



Church of Sweden 

United Nations Population Fund



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# Women, Faith and Human Rights

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Buddhist woman praying in a temple complex, Sri Lanka  
Walter Keller / third-eye-photography.de



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# **Introduction**

## Women, Faith, and Human Rights: At the Intersection of SRHR and Population Dynamics

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Women's rights in general, and sexual and reproductive health and rights in particular, continue to be among the most contentious issues in national, regional and global dynamics. They are especially so at inter-governmental settings where texts of agreements, outcome documents and statements, often have to be agreed by more than one national delegation. The Program of Action (PoA) from the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) (Cairo, 1994), as well as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPFA) from the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), the annual Commission on Status of Women (CSW), and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) are constantly and increasingly challenged by some governmental positions, as well as by some vocal religiously inspired advocacy groups interacting with the UN system.

Issues relating to women, families, children, or sexual identity, often cause prolonged debates, both in formal discussions among Member States (governments) and within the civil society representatives. The global political space for initiatives aiming at expanding women's human rights, which has certainly increased since the UN World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985, appears increasingly to be filling with voices which would detract and attack the agenda of gender equality and women's empowerment. In fact, there is an increasingly strong current aimed at limiting what are regarded as a "secular", "Western-driven", and "liberal" rights agenda.

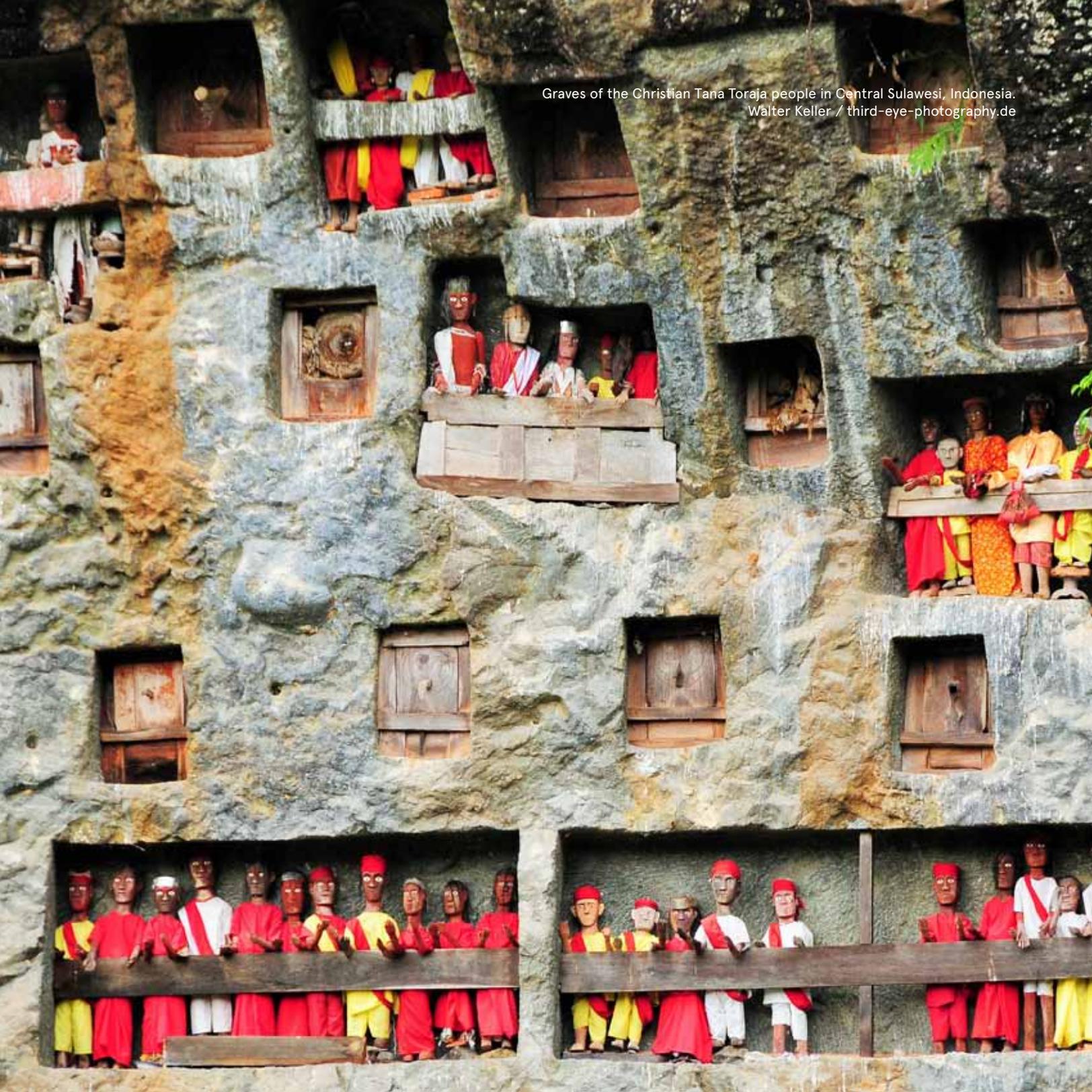
Yet many women and men of faith – believers in their respective religious traditions – do not agree with

those who advocate for backing down from the BPFA or ICPD PoA. Many also do not agree with those who advocate for limitations in women's participation and rights in a post-2015 development agenda (also known as Agenda 2030 or the Sustainable Development Goals). In fact, religious women advocates of the human rights' agenda, are rarely heard in global dialogues and negotiations, and when they are present, their voices and perspectives are often on the margins of these intergovernmental fora, rather than integrated within the official spaces and events. This happens in spite of the important contributions they can – and do – make in public spaces and in religious narratives.

The language of faith matters to many – if not most – of the world's peoples. And the language of human rights underpins all the international agreements which are meant to provide a framework for engagement and accountability within and between nations. It is therefore critical to ensure that there is a time and place deliberately set aside for various faith traditions to engage in serious reflections on the inter-linkages between human rights and faith, based on solid theological and sociological knowledge, and based on actual experiences in human development.

Thanks to the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), UNFPA has been systematically engaging with faith-based partner organizations and religious leaders since December 2013. The Church of Sweden and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) co-convened a consultation on "Women, Faith and Human Rights", which took place in Sweden on the 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2015 (at Sigtuna Foundation near Stockholm). The focus of this was to review the

Graves of the Christian Tana Toraja people in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia.  
Walter Keller / third-eye-photography.de



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*“Religious women advocates of the human rights’ agenda, are rarely heard in global dialogues and negotiations, and when they are present, their voices and perspectives are often on the margins of these intergovernmental fora, rather than integrated within the official spaces and events. This happens in spite of the important contributions they can — and do — make in public spaces and in religious narratives”.*

Women, Faith, and Human Rights: at the Intersection of SRHR and Population Dynamics. By Margareta Grape and Azza Karam

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papers expressing the knowledge of diverse actors, as part of efforts to ensure the mobilization of a broad constituency of faith actors who clearly supported the human rights agenda – especially on the sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights (SRHR) continuum of issues. These faith-based actors were convened during key intergovernmental moments, around the nexus of religion, sexual and reproductive health, and women’s human rights. The need to position SRHR as a critical component of the agenda of these diverse religious actors, as they worked to realise the new developmental agenda, increasingly emerged as requiring specific and deliberate focus by both secular as well as faith-based, governmental as well as non-governmental, proponents. The consultation enabled a convening of men and women of faith, from different regions, religions and professional backgrounds (theologians, development practitioners, religious leaders, diplomats, human rights activists), to critically assess the nexus between women rights, human rights and religious values. The discussions and presentations sought the following objectives:

- To contribute to a broader and deeper understanding of the relation between faith and human rights, particularly around issues of SRHR and population dynamics.
- To challenge the notion that there per definition is a conflict between faith and human rights in general and women’s rights in particular.
- To make the positions of faith-based women in leadership visible and to convey their experiences and views to UN missions and UN agencies.

- To inspire women in leadership to build networks that add an important voice to the global women’s movement engaged in active UN advocacy around gender equality and women and girls’ rights.

In order to do so, written reflections were requested, to address 4 key and recurrent themes in this nexus. These are: the dissonance between religious institutions and frameworks, and human rights; the links between notions of family and religious values; the extent to which faith-based language could be seen to oppose or to endorse human rights; and the specific role which faith-based actors play in the debates around SRHR.

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## Religious Traditions or Human Rights?

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At times, arguments are put forward suggesting that there is an intrinsic conflict between universal human rights and religious values. This notion is present in the general debates in and around the United Nations on SRHR and also in regards to children's rights. Combining and contrasting perspectives of academics, community leaders,

educators and women religious leaders working from within their respective religious traditions would add value to the knowledge. Particularly given the combined ability and competence to contribute to a deeper understanding of how a global normative system interacts with religious values – both positively and negatively.



Muslims in Western Sri Lanka (Puttalam)  
Walter Keller / third-eye-photography.de

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*“Gender equality is therefore a central and explicit component of Bahá’í religious understanding, one which every believer, man and woman alike, strives to understand more deeply and exhibit more fully in his or her life. But the implications of this principle are not confined to the personal and theological alone. Indeed, the Bahá’í writings clearly relate the equality of women and men to social, institutional, and legal conditions”.*

“The Baha’i Faith and Gender Equality”.

By Bani Dugal

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*“The right to life, autonomy and equal respect are three of the most basic components of the theological concept of human dignity. Without life, no person can possess dignity or exercise rights. These three components reflected in a multitude of manners in Hindu religious scriptures and traditions are really the basis of human rights as we understand it today”.*

“Hinduism and Women’s Rights: A Dowry of Knowledge”.

By Meera Khanna

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*“We cannot change the way Jewish women were perceived and the way they lived in the past — but we must change the way they live in the future. This can be done only through contextualizing the past and giving students a way of coping with its difficulties. Changing Jewish education in a direction more sensitive to feminist issues must involve the men as well as the women; the boys as well as the girls. Much more work must be done in rabbinic preparation and in teacher education — both pre-service and in-service training — in order to deal with this challenge”.*

“A Jewish Perspective”.  
By Deborah Weissman

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## Family and Religious values

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There are some voices who are actively challenging the UN rights agenda<sup>1</sup>. Among them are those who demand that the UN adopt the concept of the “natural family”<sup>2</sup>. They suggest that there has to be a specified reading of the article 16 (3) in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and State”. Historically, “families” have come in many shapes and sizes and forms, and continue to do so. Instances include grandparents living with grandchildren,

extended families, widows or widowers living in family units with children or relatives, polygamous families, rainbow families, single mom or dad families. Even religious communes are examples of how “family units” are constituted in real life. Those who advocate for “natural family” want to reduce the rights for those living in other family constellations that do not fit their understanding of “natural families”. Given the different perspectives, gathered participants reflected on some of the intersections between religious discourse and family realities.

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1. See the Scanteam report provided to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on February 2013, entitled “Lobbying for Faith and Family: A Study of Religious NGOs at the United Nations” .
  2. A resolution on “Protection of the Family” was brought forward by a core group of 12 States (Bangladesh, Belarus, China, Cote d’Ivoire, Egypt, El Salvador, Mauritania, Morocco, Qatar, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia) as a follow-up to a voted resolution adopted at the Human

Rights’ Council in June 2014. Deliberations on the resolution, which was eventually adopted, proved highly contentious with some governments arguing that it sets back the advancement of the human rights of individuals, as it seeks to elevate the family as an institution in need of protection without acknowledging the harms and human rights abuses that are known to occur within families, or recognizing that diverse forms of family existing.

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*“This model of male authority and female submission contradicts contemporary notions of justice and human rights norms, and cannot be justified on religious grounds. In addition, it is inefficient and unworkable given present day economic and social realities. Many men are unable or unwilling to protect and provide for their families. Women often serve as the protectors of their families, provide essential income for their families, and contribute through unpaid labour”.*

**“A Muslim Perspective on Challenging the gap between text, Interpretation and Praxis”. By Zainah Anwar**

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Christian community in Cambodia  
Walter Keller / third-eye-photography.de



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*“There are many networks, organisations and conferences working to find ways of making women’s voices heard in the Catholic Church. Women theologians have been working on change of structures as well as on a new theological discourse since the Second Vatican Council. In my opinion very little has been obtained on a structural and institutional level. On the other hand, all these women are each day adding new insights, new language and new praxis to the tradition of Christian thought, doctrine and life. And we must not forget that the Church has always been a mirror of the surrounding society. This means that social and political work is urgently needed as well, in order to realize full equality between the sexes”.*

“Swedish, Dominance and Woman”.

By Madeleine Fredell

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*“Critical “to do’s” for national, regional and global actors [include the need to] ... recognise that resistance to reform of Muslim family laws persists not simply because of religion, but for other reasons, e.g. patriarchy and political pressure; recognise diversity of voices within the Muslim community; highlight the egalitarian, gender-sensitive and progressive provisions found in various Muslim family laws; and build the capacity and knowledge of state officials and activists on the reformist Islamic discourses that encourage gender-sensitive reforms in Muslim family laws which reflect the new realities of Muslim women and men today...”*

“CEDAW and Muslim Family Laws Glocally: Interaction and Common Ground”.

By Marwa Sharafeldin

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## Faith based language – opposing or endorsing human rights?

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Questions covered here include what obstacles and possibilities there are for secular and faith based human rights discourses to become mutually supportive, and to what extent is there a value-added to faith-based communities' capacities to strengthen the discourse of universal human rights. There remains

some skepticism, particularly on behalf of some in the secular international development world, as to whether local and national leadership of faith based institutions and communities can indeed join forces to realise rights' based justice work, particularly where it concerns more sensitive issues such as SRHR.



Buddhist women on their way to the temple  
Walter Keller / third-eye-photography.de

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*In recent years the language of gender, reproduction and sexual health has become increasingly coded and polarised... Gender-based analysis has been seen as an invaluable tool for analysing sociological, economic and political factors related to whether one is born a woman or a man... Today, in many circles, gender is just as likely to refer to LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual or Transgendered) rights, or to a view that one's sex (being born male or female) is not a biological given at all, but rather is determined by cultural factors”...*

“Negotiating a Language of Gender”.

By Gillian Paterson

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The ancient Buddhist temple of Borobudur, Central Java, Indonesia  
(in the picture Muslim school girls visiting the temple)  
Walter Keller / third-eye-photography.de





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# Role of faith based actors to promote the SRHR and the development agenda

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There is a debate going on in some countries on the unique contribution faith based organizations can offer to promote development. However, it is mainly male faith-based actors who are being heard when the invitation to discuss or reflect together with international secular organizations is issued. Women directly involved in faith-based social service work, and the bulk of those actually providing developmental services, should also have a chance to offer their

views. After all, those within faith-based or faith-inspired organizations with a “hands-on” experience of service delivery and actual community-rooted activism, offer unique perspectives based on their contextual understandings of how they relate their faith to their daily work for justice and health. And yet the question remains: how can women of faith have a voice and a key role in the realization of Agenda 2030?



Pilgrim leaving the ancient Hindu Tempel at Prambanan, Central Java, Indonesia  
Walter Keller / third-eye-photography.de

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*“Faith based institutions will benefit from a deep study of their homogeneity and exclusionary leadership culture which excludes not only women, but many men too. They will benefit from re-examining the perception of what constitutes excellence in leadership and challenging the norms that determine leadership eligibility. It needs to be asked if there is an alignment of leadership and managerial attributes with gender stereotypes. Diversity initiatives, as part of an overall strategy, will help faith based organisations. But what helps, above all, is honesty, which needs to be accompanied with constant and effective communications...”*

“Religious institutions, power and female leadership”.

By Pauliina Parhiala

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Indian Women on a beach in India  
Walter Keller / third-eye-photography.de

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*“Contemporary religious dynamics around sexual and reproductive health and rights indicate some progress... An example is how feminist theology has brought critical contributions to gender equality and a less sexist reading of Christianity’s sacred texts, through simultaneously deconstructing distorted values, patriarchal interpretations of the sacred texts and various aspects of Christian praxis. While these instances and actions record important advances in reflection and action on issues of gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights, there are backlashes consisting of an ever wider range of conservative initiatives on the subject of sexuality among the decision-makers of the Christian churches as well as in the general public”.*

“Sexual and reproductive rights: Building a Consensus between and among Christian Churches”. By Darli Alves de Souza

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## **Realising a faith-Inspired human rights agenda of SRH: Some Reflections and Recommendations**

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### **Human Dignity — Human Rights**

Many of the participants reflected on the concepts human dignity and human rights. There is an ambiguity attached to how the concepts are being used. Sometimes there is a tendency to talk about human dignity instead of human rights. Over the last years this has been a noticeable argument in contexts where tradition, culture and religion are being stressed as the parameters within which to understand and interpret human rights in national contexts. But human dignity is also referenced by those who want to underline that there is no fundamental difference between a religious understanding of human dignity and what is codified in the global frameworks as human rights. This line of argument maintains that all human beings are by their close relation to the highest, God, the creator, the lord of the Universe – meant to live in dignity. To violate the dignity of a human being is, it is thus noted, equivalent to violating the Divine/God/the creator. In other words; human rights is a part of the gift of being human, God-given and an indivisible part of the essence of humanness. Some would argue that this is a strong justification for non-discriminatory understanding of every human beings fundamental rights. According to this understanding the discourse

on human dignity has the potential to strengthen the concept of universal rights, rather than to undermine them. The justification for universal human rights is thus to be found, not in a negotiated text between treaty parties, but in the basic patterns for what human beings are supposed to be, and with that comes the responsibility to protect the rights and, indeed, dignity, of all human beings.

Fostering a nuanced discussion on the linkages between human rights and human dignity is a complicated and complex endeavor. Conflicting interests between nations and peoples in rich and poor countries, systematic prejudices such as patriarchy and the ongoing struggle for egalitarian societies charge the atmosphere around such linkages with a general air of distrust. Against the backdrop of critique against the religious (conservative) rights' agenda at almost all UN related meetings, there is a legitimate fear that a more tentative discussion on the relation between human rights and human dignity could strengthen those who aim at limiting the universality of human rights for women, children and LGBT people.

Indeed, religion may well have the potential to give legitimacy to the conservative right's agenda.

The interaction between tradition, culture and religion is not static, and more often than not—discrimination against women, children and LGBT is being justified by relating to religion and tradition. But religion can also have the opposite effect: that of strengthening the argument for human dignity and freedom.

At the heart of the discussion is the question as to whether the discourse of human rights is compatible with that on human dignity. Are human rights instrumental to promote and uphold human dignity, or is the discourse on human dignity a way for those who want to limit the universality of human rights (for women, children and LGBT persons) to justify their opposition to universal and indivisible human rights for all? Or is there a yet to be explored possibility to bridge the alleged Western discourse on human rights and the religiously rooted discourse on human dignity? Could there be a space for jointly exploring if and how universal human dignity (as perceived in many religious traditions), and universal human rights (as codified in the global frameworks), can, in fact, have the potential to express the same fundamental values, although in slightly different languages?

In many ways these questions are a journey of constant exploration. For just as understandings of human rights and their applicability to myriad issues expands, so too do the contexts in which human dignity is demanded, continue to evolve and change. To address these issues, therefore, requires the creation of spaces where scholars and faith leaders with deep understanding and knowledge of faith, theology and gender, may get together with human rights experts and political scientists for in depth discussions.

The tentative conclusion was that all religious teachings, pending interpretation and contextualization, can and do strengthen universal human rights. At the same time, religion is being used to undermine some of these universal rights. It takes systematic work to challenge the discourse on tradition, religion and culture both within the faith communities and in and around the global meetings where the issues related to human rights and human dignity are being discussed.

### **Safe spaces**

It is noteworthy that many of those actors who seek to bridge the rights and faith discourses, find themselves being constantly questioned. In “secular” spaces, their faith is questioned. While in religious contexts the feminist commitments are questioned. The gathering in Sigtuna had participants from some of the major religious traditions in the world (Christian – Catholic and protestant, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, and Bahai’) and the need for the ‘safe spaces’ was expressed by all faith protagonists. Many emphasized the need for such spaces – those that allowed for tentative discussions, for voicing and sharing ideas that are not yet totally thought through, for expressing frustrations but also to share discursive and pragmatic successes in argumentation and implementation. Many expressed the need for laboratories and workshop to build and try new alliances and to articulate new initiatives. Negotiating a position requires reaching a joint language, and to confirm a shared narrative, with all that may entail in terms of compromise. A safe space does not substitute for the policy tables where positions are carved and eventually adopted – whether in academia,



Health Center for Dékpo Zone, Aplahoué. District-Dékpo, Benin.  
UNFPA/Ollivier Girard

the NGO world or indeed the international development contexts. But it can be a space to jointly test lines of argumentation, with a view to strengthening the discourse supporting women's rights as it is challenged by religious perspectives and narratives.

### **Who is invited to speak?**

It is not controversial to argue that it is necessary to make the voices of religious leaders heard in and around UN-related processes, including when human rights are discussed and positions are negotiated. In fact there are many initiatives linked to faith and culture to which religious leaders are invited to address some of the crucial issues at stake.

The formal religious leadership is important, and it is of high value that the dialogue between the global organizations and influential religious leaders gets space and attention. However, if global organizations only listen to the voices of those who hold formal leadership positions, a big segment of the lived realities of the faith communities will be effectively absent, and thus, silenced.

Religious communities are organized in different ways – from rather monarchical structures to more independent local entities, and even some corporate look-alikes. Yet, in spite of these differing structures, it is men who predominantly – and formally – govern faith communities. Women, let alone their perspectives and lived realities, are either not present – or minimally so – when religious leaders gather around the world to reflect on topical issues. While this may not necessarily reflect a willing lack of inclusion, the fact remains that

the absence of women in rooms and tables where doctrine is shaped, and where statements based on faith are being drafted, will inevitably lead to rather myopic views on the realities of those who are not present or represented around the table.

In many ways governance structures in faith communities are not that different from other male-dominated power structures. The added challenge generated in religious power structures is that they often give legitimacy to positions that confuse theology and cultural traditions, particularly where issues concerning women's empowerment, and gender, are involved.

It is noteworthy that secular women's organizations have played a critical role – and continue to – in and around the meetings of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), and the CEDAW. Indeed, there are those who would maintain that the progress of the two UN-agencies (UN Women and UNFPA) would not have been possible, had the women's movement not been so present and vocal on the global stage over the last 20 years. The formal leadership of the governments (Member States of the UN) would arguably not have agreed on many of the gender-related issues if they had not been challenged by the women's organizations in their own countries, as well as in New York and Geneva.

While women in religious organizations are and have been present in and around the UN, they often speak to the 'victimhood' and oppression suffered by women, or idealistic roles and responsibilities of women and men. It remains a rare occurrence to see women prevalent in UN and other international

developmental fora, who actually occupy leadership positions as scholars, religious leaders, or writers – or any other position which positions them as “norm shapers”. The latter are seldom invited to interact with Member States or the general women’s movement. Women leaders with roots in the faith communities tend to be neglected as a resource and seen with suspicion both from the faith leadership and from the “secular” women’s movement. Faith leaders often do not approve of their way of challenging theology and tradition, and at times “secular” feminists tend to suspect they want to challenge and undermine the struggle for women’s rights.

Women from within faith communities can represent an added value in relation to the formal religious leadership. At the best some of the religious leaders can be persuaded to support a women’s agenda, as elaborated by the UN. Women leaders stemming from religious contexts are already persuaded and have the ability to bridge the theological language and the right’s language. That is why women from faith communities should be invited to take an active part in panels, dialogues, working groups and such, in order to contribute to challenging the discourses allegedly based on a contradiction between universal human rights and respect for freedom of religion, but to do so “from within”.

### **The Need for religious literacy**

During the discussions the issue of literacy came up several times. Some pointed out that the secularization in the Nordic hemisphere has eroded the general religious literacy among civil servants in

UN agencies and development agencies in Member States. The problem was not described as the absence of religious faith, or that secularism has turned people away from religious beliefs and traditions. Rather, the challenge is the increasing inability to analyze and to understand the nature of faith and the role faith plays in shaping not only the identity of individuals, but also its impact in shaping communities. And yet it would seem self-evident that for civil servants, diplomats and development practitioners, knowledge about religion and the role it plays in eight out of ten people’s lives, is quintessential.

The knowledge of religious narratives and religion’s shaping of lived realities is pivotal for the understanding of the role of national contexts, both when religion plays a negative and oppressive role, as well as when it inspires to claim justice and equality. To be able to effectively implement the newly adopted SDGs therefore, it is important to actively promote religious literacy among those who will be involved in development initiatives, globally and regionally. Indeed, there was a stark warning leveraged in the discussions: if the actors in the “development industry” deliberately ignore the role of religion, they may, by default, contribute to strengthening the more conservative and fundamentalist versions of religious traditions. There is an imminent risk that the most conservative religious readings become normative, if they are not challenged and put into perspective. The ones who will have to pay for this are poorer women and girls in patriarchic societies. Women in the North, where stronger and relatively more accountable legal and social systems prevail, are far less likely to be affected by a polarization between women’s rights and respect for conservative expressions of religious beliefs.

There are scholars around the world who actively contribute to increasing religious literacy among staff working in organizations aiming at promoting the universal human right's agenda. Mutatis mutandi they have a role to play in order to encourage women living in faith communities to revisit their religious texts and traditions in order to find bridges between their

faiths and the universal human right's agenda. Several examples of this are to be found in the papers offered by the participants in the consultation. Universities, international agencies, civil society organizations, national development organizations, and other sectors, should cooperate in initiatives aiming at building capacity and literacy in the field of religion.



UNFPA/Sami Sallinen

## Continuing to work together

Based on the literature overview and the varied discussions which have taken place between the various constituencies in regional and global contexts, two concrete and actionable recommendations emerged.

- **An NGO for joint reflection and action directed at the UN and other intergovernmental fora**

This initiative emerged out of a general perception that a safe space was needed wherein the unique expertise combining theology, feminism and development praxis, could continue the dialogue on one hand, but also jointly address some challenges related to women's rights and religion as they unfold in intergovernmental settings on the other. For this purpose there was a sense of value to having an NGO structure. With or without an NGO however, there is a keen sense that moments such as the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) are important moments for this very same network of expertise to systematically, and in an organized and deliberate fashion, set up side events and convene the dialogues around religion and women's human rights.

- **Initiatives for joint studies and increased religious developmental literacy**

Some of the participants are experienced researchers with access to broad academic networks. It was suggested that some of the themes related to women and religion could be jointly researched through an interreligious lens. One of the themes mentioned in this regard, was how Sharia law and Canon law relate to scripture, context and tradition. In this context, a case was

strongly made for jointly organized seminars on the nexus of religion and development, to be simultaneously informed by the varied melange of expertise combining theology, human rights, and social development praxis. This form of religious developmental literacy should take into account the lived reality of religion and faith traditions, but should not be focused on or confused with an introductory theological discourse. Rather, geared for civil servants in global and national organizations, this form of literacy is to review and inform on why and how religious considerations inform – and can be informed by – development praxis.

The papers in the full length version of this publication have been been minimally edited. Instead, they are presented in the words of their authors/speakers, articulating perspectives that are often rarely voiced in one volume and in one space. All the opinions expressed in these papers are entirely those of the authors and they do not represent any institutional position. They remain perspective of informed and learned voices and actors, which are working in the midst of one of the most volatile intersections of human rights, gender equality and faith – the domain of sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights.



The quotes in this publication are taken from the papers in the full length version of the publication "Women, Faith and Human Rights". To access the full length version, please use the QR code or go to [www.svenskakyrkan.se/default.aspx?id=1485228](http://www.svenskakyrkan.se/default.aspx?id=1485228)



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