

Communiqué: outcomes of an international workshop for strengthening the global faith movement for gender justice

In March 2015, representatives from seventeen international faith-based organisations, ecumenical networks and faith institutions met in London to discuss the case for strengthening the global faith movement for gender justice. It was agreed that the moral and theological rationale for gender justice needs to be clearly articulated and that our gender should be seen as a gift and source of life.

The overwhelming majority of the world's poor are women. We live in gender inequitable societies which have stunted human social, political, economic and spiritual development – not just for women and girls, but for men and boys too.

With 70% of the world's population claiming to adhere to a faith, the participants agreed that faith leaders and faith-based organisations have a crucial role to play in ending gender inequality.

- Faith leaders are a permanent presence in their communities and can play a key role in shaping people's values, norms of acceptable behaviour, life roles and aspirations for 'a good life' in every form of human endeavour.
- They can bring the values of faith to political contexts on local, national and international platforms.
- At the community level, faith leaders exercise a pastoral role, offering guidance and support to individuals and households.
- Faith based organisations and all people of faith can draw on the values of faith to influence and change the laws, policies, programmes and relationships that shape and govern the societies in which we all live – many of which are gender blind or actually reinforce gender inequality.

However, while many faith leaders are playing a positive role in support of gender justice, there is inconsistency, both geographically and socially.

- Many faith leaders have yet fully to grasp the full scale and depth of gender injustice.
- The role of faith leaders in addressing gender justice has often focussed on particular themes such as gender-based violence, rather than confronting gender inequality as a cross-cutting issue in all social, political and economic injustices.
- Many of those working to achieve gender justice regard faith leaders and patriarchal faith institutions as part of the problem and do not take into account the transformational role that faith leaders and people of faith can exercise in tackling the root causes of gender inequality.
- Religious teaching may seem to justify deep-rooted, damaging social values, norms, attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate gender inequality.

What are some of the barriers preventing faith actors doing more for gender justice?

The Workshop examined barriers that prevent faith leaders from feeling that they

- a. want to do more for gender justice
- b. must do more for gender justice, and
- c. can do more for gender justice.

The barriers might include:

- i. a lack of understanding of the moral imperative
- ii. a lack of awareness that they have the power to reshape damaging social norms
- iii. a lack of awareness of the centrality of gender to poverty reduction, and
- iv. a lack of practical knowledge and skills around recognising and addressing gender issues
- v. a lack of trust and support for faith actors by some other gender justice stakeholders
- vi. an uncoordinated faith-based response to gender justice across and within sectors and faiths

The Workshop identified relational, organisational and societal factors which impede faith leaders from addressing gender justice. Whilst gender champions do exist within faith institutions, they often fear negative sanctions from their peers, institutions or societies. They are often in a minority and feel isolated, lack incentives to prioritise gender justice and have no safe space to discuss the issue with peers.

Most faith leaders have not been sensitised to gender injustice and remain unaware both of the moral and theological imperative of gender justice and of their great potential to challenge and change harmful gendered social norms.

Faith-based organisations and donors have also been slow to acknowledge the potential of faith leaders to address gender injustice. This, in part, is due to a lack of evidence of the positive role that faith leaders and faith-based approaches can play in building gender justice across a full range of sectors. The Workshop also highlighted the reluctance of many governments and women's rights organisations to work with religious organisations.

The Workshop concluded that faith-based NGOs are uniquely placed to bridge the gap between stakeholders, and help all parties to understand what their relative roles could and should be in mobilising a faith-based response to gender justice.

It also acknowledged that faith-based NGOs have not always been models of gender equality, and that they too need to demonstrate a commitment to gender justice before asking others to do the same.

How can these barriers be overcome?

The Workshop looked at what could be done to help faith leaders feel they *want* to address gender justice.

Positive actions might include:

1. Nurturing more constructive relationships and mutual respect among faith leaders, faith based organisations, women's rights organisations and governments to enable them to collaborate in addressing gender injustice – for example, by providing a common platform for them openly and safely to discuss gender justice issues through the establishment of joint faith-based organisation/faith leader networks.
2. Providing evidence and facilitating 'exposure to gender justice issues' to help faith leaders more fully understand the reality of gender injustice. This might include, for example, visiting development projects, meeting victims of gender injustice and immersion experiences for faith leaders.
3. Building the capacity of faith leaders to recognise and practically address gender injustice issues within their communities. Many faith-based institutions already have a wealth of practical tools, approaches and theological materials which, properly instituted (e.g. through mainstreaming to the theological curricula), could address this capacity gap. Such materials and tools will need to be gathered into an easily accessible place.

The Workshop recognised the need to encourage faith leaders to both want to address gender justice, but also to see it as a vital issue they *must* address. This will require a combination of pressure from below and from above, i.e. campaigning for gender justice by people of faith to their own faith leaders, and pressure from senior faith leaders to other ministers.

Practical measures may include instituting codes of conduct for all clergy, commissioning gender audits and developing national faith-based action plans for gender justice. Faith-based organisations can play a significant role in convening and encouraging faith leaders to do more for social, political and economic justice through the entry point of gender.

What actions can be taken to strengthen faith actors ability to work on gender justice?

The Workshop identified common actions, including a commitment to working collectively, towards:

1. Building a more comprehensive evidence-base for the contribution that faith leaders, faith institutions and faith-based NGOs can make towards gender justice
2. Establishing safe spaces for senior faith leaders to discuss, understand and commit to take leadership action on gender justice at every level from the household to global
3. Establishing and supporting safe spaces for faith leaders and people of faith already championing gender justice to discuss relevant issues and provide them with a platform to share their views
4. Building greater awareness amongst people of faith, faith leaders and faith-based organisations of the moral and theological imperative for gender justice and supporting them to demand this of themselves, their partners, communities and leaders

5. Producing and sharing existing materials, and disseminating faith-based tools, methods and theological materials for use by faith leaders and faith-based organisations to address gender justice issues
6. Mapping of existing faith actors and enlisting new ones to work more collaboratively towards common gender justice goals.
7. Support for the creation of national, regional and global structures for a more coordinated and collaborative movement of faith-based gender justice actors to take more affirmative and common action towards achieving gender justice policy and programmatic outcomes
8. Pooling existing resources and collectively seeking new resources to implement these activities

What is the way forward?

The Workshop concluded that there is much more that can be done to strengthen the global faith movement for gender justice, to deepen and broaden its contribution towards achieving just and equitable relationships between women and men.

However the task - of mobilising faith leaders to take affirmative action on gender justice at scale and depth is huge. In practical terms this will mean faith leaders, faith institutions and faith based organisations working more cooperatively and collaboratively to enhance a common understanding of the significant contribution that faith leaders can make to gender justice, and to build their capacity to take action. This in turn will require a scaling up of human, financial and technical resources dedicated towards the task. No single agency currently has this task or capability.

The Workshop concluded that a new framework should be established to strengthen and help coordinate the current global faith movement for gender justice. This will include shared values, principles, aims and objectives and a common vision of gender justice for all. To this end, a multi-agency inception group has been formed to begin to formulate what this might look like, and how it might come about.

Participating Organisations

Anglican Alliance for Development, Relief and Advocacy; Anglican Communion, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Church of Ireland's Bishops' Appeal (rep), Church of Scotland (rep), Church of Sweden (rep), Dan Church Aid, Finn Church Aid, International Anglican Women's Network (rep), Islamic Relief, Norwegian Church Aid, Progressio, Restored, SEND Foundation (rep), Sonke Gender Justice, Lutheran World Federation

Further information

For further information on this workshop or how to get involved in follow-up activities, please contact Geoff Daintree GDaintree@christian-aid.org or Terrie Robinson Terrie.robinson@anglicancommunion.org