exacerbate these gender, health, and economic inequalities. In partnership with local faith-based actors, Christian Aid used a 'Faith for Life' approach to empower faith leaders as agents of change in the community.

The 'Faith for Life' model leveraged the influential role of faith leaders in Maasai communities to transform social norms that negatively impacted child and maternal health. The initiative aimed to educate and empower faith leaders to use their platforms to challenge discriminatory social norms and promote gender equality. Faith leaders integrated Maternal and Child Health (MCH), such as family planning, nutrition, antenatal and postnatal care, skilled birth, sexual reproductive health and male involvement in maternal and child health, into their teachings, sermons, counselling sessions and community meetings.

Faith leaders normalised discussions previously considered 'taboo' in faith communities, such as MCH and SRH. Open dialogue led to an informed community, with women gaining greater agency in making decisions about their reproductive health and family planning. Advocacy initiatives also led to increased budget allocations to maternal and child health services, which contributed to reduced rates of maternal and child mortality and morbidity, increased access to antenatal and postnatal care, and improved nutrition status during pregnancies and for children under five years old.

Resistance to discussing MCH issues was experienced by some faith leaders, who perceived them as the responsibility of the government. Theological interpretations also varied among faith leaders, which presented challenges in achieving a consistent approach across faith denominations. The collaboration between faith leaders, local governments, and NGOs was critical to ensure a stronger community response to MCH issues. Faith leaders mobilised communities to adopt new practices. The increased advocacy from faith leaders significantly contributed to policy changes, including the adoption of Mother Packs by the Ministry of Health to attract pregnant women to give birth in hospitals instead of giving birth at home, implementation of the anti-FGM Act 2011, including greater involvement of women in the Maasai Council of Elders. It empowered collective accountability to support and reinforce adopting new policies and practices to promote gender equality.

Critical Areas: Women and Health, Violence Against Women

6.

Uprooting Patriarchal Cultural Practices to Advance Gender Equality

Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe & IREMO, Marsabit County in Kenya, 2024- 2025

In Marsabit County, Kenya, approximately 450,000 people live in rigid societal structures across 15 communities, including the Gabra and Rendile. In October 2024, the Indigenous Resource Management Organization (IREMO), in partnership with Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe, aimed to shift harmful social norms through a multi-faceted approach that targeted traditional institutions such as Gabra Yaas and Rendile Nabo.

By strengthening the capacity of traditional leaders, including faith leaders, through participatory training and community forums, increased awareness and advocacy against child marriage that helped to shift attitudes and behaviours that are harmful to the girl child and women. The trusted position of faith leaders, who could demonstrate that social norms perpetuating gender inequalities are neither

mandated by religion nor beneficial to society, contributed to robust change processes. Elders, parents and community leaders began to recognise the harmful consequences of early marriage, particularly to girls' health, education, and economic prospects.

On October 12, 2024, a public Declaration to End Child Marriage was made at the Kalacha Cultural Centre, marking the commitment of community members and leaders. More families now prioritise education for girls over traditional cultural practices. At the organisational level, anti-child marriage advocacy became integrated into the work of local organisations, and efforts to strengthen legal protections for girls have gained traction. This success has influenced national and regional dialogues, with other regions beginning to replicate the programme.

Faith-based actors and traditional institutions can play a transformative role in changing social norms, advocating for gender equality, and ensuring girls' rights and empowerment. Together, faith-based actors partnered with local NGOs, government agencies, human rights advocates, and other community leaders to advocate for stronger local policies and collaborated with governments to enforce laws protecting children from forced and early marriage.

Critical Areas: Women and Health, Violence Against Women, The Girl Child

7.

Theological Reflections: A Journey Towards Gender Equality and Ending GBV

Ethiopian Orthodox Church Development & Inter-Church Aid Commission, Ethiopia, 2021 - 2022

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), one of the largest and oldest Christian denominations, has long played a central role in shaping Ethiopia's social, cultural and religious norms. Due to a lack of clarity about the church's position on gender justice and GBV, harmful traditional practices, such as FGM have wrongfully been linked to religious teachings. The EOC developed the initiative to bridge the disconnect between the church's teachings and perceptions within communities. Workshops, community dialogues and educational programmes raised awareness of the church's position on gender equality and to challenge misconceptions.

Aligned with the BPfA, the initiative worked to empower women and girls, educate future faith leaders on gender justice and GBV, and engage church leaders in reshaping societal attitudes toward gender equality. Key actions included theological reflections, national advocacy workshops, and the integration of gender-focused teachings into the curriculum of EOC theological colleges. The initiative also engaged local communities through outreach programmes to amplify key messages from the church that promoted gender justice.

The project received support from the highest levels of the church, including the Patriarch and the Holy Synod, which helped give it credibility and a broad platform. The EOC fostered dialogue within the church and wider community, which empowered faith leaders in advocacy efforts and reshaped social norms about gender roles. By combining theological reflection with practical application, the teachings were ensured to be relevant to the daily lives of congregants. Faith-based actors, when working collaboratively and sensitively, are key in transformative practices to promote gender equality and address GBV.

Through these efforts, the EOC has taken steps to address the historic marginalisation of women and foster gender-just communities.

Critical Areas: Violence Against Women

8.

A Guru Ba’s Journey to Champion Gender Equality in the Tharu Community

LWF Nepal, Bardagoriya Rural Municipality in Nepal

In the Tharu community of Bardagoriya Rural Municipality, a respected Guru-Ba (Chaudhary) has become an agent of social transformation, challenging long-standing gender norms and advocating for gender equality. Traditionally, Guru Ba’s like Chaudhary held influential roles as spiritual leaders, healers, and upholders of societal customs. However, after attending a two-day training by Digo Bikash Samaj (DBS), an implementing partner of LWF Nepal, hosted a two-day workshop on the roles and values of faith leaders. Chaudhary attended the seminar, and he reflected:

“I never imagined that my role as a Guru-Ba could extend beyond rituals and healing... The training opened my eyes to the inequalities embedded in our customs and the immense power I hold to change them. It made me realise that as a religious leader, my words and actions can transform lives.”

He began encouraging his community to seek medical care instead of relying solely on spiritual remedies and he condemned harmful practices that perpetuate gender inequalities. Women, who were once excluded from reading sacred texts or participating in religious leadership, now take on roles previously reserved only for men. This includes reading holy texts and leading religious ceremonies. As a result, women are powerfully challenging the patriarchal traditions that had previously confined them.

Community members proudly share how their roles have shifted, with women now embraced as leaders. The belief that women’s leadership could anger the gods has been dismantled and the community now values women as equal contributors to society. Through this transformation, Chaudhary is not only reshaping the spiritual landscape but also advocating for a more inclusive, just society that fosters shared responsibilities and leadership.

Critical Areas: Women in power and decision-making

9.

The Unspoken Rules that Govern Society

World YWCA, Egypt, Kenya, Palestine and South Sudan

The rules that govern society are often unspoken, yet they determine who holds power, speaks, and is heard. These norms exclude women from leadership and decision-making. World YWCA leads a consortium, the Young Women for Awareness, Agency, Advocacy, and Accountability (YW4A) Initiative, on the premise that when faith-based actors challenge and address restrictive norms and institutionalise gender-sensitive policies, progress toward gender justice happens with deep effect in local communities. With faith and rights-based institutions in Egypt, Kenya, Palestine, and South Sudan, YW4A shows that sustainable change requires awareness, work and action. Action reshapes gender

norms and tangibly advances the Beijing Platform for Action in locally rooted and globally significant ways.

YW4A collaborates with FBOs to integrate gender-sensitive policies and practices into religious institutions. A key strategy is a Gender Audit for different types of faith institutions, an assessment that identifies gaps and biases. These audits, conducted through the YW4A faith partner, the Faith to Action Network, in partnership with local faith-based and women's rights organisations, result in Gender Action Plans, equipping religious communities with actionable steps to dismantle harmful gender norms from within.

In Kenya, this effort resulted in the National Independent Church of Africa validating a gender policy that ensures women's representation in leadership elections. In Palestine, the Evangelical Lutheran Church's personal status law revisions contributed to the historic ordination of the first female Palestinian pastor. Religious leaders are often gatekeepers of tradition and hold the power to reshape narratives. YW4A partners with faith leaders to promote gender equality from within, challenging the misconception that faith and feminism are opposing forces. In South Sudan, in safe space dialogues, led by faith actors, survivors of GBV shared their experiences, advancing accountability within religious institutions. Interfaith discussions in Egypt engaged leaders from Al-Azhar University and the Coptic Orthodox Church, starting conversations about positive masculinity and men's role in gender justice.

By integrating gender-sensitive policies in religious institutions, YW4A sparks a shift beyond places of worship. In Kenya, the Kisii Interfaith Network's work against harmful practices like FGM and child marriage drove community advocacy. In South Sudan, faith-led efforts influenced legal reforms, including revisions to the penal code on marital rape. YW4A demonstrates that faith and gender equality need not be at odds. The consortium principles and design disrupt embedded traditional norms by considering religious frameworks as platforms for empowerment and rejecting the premise that they are only platforms of stagnation and regression. Then, women may lead with authority and authenticity in spaces where their voices were silenced.

Critical Areas: Women in Power and Decision-Making

10.

Health Crisis Responses: The Role of Faith, Trust and Collaboration

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania

When COVID-19 hit Tanzania in 2020, the government's delayed response caused confusion, myth and misinformation. However, faith leaders led by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) were critical in shifting public health norms and advocating for gender justice. ELCT, in collaboration with other faith-based actors, established an interfaith task force to address both the pandemic and its gendered impacts, such as increased gender-based violence (GBV), early and forced child marriages, and teenage pregnancies.

Faith leaders used their platforms to promote science-based solutions, like vaccinations, early identification, modern clinical treatment, and social distancing. They also addressed the root causes of gender inequalities by transforming social norms. Faith leaders supported teen mothers, including

advocating for their right to continue their education, and the visibility of these actions contributed to social norm change. The ELCT, through its leadership, successfully pushed for policy changes allowing school re-entry programmes for pregnant girls and launched a scholarship scheme for 50 teen mothers, the first of its kind in the faith communities.

The interfaith task force played a key role in advocating for women, including young women and girls' access to health services. Their efforts contributed to the national COVID-19 vaccination drive, with over 35 million doses administered by 2023, and demonstrated the power of faith-based leadership in promoting gender equality during a health crisis. ELCT received a special recognition award from Govt due to their unique contribution during the Pandemic.

Critical Area: Women and Health

11.

Shaping Change through Faith: Empowering Leaders to Champion Gender Equality and Transform Social Norms

ACT Sierra Leone, Western Rural Sierra Leone, 2022

In Sierra Leone, harmful gender norms and patriarchal structures have perpetuated VAWG across households, communities, and institutions. The ACT Sierra Leone Forum was supported by the ACT Gender Justice Programme to design and implement an initiative that was led by the Christian Council in Sierra Leone. This project promoted gender-transformative approaches to social norm change through positive masculinity. This initiative aimed to engage men and boys as agents of change to dismantle these harmful norms and advocate for gender equality. The project focused on faith-based actors—religious leaders and communities—as influential agents who could reinforce or challenge gender inequality. By training faith leaders to reinterpret religious texts and model positive masculinity, the project sought to shift beliefs that supported male dominance and cultural acceptance of VAWG. Values such as mutual respect, non-violence, and shared responsibilities in the home and community, was emphasised by faith leaders, who encouraged men to support gender equality.

Key strategies included capacity building, community dialogues, advocacy campaigns, and mentorship programmes. These approaches engaged men and boys, including faith leaders, across eight districts, including rural and peri-urban areas, and used churches, mosques, and community centres as platforms for spreading gender justice messages. The project contributed to the BPfA by promoting women's political participation, advocating for a 30% quota for women in governance and supporting the passage of the 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Bill'. Faith leaders continue to be vocal agents of change for gender equality in Sierra Leone and collectively promote positive masculinities.

Critical Areas: Violence Against Women

12.

Faith Leaders Breaking Barriers to Promote Access to SRHR

Norwegian Church Aid, Chikwawa District in Malawi, 2024

In Malawi, deeply rooted cultural beliefs contribute to high fertility rates. This significantly affects adolescents' access to contraception and results in high fertility rates, currently at 4.06 births per woman, one of the highest globally. Married couples face social measures to start childbearing immediately. This is combined with faith communities that do not openly discuss SRHR, exacerbating the issue. In the Chikwawa District, where teenage pregnancies are at 30.5%, cultural and religious beliefs in churches and mosques discourage the use of contraceptives and encourage reliance on abstinence and spiritual healing.

Norwegian Church Aid developed the 'Faith Actors Motivating Empowerment' (FAME) Toolkit in 2021, which was introduced in communities in NCA project locations in Malawi in 2022, training Christian and Muslim faith leaders across Chikwawa and other parts of Malawi. The training educated leaders on various negative social norms, the dangers of early pregnancies, child marriages, and the importance of SRHR, allowing them to address these issues within their congregations. Faith leaders began using church and mosque sermons and biblical/Islamic texts to challenge harmful practices and promote healthier, more informed views on SRHR and family planning.

Faith leaders were able to engage in dialogues with community and district leaders that identified the root causes of child marriages and teenage pregnancies. They advocated for women's and girls' access to SRHR services and fostered safe spaces in churches and mosques for open discussions. Local authorities partnered in awareness campaigns on community bylaws that protect women and girls, and advocating for girls' education, supporting girls readmission into schools after leaving child marriages and helping them with school materials.

The faith leaders' actions contributed to resolving fifteen child marriages, and one case of teenage pregnancy was reported between August and November 2024. Faith leaders' engagement has also spurred youth clubs for SRHR discussions, which has improved youth-friendly health services. The FAME Toolkit shows promise for scalable

13.

Tackling Inequalities, Social Norm Change and Human Rights Violations

Messianic Jewish Aid Organization (MJAQ), NCA partner, South Sudan

In South Sudan, key protection issues, including physical violence, sexual abuse, gender inequalities, and human rights violations, continue to impact the lives of women and girls, especially in areas like Central Equatoria State, where large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) are hosted. The cultural norms that perpetuate these violations are deeply ingrained, making it difficult for women and girls to speak out and seek help. MJAQ, in partnership with NCA and NORAD funding, has implemented 'Engaging Men through Accountable Practice (EMAP)', a programme designed to raise awareness about gender-based violence (GBV) and its effects.

Through EMAP, both women and men participate in gender-sensitive sessions, which foster a shared understanding of GBV, its impact, and the role of the community in combating it. As a result, community members have developed a bylaw that holds individuals accountable for violations, and they have engaged community leaders and government officials in advocating for change. By fostering community engagement through structured dialogues that focus on human rights violations and promote gender equality, open conversations have contributed to challenging harmful social norms.

With Norwegian Church Aid's support, MJAO has distributed contraceptive methods and educated women on their reproductive rights. Girls have been empowered, through the initiative's impact in schools, with strategies to oppose early marriages and protect themselves from exploitation. As a result, four girls reported forced marriage attempts, which were addressed by the authorities. Community-based protection networks have also been strengthened. Awareness campaigns, including home visits, have further supported communities to understand human rights and reporting mechanisms, which improve legal accountability.

Through this work, MJAO has learned that transforming social norms and empowering women and girls requires sustained effort but positive outcomes are achievable with the contextual support and advocacy. Community-driven initiatives, led by faith-based actors and local leaders, have shown how entrenched social norms can be reformed for gender equality in South Sudan.

Critical Areas: The Girl Child, Violence Against Women

14.

Transforming Social Norms with Sacred Texts to End Violence Against Women and Girls

RACOBABO and DanChurchAid, Mid-Central Uganda, 2020 - ongoing

In mid-central Uganda, VAW/G, including sexual violence, child marriage, and defilement, is deeply ingrained in social norms. Widespread violence, combined with high HIV/AIDS rates and deep poverty contribute to undermining women's and girls' human rights. Despite laws to prevent violence, harmful traditional practices, like early and forced marriage, persist, often fuelled by societal views that place a woman's value in her sexuality and purity. Rural Action Community Based Organization (RACOBABO), with the support of DanChurchAid and funding from the European Union, is actively addressing these challenges through faith-based strategies in the region.

Since its inception in 2020, the project has focused on mobilising faith leaders as agents of change to challenge toxic masculinity and patriarchal structures that perpetuate violence. The project focuses on liberating hermeneutics, where sacred texts, including Biblical and Qur'anic teachings, are interpreted to promote gender equality and justice. Faith leaders trained to reinterpret texts have been instrumental in provoking community changes by rethinking traditional gender roles and encouraging more equitable power dynamics between women and men.

The 'First Man Standing' method targets men as advocates for change. This method has helped create male role models, who speak out against GBV, challenge harmful social norms and empower other men in their communities to take similar stands. Positive male voices has enabled the project to encourage broader community-wide engagement and resulted in a significant shift in attitudes toward women and girls. Faith leaders developed interfaith pastoral letters to mark important events, like International Women's Day and the 16 Days of Activism, calling for an end to GBV. These letters, issued by faith leaders across diverse religious groups, help to amplify further the call for change to promote gender justice.

Faith leaders have not always utilised their positions effectively due to capacity and socialisation, sometimes called 'sleeping giants' in efforts for sustainable development. Through these combined efforts, faith leaders were able to build the capacity of socio-cultural structures to effectively prevent

and respond to GBV and other forms of VAWG. Masculinities and power relations have successfully been reshaped by engaging with normative theological texts. Social norms can be a barrier to reporting violence. Through this programme, communities are now equipped to report cases of violence, contributing to a safer environment for women and girls.

Critical Areas: Violence Against Women, Women and Health, Women and the Economy, The Girl Child

15.

Transforming Taboos: Faith, SRHR and CSE

Youth Empowerment on Strategic Advocacy and Mentorship (YESAM), YWCA Kenya Partner, Kisumu County in Kenya, 2024

In Kenya, there is deep-rooted stigma and opposition surrounding Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, particularly within faith-based circles. Comprehensive Sexuality Education, an essential tool for promoting healthy sexual behaviour, faces resistance and is considered by some as 'controversial'. In April 2024, a two-day sensitisation program was held in Kisumu County, Kenya, to empower faith leaders to advocate for Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) and access to SRH services.

Faith leaders were equipped with accurate, non-judgmental information on CSE and SRH Services, helping them foster informed dialogue and challenge harmful societal norms. Faith leaders have shaped attitudes and beliefs related to sexuality, reproduction, and health, even when they remain silent on these issues. During the workshop, leaders were equipped with the knowledge to navigate sensitive topics, which was crucial in promoting SRHR. Mixed methods were employed to engage the leaders, including attitude transformation sessions, values clarification, group work and safe space discussions. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their own beliefs and cultural practices, fostering a more open-minded and compassionate approach to change processes.

During the sessions, faith leaders began to identify how religious values and the promotion of SRHR were aligned rather than conflicting. Values like justice, compassion, and human dignity resonated with the need to affirm human rights. Through facilitated discussions and group exercises, the participants were able to identify the gaps in their understanding and challenge their assumptions, gaining a deeper appreciation for the complexities of SRHR. One of the key takeaways from the sensitisation was the importance of providing accurate information. Many faith leaders are committed to being trusted sources of information, using their positions of influence to promote open dialogue and support access to services. Digital technology and social media were seen as powerful tools for raising awareness and engaging a broader audience. Empowering young women to take active roles in SRHR discussions was also key to driving change within their faith communities. Faith leaders also expressed their commitment to advocating for policies that support young people's SRH, for example, advocating for the inclusion of CSE in school curricula.

Critical Areas: Women and Health, Education

16.

Shifting Social Norms: Empowering Communities to Combat Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

CORDAID, Afghanistan, 2020

In Afghanistan, there were increasing rates of SGBV during the COVID pandemic across several provinces. To combat this, CORDAID developed a series of strategic initiatives to raise awareness, mobilise communities, and empower individuals with the tools and resources needed to address SGBV. A monthly meeting with traditional and religious leaders was used to mobilise their platforms to promote women's rights and actively address domestic violence. The authority and trust of religious and traditional leaders between communities were leveraged to raise awareness about the risks of SGBV. Many people attend mosques for Friday prayers, where the incorporation of messages on gender equality into sacred spaces would resonate with communities and reach a larger audience in a culturally sensitive manner.

Community mobilisation also included developing and distributing 10,000 pamphlets in two languages aimed at educating the community about SGBV, its consequences, and the resources available for survivors. These pamphlets were delivered through door-to-door campaigns and outreach visits. Alongside the pamphlets, 750 posters were placed in strategic locations, such as pharmacies and supermarkets, featuring vital information on SGBV hotlines and the contact numbers of key organisations like DoWA (Department of Women's Affairs), AIHRC (Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission), and local attorney offices. These initiatives resulted in changing social norms and community contexts that empowered women to raise their voices, with a notable increase in trust toward judicial and support institutions.

Recognising the needs of society's most vulnerable members, the provincial women's network also conducted 11 outreach activities across five provinces that focused on displaced women, many of whom had fled areas of conflict and faced heightened vulnerability to SGBV. Information was shared on available services and survivors were identified and referred to relevant organisations. In total, 120 displaced families in Nangahar and Herat were referred to emergency response programmes by CORDAID and UNHCR, which provided essential services like shelter, food and medical aid.

This comprehensive approach—incorporating traditional leadership, community engagement, and support for the most vulnerable—proved to be an effective model for raising awareness and combating SGBV. It also strengthened the community's trust in service providers, fostering social norm change that created a more supportive environment for survivors of violence.

17.

HIV and AIDS Social Norm Changes through Faith-Based Interventions

UNERELA+, Act Church of Sweden Partner, 2019 - 2027

Since 2019, in Bunyoro Kingdom, Uganda, a transformative project aimed at addressing societal issues such as young parenthood, adolescent sex trade and the resulting rise in child labour has been underway. The project focuses on the integration of faith leaders into the community-based approach to HIV prevention and management of SRH, including improving postnatal care for children born to young parents who carry the HIV virus.

The project specifically targets young people who, due to the influx of a mobile labour force in search of opportunities in the oil industry, have resorted to early sexual activity, a rise in child-headed households and the exploitation of young girls. Through the training of 80 faith leaders, the project aimed to change mindsets and attitudes within the community and empower religious figures to advocate for better health practices and prevent child parenting.

Initial findings suggest that keeping girls in school plays a central role in preventing teenage pregnancies. The project employs a combination of community outreach, congregational education and mass media to promote HIV and AIDs prevention messages, leveraging the influence of faith leaders to promote social norm change. One of the core strategies is the use of the anti-SSDDIM (Stigma, Shame, Discrimination, Denial, Inaction and Misaction) and pro-SAVE (Safer practices; Access to treatment and nutrition; Voluntary, routine and stigma-free counselling and testing; Empowerment) methods. These are implemented in schools, places of worship, community spaces, and contribute to transforming taboos related to sex and sexuality.

Extensive sensitisation has made faith leaders key proponents of the program. In the second phase, faith leaders actively share information and refer individuals to healthcare services when necessary. Faith leaders' engagement in the project has also increased focus on gender equality in faith-based institutions and local government structures, where more women are now included in leadership roles. The project's approach highlights the importance of working with local cultural and religious values, which can both challenge and support advocacy for gender equality. The project's impact on Bunyoro Kingdom shows that while social norms are slow to change, progress is being made, especially as faith-based institutions adopt strategies to support gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Critical Areas: Women and Health, The Girl Child

18.

The Time Travel Method: Using Heritage for Cultural Change

CCT, ELCT, Act CoS, and Kalmar County Museum, Tanzania, 2019

In 2018, a collaborative project between Act Church of Sweden and two partner organisations, the Christian Council of Tanzania (CCT) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania (ELCT), launched a ground-breaking initiative to address GBV and FGM in Tanzania. The project ran until 2020 and received funding from the Swedish Institute: Creative Force. A key component of the project was the implementation of the Time Travel Methodology (TTM), designed to provoke reflection, dialogue, and societal change on issues related to harmful traditions and gender inequality.

The Time Travel Method connects local heritage and historical narratives to present-day issues, particularly in marginalised communities. It allows participants to "travel" back in time, reflecting on past practices such as FGM, early pregnancies, early and forced child marriages and other harmful rites of passage, while also imagining a future where these practices are eradicated. Engaging in this participatory process empowers community members to identify solutions and act toward a healthier, more just society. The TTM was particularly effective with faith-based organisations, where cultural

heritage and faith are powerful drivers of change. In Tanzania, churches have significance in society, which enables them to facilitate critical discussions on complex societal issues.

A highlight of the Time Travel Project was the "Time Travel Event," where participants role-played fictional stories based on historical events. This interactive experience encouraged them to adopt different roles, including that of community leaders or villagers, fostering empathy and understanding of diverse perspectives. As participants worked together to solve contemporary problems related to GBV and FGM, they developed a greater sense of responsibility and commitment to societal transformation. TTM role plays closed the gaps and culturally set boundaries between the genders, ages and denominations.

The project successfully demonstrated that significant shifts in attitudes and behaviours could occur by using cultural heritage as a tool for change. Integrating the Time Travel Method within faith-based and community frameworks created a powerful avenue for promoting gender justice, offering hope for a future free from harmful traditions. TTM played a significant role in the reduction of FGM prevalence in places like the Manyara region, where the practice had been as high as 58% before the interventions.

Critical Areas: Violence Against Women, Women and Health

19.

Movement Building through Capacitating Faith Actors to Achieve Gender Equality

INERELA+, Act Church of Sweden partner, Ghana and Burundi, 2020 - 2023

INERELA+ convenes over 45,000 members, who are faith leaders and faith-based organisations that harness their influence across multiple faith traditions to drive positive change in communities worldwide. INERELA+ focuses on the intersection of SRHR and GBV, aiming to change harmful social norms and promote gender equality.

In many communities, deeply ingrained social norms shaped by cultural and religious practices, create challenges to advancing gender equality. Traditionally, many faith leaders have held conservative views on gender norms and roles, that have reinforced harmful stereotypes and gender power relations. These views, rooted in both religion and culture, usually positioned men as decision-makers, particularly regarding women's health, and upheld patriarchal structures that perpetuate violence against women and girls.

Recognising the decisive role that religious institutions play in shaping societal attitudes, INERELA+ set out to challenge these norms by training and empowering faith leaders to become advocates for gender justice. Using the SAVE methodology and the ASRHR Handbook, INERELA+ provides faith leaders with the tools and knowledge to shift perspectives within their communities. These resources draw on sacred texts such as the Bible and Quran and scientific evidence to guide faith leaders in addressing GBV, gender inequality and the importance of SRHR.

A key element of the initiative is the leadership of faith leaders who take on the responsibility of speak out against GBV, for example early marriage and FGM. Through campaigns like the "Break the Silence Sunday Campaign," faith leaders spoke openly in their congregations about the need to end VAWG. Another major initiative is the "End Unwanted Pregnancies" campaign, where faith leaders use their

public platforms to denounce early, forced and unintended pregnancies. Faith leaders have helped to reshape the discourse around reproductive health and the human rights of women and girls by speaking out on television, social media, and other media outlets. Faith leaders also engage in theological dialogues, encouraging their communities to reflect on the spiritual and social dimensions of gender equality.

Through these efforts, INERELA+ has successfully shifted social norms in many communities. In Ghana and Burundi, the programme reached thousands of women and girls, equipping them with the knowledge and confidence to report instances of violence and seek help. The programme also engaged men, boys, and youth, encouraging them to adopt positive masculinity and participate in transforming gender norms. Religious leaders also contributed to regional policy reforms, such as the SADC Model Law on GBV, highlighting the influence of religious leaders in driving legal and policy changes.

Critical Areas: Violence Against Women, Women and Health

20.

Could it be from God?: A Tool for Talking About Gender and Faith

ACT Latin America and the Caribbean Gender Justice Community, 2023 - 2025

The ACT Gender Justice Community of Practice in Latin America and the Caribbean is a feminist collective formed by women from churches and faith-based organisations within the ACT Alliance. Its goal is to influence the organisations that are members of the ACT Alliance and beyond, advocating for gender equality and the rights of women and diverse groups through faith-based spaces. The work in the region is focused on the crossover between diaconia and gender equality perspectives, where churches and faith-based organisations are working in service to communities. By sharing best practices, generating knowledge and amplifying faith voices with a human rights perspective, the Gender Justice Community of Practice aims to improve the lives of girls, women, and diverse groups.

A key resource developed is ‘Could it be from God?’, a tool designed to foster dialogue and understanding about the relationship between gender and faith. The title is a question. Each argument proposes biblical theological approaches and community experiences to reflect on different problematic knots in faith communities resulting from religious justifications of social practices as the will of God. The title asks in the form of a question whether it is true that these social practices that are expressed as persistent problematic (gender) knots in communities of faith are the will of God. This tool offers theological perspectives, experiences, and proposals from various faith communities in Latin America, addressing the current debates surrounding gender justice. The tool is not a rigid manual, but a guide meant to encourage open, respectful discussions on gender justice, particularly within faith communities and social justice organisations. A fundamental aspect of the resource is that it brings together different theological visions and diverse experiences in very different territories of Abya Yala. The set of arguments proposes a broad and creative dialogue based on faith experiences that develop in various faith-based organisations of Abya Yala.

In collaboration with the ACT Gender Justice Programme, ‘Could it Be from God?’ is structured around three central themes: gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and economic justice. The resource features a theological argumentation and mapping process that brings together the contributions of faith-based individuals and organisations. This collective input aims to promote a more inclusive and gender-transformative theology, challenging patriarchal and colonial ideas that often

perpetuate GBV and inequality. At a point of improbable and difficult dialogues between faith and secular feminisms of civil society, the research and the text's proposal: ¿Será de Dios?, which provides clear and forceful propositions for dialogues with civil society.

The 'Could it be from God?' tool is scheduled for implementation between 2023 and 2025 in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). The project will continue to address crucial topics like poverty, women's education and empowerment, violence against women, economic justice and the inclusion of women's human rights within faith-based frameworks. The tool bridges the gap between faith-based perspectives and secular sectors by translating theological arguments into secular language relevant to mass communication and social media. In doing so, it challenges harmful religious and cultural practices that sustain gender injustice, offering faith communities and the public a path toward a more equitable and inclusive society.

Critical Areas: Violence Against Women, Women and the Economy

21.

'Ebó de Conducto.' At the intersection of religion and gender violence.

KOINONIA, ACT member and Brot für die Welt partner, Salvador in Brazil, 1994 - 2024

Ebó de Conducto: *Ebó is a ritual that is performed in African-based religions to eliminate bad things and bring good things.*

KOINONIA, founded in 1994, is an ecumenical organisation based in Brazil that has played a crucial role in promoting socio-environmental justice and human rights. Over the years, it has expanded its focus to address the pressing issues of gender violence and inequality, particularly within vulnerable communities in Salvador, Brazil. These communities, mainly consisting of Black women and LGBTQIA+ individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, often face compounded social and gender-inequalities.

KOINONIA's work has been centred around the intersection of religion and gender violence, particularly in Candomblé communities. These communities are often subject to the harmful influence of religious fundamentalisms, particularly from conservative Christian ideologies that fuel the justification of gender violence and discrimination. KOINONIA has engaged with local religious leaders to challenge these harmful norms and promote more inclusive theological interpretations.

In 2024, KOINONIA initiated a series of community engagements called 'Ebó de Conducto!', which drew from African religious traditions to promote change through dialogue and education. These gatherings, held in four Candomblé communities across Salvador, sought to confront gender violence and empower participants to act. Throughout 10 sessions, KOINONIA facilitated conversations about gender relations, women's rights, human rights, and the legal frameworks available to support victims of violence, such as Brazil's Maria da Penha Law. Religious leaders and KOINONIA's team co-led the sessions, using educational materials like films and discussion guides to foster open dialogue. A platform was created by the sessions for participants to engage with issues like violence, self-esteem, and personal empowerment. The work also helped participants better understand their rights and the resources available in Salvador, such as support centres and specialised police stations for women.

By creating a space where community members could openly discuss taboo topics, challenge patriarchal norms, and affirm their identities, religious spaces that were typically considered sacred and separate from broader societal issues have become vehicles for positive social change. Additionally, KOINONIA encouraged interfaith dialogue, inviting people from different religious backgrounds to participate, thereby reducing religious prejudice and fostering solidarity. KOINONIA demonstrated through its collaborative approach how religious leaders can serve as powerful agents of social transformation. The initiative also highlighted the importance of education and open dialogue in combating deep-rooted social norms. By working directly within the community, KOINONIA helped individuals understand their rights, provided critical information about legal protections and offered a supportive environment to challenge harmful cultural practices.

As KOINONIA continues its work, it is committed to expanding these efforts. Future initiatives will focus on political education, further engagement on LGBTQIA+ rights, and strengthening community care networks. The 'Ebó de Conducto!' model has shown that when harnessed for social justice, religious spaces can be pivotal in transforming community behaviours and challenging harmful ideologies.

Critical Areas: Human Rights of Women, Violence Against Women

22.

Brave Guatemalan Women Breaking the Cycle of Violence

Jotay (Act Church of Sweden, Bread for the World, Norwegian Church Aid and Lutheran World Federation), Guatemala

In Guatemala, GBV is a pervasive issue that profoundly affects women, particularly Indigenous women and girls. Almost 90% of women have experienced some form of domestic violence. Guatemala struggles with high rates of femicide, psychological abuse, and sexual violence. Rigid social norms, economic dependency and a limited awareness about legal rights has resulted in many women becoming trapped in violent relationships, unable to seek help or escape. In response to this ongoing crisis, Jotay partnered with local organisations to empower Indigenous women and girls to break the cycle of violence.

Nearly 500 Indigenous women have participated in this initiative that has provided them with essential resources such as shelter, food, medical care, and legal assistance. The initiative also provided spaces for group healing exercises and workshops on traditional medicine, this allowed the women to reconnect with their cultural roots and strengthen their identity. By understanding their legal rights, women could access legal guidance that supported many to navigate the process of seeking justice, while support from trained professionals empowered them to transform social norms and break free from their abusers.

One woman shared her experience: “They made me believe that I was fat, ugly, that I was only good for cooking and that I should be quiet, and they ‘blindfolded’ me. Now that I can see, I can raise my voice, and I’m not afraid anymore.” This individual story of transformation illustrates the profound impact on the women involved. Having access to the relevant knowledge and support networks, oppressive social norms were transformed, and Indigenous women were able to demand justice. This initiative has

empowered Indigenous women to become change-makers in their communities, breaking the cycle of violence and inspiring others to stand up for their rights and dignity.

Critical Areas: Violence Against Women, Women and Human Rights

23.

Transforming Social Norms through Interreligious Dialogues in Honduras

Ecuménicas por el Derecho a Decidir (EDD), Honduras, 2020, 2022, 2023-2025

In Honduras, EDD has been at the forefront of addressing the deep-rooted issue of GBV and femicides. EDD, a feminist organisation of diverse women from various faiths and spiritualities, has been instrumental in empowering Honduran women and girls, mainly through their Interreligious Dialogues for the Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women and Girls and Femicides.

These dialogues, initiated under the ‘Spotlight Initiative’, target the social norms that perpetuate violence, focusing on the role of religious institutions in shaping gender roles, women's bodies and sexualities. Religious beliefs and practices often shape societal attitudes toward women, and the potential for these institutions to either perpetuate or challenge violence makes them key players in the transformation process.

EDD has fostered collaboration between faith-based organisations, civil society groups, and government agencies through these dialogues. These discussions aim to shift the cultural and religious narratives that justify or ignore violence, promoting a rights-based approach and collective debate to bridge gaps between traditionally opposing groups. A core outcome has been the empowerment of ecclesiastical women, who now lead efforts to identify and prevent violence while offering support to survivors and educating perpetrators.

Since 2020, EDD has conducted multiple cycles of these dialogues in cities such as La Ceiba and Tegucigalpa, involving diverse religious leaders, government officials, and civil society members. Among the initiatives promoted, religious leaders have shared knowledge on reporting violence, provided support to victims, and openly addressed their own experiences with violence, either as survivors or perpetrators. These actions contribute to raising awareness about femicide, fostering respect for women's rights, and recognising diverse worldviews and spiritualities. Yet, EDD have experienced attacks from conservative faith leaders, with accusations of promoting ‘gender ideology’.

Critical Area: Women and Human Rights

24.

Faith Leaders Use SASA! Faith Methodology to Change Cultural Norms in Uganda

SASA! Faith Methodology, used by DanChurchAid in Uganda

In Uganda, the SASA! Faith Methodology is designed to combat VAWG and GBV. Implemented by DCA and its partners, the methodology leveraged the influence of faith leaders in West Buganda Diocese to address harmful gender norms and toxic masculinity that perpetuate VAWG. The capacity of faith leaders to become community activists in the fight against GBV was strengthened. By recognising faith

leaders' significant influence in shaping community attitudes, the SASA! Faith Methodology equipped leaders with the tools to challenge entrenched social norms.

Faith leaders are now equipped to be community activists, who actively engage in community action for gender equality. Seminars, conferences and experience-sharing events have brought together men, women and youth to discuss gender inequalities and co-create strategies for ending VAWG and GBV. These gatherings provided a platform to challenge toxic masculinity, emphasising that men could be powerful allies in promoting gender equality. As community activists, faith leaders were able to use everyday events like weddings, burial ceremonies and community gatherings to spread the message of justice, peace and dignity, fostering a culture of collective responsibility for ending GBV.

A crucial component of the SASA! Faith Methodology provides support to survivors of violence. Community activists are trained to listen to survivors' stories and connect survivors to essential services, for example healthcare, shelter, and legal aid. Through regular follow-ups and continued counselling, survivors were encouraged to rebuild their lives, gaining access to economic empowerment programmes and further support systems.

Faith-based actors have also established strong networks to sustain the movement against GBV within the community, partnering with local organisations, healthcare providers and law enforcement. This collaboration ensured survivors had access to comprehensive services, from health care to legal assistance, and created a supportive ecosystem where Faith leaders could address GBV from multiple angles.

The SASA! Faith Methodology resulted in a marked reduction in incidents of GBV in the targeted communities, with improved relationship dynamics between men and women. Through faith-based teachings, harmful social norms and toxic masculinity were transformed, leading to a more equitable and respectful environment. The communities took ownership of the interventions and faith leaders became key change agents in promoting gender justice and transformation.

Critical Areas: Violence Against Women, Women and Health, The Girl Child

25.

Empowering Women through Faith and Reclaiming Spirituality in Colombia

GemPaz, Act Church of Sweden Partner, Colombia

GemPaz is a movement of women from diverse faith and spiritual backgrounds that creates peace by promoting self-care, collective care, and a feminist perspective on faith. It provides safe spaces for women in conflict areas, where violence, both physical and spiritual, often limits their access to dignity and rights. GemPaz emphasizes principles like ecumenical spirituality, sorority, forgiveness, reconciliation, and relational autonomy to transform faith-based communities into supportive environments for women.

In Colombia, many women face spiritual violence, where a manipulation of faith teachings can be used to control and silence them. GemPaz's initiative aims to identify, name, and confront these abuses, enabling women to reclaim their autonomy and dignity. Through collective dialogue and inquiry, GemPaz has worked with 60 women in regions like Sampués-Sucre, Cali-Valle del Cauca, Bogotá, and Altos de la Florida-Soacha, to create a 'Protocol for the Prevention of Spiritual and Religious Violence'. This protocol

provides guidelines for identifying risk factors, red flags, and appropriate support options for women in faith communities.

A key part of GemPaz's work is re-reading biblical texts with a feminist perspective, using tools of feminist hermeneutics to challenge patriarchal interpretations that have historically oppressed women. By empowering women to reclaim faith as a source of liberation, GemPaz encourages them to use spirituality for healing and empowerment rather than as a tool of control.

The movement also focuses on emotional and spiritual accompaniment, providing a space for women to share their experiences and heal from trauma. GemPaz plans to continue strengthening the protocol and building inclusive faith spaces, training women of faith to become healers and advocates for other survivors. Through this work, GemPaz is transforming social norms that previously tolerated spiritual violence and creating spaces for healing and empowerment for women in Colombia.

26.

Evangelical Schools Supporting Comprehensive Sex Education (CSE) in Argentina

Hora de Obrar, Argentina, Since 2019 - Ongoing

Through ecumenical faith-based approaches, a collective of 16 Evangelical schools in Argentina has been at the forefront of implementing Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). This effort, coordinated by Hora de Obrar, involves integrating SRHR into school curricula, ensuring that students are educated on sexuality, gender and diversity from a rights-based perspective.

Although the CSE Law (Law No. 26,150) was passed in 2006, many of these evangelical schools began addressing issues related to sexuality and gender as early as 30 years ago. Located across various Argentine provinces, including Buenos Aires and Misiones, these schools are working to align with the Comprehensive Protection of the Rights of Children and Adolescents Law (No. 26,061). Safe and open space for discussions on sensitive topics is a focus, which is integrated into subjects and workshops for children and adolescents.

The core aim is to foster critical, autonomous decision-making among students. The importance of understanding one's body is a key theme of the workshops, including the value of affectivity, embracing diversity, exercising rights and integrating a gender perspective. The schools ensure that students understand their rights and are encouraged to make informed choices in their personal lives, by incorporating these principles.

Some have found integrating CSE challenging because it reconciles confessional beliefs with modern approaches to sexuality. Evangelical schools must demystify common misconceptions about sexuality, which can be a delicate balance between faith and education. These schools also participate in national conversations about human rights, providing an essential counterpoint in political pushback against reproductive rights and progressive education.

27.

Solidarity in Action: The Role of Social Norms in Community Resilience and Support Systems

Gwai Grandmother's Group, Felm Partner, Zimbabwe

The grandmothers' groups in the Gwai area were formed as an informal response to Zimbabwe's political chaos, deepening economic plight, livelihood challenges, deteriorating situation of HIV and AIDS and drought years. The grandmothers of a Lutheran congregation in a village in Matabeleland organised themselves in the 1990s to be an informal response to Zimbabwe's deepening economic inequalities. The focus initially was on the care of orphans in their community, and by creating a home-based care system, there are no longer any child-headed households in the community.

Women of faith came together from different churches to create an informal response network of 'grandmothers' groups', who provide immediate physical and psycho-social support. The groups have contributed to strengthening children's identity, belonging to society and self-esteem. The project also contributed to transforming social norms, as women, particularly older women, assumed the leadership of addressing the issues in their community. Social norms were transformed by the visible leadership of women going beyond their traditional roles in the home to be first responders in times of emergency and crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Gwai Grandmothers' Group has been able to make its voices heard in raising the concerns of their communities. While initially focused on ensuring the care of orphans, the group is now also responding to addressing gaps in its infrastructure. For example, the groups built a water pipe in an area suffering from drought, with grandmothers participating in the digging. The grandmothers are assuming leadership roles in transforming social norms and promoting values that promote collective responsibility and care for community members, especially children.

The project also supports children's education by providing school fees, uniforms, and books. The project aims to increase access to nutritious and adequate food, quality education, and needs based on psychosocial care and support for the orphans and vulnerable children of the project area. The financial sustainability of the households is also strengthened by improving community members' skills base, providing access to different livelihood opportunities and resources, which break the stereotypes of 'women's work'.

Critical Areas: Women and the Environment, The Girl Child

28.

Social Norm Change and Faith in Ethiopia's Deaf Education Initiative

FELM, Ethiopia, 2003 - ongoing

Felm, an NGO of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, has been a pivotal force in promoting social change for the deaf community in Ethiopia through its Social and Educational Programme for the Deaf. Launched in 2003 in collaboration with the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus – Development and Social Services Commission (EECMY-DASSC), the programme addresses the challenges faced by over 500,000 deaf individuals in Ethiopia, where fewer than 10% have access to formal education and discriminatory social norms related to gender and disability, contribute to isolating women and girls from community life.

Ethiopia's education systems have been under resourced and ill-equipped to ensure the inclusion of students with hearing impairments. Deaf children have historically been isolated in specialist boarding schools, away from their families and communities. Recognising the importance of social integration and inclusivity, FELM's programme focused on training mainstream school teachers in sign language. Deaf students are now included in inclusive bilingual education, with both spoken and sign language, eliminating the need for institutionalised schooling.

The programme's approach is rooted in faith and social justice, promoting the idea that all children, regardless of disability or gender, are entitled to education and a dignified life. An immediate educational gap is addressed, while also fostering a broader cultural and social norm shift towards inclusivity. Through workshops involving deaf educators, disability advocates, and professionals, the programme developed a curriculum that supports inclusive teaching methods. As a result of the training of over 2,000 teachers and enrolling more than 35,000 deaf, transformation of school practices is ensuring hard-of-hearing children are able to learn alongside their hearing peers.

A significant aspect of the initiative is its focus on empowering local communities. In addition to teacher training, the programme provides educational materials and assistive devices while involving parents and local officials. This comprehensive approach has increased access to education and contributed to the national Special Needs/Inclusive Education Strategy, incorporating sign language training for preschool children. The programme's sustainability is supported through funding from the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Finnish donations, and in-kind contributions from the Ethiopian government. With plans to expand into rural areas, where 80% of people with disabilities live, Felm envisions the model being replicated in other sub-Saharan African countries with similar educational challenges.

Critical Areas: Women and Education, The Girl Child

29.

Social Norm Change Through Accessibility and Inclusion Training for the MKUKI Coalition

MKUKI Coalition, including FELM, Tanzania, 2021

MKUKI coalition is the largest NGO forum in Tanzania responsible for coordinating the 16 days campaign. This initiative was hosted by a smaller coalition consisting of Fida International, Felm, FPCT, ELCT, EDAN, SHIVYAWATA (Tanzania Federation of Disabled Peoples' Organizations)

The MKUKI Coalition is a Tanzanian network responsible for coordinating and organising the 16 Days of Activism against GBV campaign in Tanzania. In 2021, the MKUKI coalition was engaged by Finnish development partners (Fida International, Felm and Abilis with the support of Finland's development cooperation) and their partners in Tanzania (ELCT, FPCT and many others). One notable intervention was the accessibility and inclusion training conducted in 2021, aimed at preparing MKUKI Coalition members for the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence. This initiative sought to address critical issues related to the intersection of disability, gender, and violence, emphasising the need for inclusive practices in the fight against GBV and ways to make 16 days of activism campaigns accessible and inclusive.

In many societies, persons with disabilities (PWDs), particularly women and girls, face a heightened risk of gender-based violence due to societal exclusion, stigmatisation, and lack of accessible support systems. Social norms often marginalise these individuals, rendering them invisible in mainstream discussions around GBV prevention and response. Inaccessible services, inadequate legal frameworks, and societal prejudices exacerbate their vulnerability. The MKUKI Coalition recognised that to address GBV effectively, it was crucial to promote accessibility and inclusivity in the broader movement. This

included ensuring that people with disabilities, especially women and girls, had equal access to resources, protection services, and opportunities for activism.

MKUKI Coalition members participated in training to challenge entrenched social norms by fostering a deeper understanding of the barriers faced by people with disabilities. The coalition further developed training delivered by the Tanzanian Federation of Disabled Persons Organizations and disability and accessibility experts. The training included:

- The specific factors placing women and girls with disabilities at the risk of GBV.
- The importance of accessible GBV services, including accessible information, communication, transportation, and support systems.
- How to integrate inclusive practices into existing gender-based violence prevention programmes.
- Legal rights and protections for women with disabilities in the context of GBV.

Due to the training and engagement with the MKUKI Coalition, it decided that training was particularly impactful in including disability inclusion as the central theme for the 2021 Campaign. This had a role in shifting societal attitudes toward persons with disabilities through the campaign. The campaign highlighted the urgent need for inclusive GBV response mechanisms that do not exclude people with disabilities from protection, health services or justice. The training also encouraged participants to challenge societal stereotypes that often view individuals with disabilities as powerless or voiceless, emphasising their agency and role in advocating for their rights and spearheading the change.

By aligning the training with the global 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, the MKUKI Coalition helped raise awareness about the intersection of disability and gender-based violence, thus advancing the conversation on how inclusive activism can drive meaningful social change. The work continued in the form of the National Dialogue on “disability and SRHR and the right to live free from violence”. The project produced an outcome document/policy brief on the realisation of SRHR of persons with disabilities to a life free from violence; as a result of the 2021 campaign, the work translated into the establishment of centres of excellence on disability-inclusive SRH and GBV services, and a multi-stakeholder Tumeweza compendium.

Critical Areas: Women and Education, The Girl Child

30.

Advancing Gender Justice through Faith-Based Action: The ACT Gender Justice Global Programme (GJP)

ACT Alliance, First Phase of the Gender Justice Programme, 2019 - 2024

The ACT Gender Justice Global Programme harnesses the power of faith-based actors to advance gender justice, counter backlashes and foster inclusive and equitable societies. Through an intersectional approach that integrates gender justice into development, humanitarian response, and advocacy efforts, the programme has demonstrated the power of a faith-based network to advance gender equality, in local, national, regional and global contexts.

Outcomes of the programme include ACT Alliance members deepening their commitment to transforming unequal power relations and promoting gender justice. Working together to advance gender just societies, including social norm change. Co-creating global faith-based forces for gender

equality, becoming a leading faith-based voice in global advocacy. The programme has also institutionalised gender justice within the alliance, including strengthening gender mainstreaming in climate, humanitarian and peace programmes.

For example:

- Adoption of 138 gender justice policies across ACT member organizations.
- Capacity-building initiatives such as the Women in Leadership Academy in Asia-Pacific, fostering both institutional and individual transformation.
- Providing \$1,392,805 in sub-grants to support 26 locally-led projects across multiple regions.
- Enhancing women's leadership in faith communities, particularly within national ACT Forums in Uganda and Ethiopia.
- Hosting multiple UN Side Events, roundtables, and strategic dialogues, engaging over 29 Member States.
- Reclaiming religious narratives for gender justice, including advocacy for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) at UN policy forums.
- Mobilizing faith communities to transform social norms, advocate for legal reforms, and push for gender equality.
- The revision of the ACT Global Gender Justice Policy (2024), strengthening commitments to SRHR, SOGIE, and accountability.

The programme has catalysed systemic change, demonstrating that faith and human rights can work together to promote equality and justice worldwide. Through sustained action and collaboration, faith-based actors continue to be pivotal in building more just, inclusive, and gender-equitable societies.

