

7th Annual Symposium on the Role of Religion and Faith-based Organizations in International Affairs

**2021: A Defining Year for
Accelerating Gender
Equality, Equity and Justice**



January 26 2021, 8:00 am - 12:30 pm EST

The 7th Annual Symposium on the Role of Religion and Faith-Based Organizations in International Affairs, entitled “2021: A Defining Year for Accelerating Gender Equality, Equity and Justice” will be held virtually 8:00 - 12:30 pm EST/New York on, Tuesday 26th January 2021.

The Symposium will focus on overcoming pervasive gender inequalities and discrimination as an essential contribution to reshaping the world as we recover and rebuild from the COVID-19 pandemic and to achieving sustainable peace and development. It will explore how faith actors and institutions can work in tandem with governments, the United Nations, and broader civil society to accelerate the pace towards gender equality, equity and justice, presenting directions based on innovative approaches. The Symposium will not shy away from honest appraisal of both the contributions of faith actors to this agenda as well as pointing to where and how they are hindering progress, but will primarily serve as a space to recommit to achieving gender justice, grounded in both faith values and universal human rights, and as part of our commitment to begin a more critical understanding of race, post-colonialism and intersectionality within international development discourse and practice.

CONTEXT

2021 is gearing up to be a critical year for gender justice, as the world looks to emerge from the crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and to re-engage and pick up processes that were delayed and curtailed over the past year, including the 64th session of the Commission on the Status of Women and Generation Equality Forum. The world is facing multiple and interconnected crises that the COVID-19 pandemic itself, and the responses to contain it, have revealed. Pre-existing social inequalities including gender inequalities have been highlighted and new ones created, which will continue to exacerbate these crises unless resolved. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused untold suffering and economic hardship, all the more so as it connected to the raging crises of gender inequality, racism, structural economic injustices and climate change. Yet as the world struggles to recover from its impacts, there is an opportunity to use this phase to reshape national and global systems and structures in ways that address the fundamental problems that have been brought to the fore. Well-designed policies to foster recovery, including economic stimulus policies that prioritize gender equality, will be essential to building a recovery that is inclusive and maximizes jobs, productivity and human capital formation. It will also require concerted action to scale-up evidence-based prevention efforts to stop violence before it starts, address harmful social norms, ensure availability and accessibility of comprehensive services to all survivors, and to hold perpetrators accountable to tackle impunity: to build back better and differently with gender justice.

Gender justice is defined as the creation of gender equality through ending inequality between women and men, as well as through redress for existing inequalities. Gender justice is both a formal process and a substantive outcome. The successful realization of gender justice relies on two elements: accountability and equality, in line with international and regional standards. Gender equity is the process of being fair to



women and men. To ensure fairness, strategies and measures must often be available to compensate for women's historical and social disadvantages that prevent women and men from otherwise operating on a level playing field. Equity leads to equality. Gender equality is achieved when men and women enjoy the same rights and opportunities across all sectors of society, including access to justice and to economic and social opportunities. Gender-based violence (GBV) is a major barrier to gender justice in all parts of the world and includes various forms, such as sexual violence, physical violence, and psychological violence. These various forms of violence manifest themselves in many ways both in the private and public spheres, including as domestic violence, rape and other forms of sexual assault, sexual harassment, child and forced marriage, female genital mutilation and other harmful traditional practices, trafficking in persons, and honour-based crimes. Economic violence is facilitated by laws and policies that cause financial disadvantage to women and girls, such as discriminatory laws relating to marriage, divorce, property, inheritance, and employment.

Pre-existing gender inequalities in all areas of social, cultural, economic and political life have been exposed - inequalities that are disproportionately impacting women's lives and livelihoods to such an extent it is no longer tenable for the world to ignore. The current COVID-19 crisis threatens to push back the gains made on gender equality and exacerbate the feminization of poverty, vulnerability to violence, and women's equal participation in the labor force where they are typically overrepresented in more precarious and lower-paying jobs which offer poorer social and health insurances. As regular primary health services are disrupted by the pandemic, women and adolescent girls have reduced access to vital sexual and reproductive health services, including maternity care and family planning, putting them at increased risk of unwanted pregnancies, and maternal mortality and morbidities. Evidence from service providers suggests that rates of domestic abuse have increased significantly in the context of the COVID-19 lock-downs, as women and girls are trapped with abusers and services that they rely on have been shut down. Evidence is also emerging that girls face heightening risks as a negative coping mechanism of COVID-19, associated with economic fallout and school closures. Extensive closure of schools due to COVID-19 has interrupted the education of more than 1 billion children globally, exposing girls to a greater risk of GBV, child marriage, female genital mutilation, unintended pregnancies, and HIV infection with limited or no access to reproductive health services. Women and girls in vulnerable situations are most at risk, including vulnerability due to various forms of disabilities.

Gender discrimination, driven by globally pervasive patriarchal norms, continues to hinder effective responses to achieve gender justice and equality, thus imperiling the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, and indeed, gender sensitive policy and practice at almost all levels. Addressing these inequalities has become imperative, both morally and as an essential foundation for sustainable development and peace. Given the growing urgency of addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in the context of COVID-19, and considering the context of escalating reports globally, as a follow up to the UN Secretary-General's call for 'peace in the home', the UN Executive Committee recently endorsed a UN-System wide political engagement strategy to engage influencers at all levels, and mobilize the social and cultural shift necessary to tackle gender-based violence. This strategy specifically recognizes the importance of the UN-System's engagement with traditional and faith leaders.

Addressing gender injustice is a multi-faceted and multi-stranded agenda. Gender justice stands out as the re-defining topic of our time as the world looks to 'build back better and differently' and mount a just and inclusive recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Without progress to realize gender equality, equity and justice, the achievement of all other goals, including economic recovery, is hindered and the credibility of the international human rights frameworks is undermined.

For the purpose of this Symposium, we posit that religions and religious bodies (and their texts and discourses) have approached the issue of gender justice in their respective traditions with varying degrees of consensus, convergences, and divergences. Religious discourses on gender justice antedate the multilateral agreements within the United Nations system. These are discourses that have woven



challenging issues that have vexed the imagination of both religions and nations states - issues such as human identity and human belonging, human dignity and human rights, human sexuality and gender, and so many more. By taking stock of the various dimensions of gender justice offered by religious and multilateral bodies, the Symposium offers space for a renewed identification of areas of collaboration to advance the implementation of existing multilateral declarations and promote understanding of the connections between human rights and faith values.

Many faith actors relating to the UN were ready for strong engagement for gender justice in 2020, based on a vision of a world where all can live in dignity, with equality and the full range of universal human rights. Although activities have needed to be suspended, the resolve and commitment of these faith leaders and communities remains as strong now to scale up work for inclusive policies and gender sensitive programmes as we move to 2021 and beyond. The Symposium will provide the opportunity to explore together ways to scale up work for gender justice.

HISTORY OF THE SYMPOSIUM

Seven years ago, faith-based partners came together to launch an annual symposium around the intersections of religion and international affairs. They partnered with the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development with the intention of organizing an annual policy dialogue between the UN System, member states, faith actors and wider civil society on critical issues of the day. Over the years, the sponsorship of the Symposium has included an increasing range of faith traditions and different UN entities.

The Symposia series features a theme each year that both relates to current policy debates and intersects with the concerns and contributions of faith-based actors working in international affairs. The first Symposium in 2015 established the framework for all future symposia with a focus on human rights and human dignity. The second Symposium focused on the prevention of atrocity crimes and violent extremism (2016), the third focused on just, inclusive and sustainable peace (2017), the fourth focused on migration and displacement (2018) and the fifth (2019) covered the intersections of these four themes with key aspects of economic justice and financing for sustainable development. The sixth (2020) was intended to reflect on the planned processes to review progress 25 years since the Beijing Platform for Action and the state of multilateralism at the 75th anniversary of the UN, but was postponed to 2021 due to unforeseen circumstances. Given the crucial importance of the theme, a smaller but well resourced workshop for faith-based organizations was organized in its stead.

The Symposium has been timed to be held in January of every year, in close proximity to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday to help commemorate the values and legacy he bequeathed to the world. This timing is made more relevant today as we confront an increased racialization of our social and political relations, demonstrated by the rise of populism and an upsurge of acts of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance, including white supremacy and bigotry committed in our societies today. The intersections of racialized, ethnicized, misogynist and homophobic trajectories of history cannot be ignored especially as they loom large in the functioning of the multilateralism system and neo-liberalism. The Symposium is also a contribution to the global observance of the World Interfaith Harmony Week that is celebrated annually in the first week of February of each year.

Given pandemic conditions, this symposium will be held virtually for the first time.

OUTCOMES

Reflecting the opportunities presented by a virtual format:

1. **Deepen understanding** of the complexities of working for gender justice and equality from faith and



rights perspectives, to identify means of overcoming polarized assumptions and scaling up for greater multi-stakeholder dialogues and initiatives (built on existing partnerships).

2. **Showcase** the transformative role faith leaders and faith inspired actors are playing, drawing from actual and innovative experiences around the globe, to promote gender equality and human rights and address gender discrimination and gender-based violence, within the wider context of re-envisioning and reshaping the future as the world recovers from the impacts of the pandemic and response.

3. **Share** best practices across diverse stakeholders including faith-based organizations, UN System entities, member states, intergovernmental and non-governmental entities.

4. **Propose** policy recommendations and practical steps to increase urgency and effectiveness of partnerships working for gender equality and accountability across diverse stakeholders, including faith-based organizations, UN System entities, member states, intergovernmental and non-governmental entities in different regions.

5. **Reinvigorate** all stakeholders in taking up the call for gender equality, equity and justice, and to serve as a clarion call to faith based actors to follow up in tangible ways, with specific commitments, actions and policy recommendations developed from the proceedings to take into CSW65, the Generation Equality Forum and other relevant processes in 2021, and into the Action Coalitions, Decade of Action, Nairobi ICPD+25 commitments, and longer term acceleration of progress on gender justice.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

The Symposium will draw from multi-disciplinary research and studies and wide ranging experiences of expert presenters to highlight where faith-based organizations working in partnership with Member States and UN entities can and must accelerate progress on gender equality. Overall the program will provide a broad framing of the context and the multi-faceted hurdles and challenges to overcome, encompassing the philosophical, cultural, religious, political and socio-economic, from both conceptual and lived perspectives and will look at specific dimensions for gender inclusion in international policy and affairs. It will include interactive dialogues and moderated conversations, and address questions from the audience. Each session will aim to highlight the progress made, the goals accomplished, the current challenges and setbacks, and the plans of actions to fulfil the short and long term objectives to achieve gender equality and the realizations of women's rights.

Tuesday, 26th January 2021

1. High Level Opening Session: Multi-stakeholder Collaboration to Accelerate Gender Equality, Equity and Justice

The opening session, with high level leaders drawn from the faith and UN communities, will set the scene, providing a perspective on the importance and potential of collaboration in accelerating progress for gender justice.

2. Session 2: An Epoch-Defining Urgency for Gender Equality, Equity and Justice: Framing the Issue

This session will delineate the state of the question, factoring in the epoch-defining resolutions



intergovernmental agreements of the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), arguably the most comprehensive blueprint for advancing women's rights including the right to equality and equity, which followed on the heels of the adoption of the groundbreaking Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (1994). Robust contributions from religious traditions to the dignity and full humanity of women of all ages will be outlined with an honest assessment of their being mitigated by cultural perceptions where the importance or value of a person is measured by force, militaristic, and warfare abilities. Joined by perspectives from the UN and other actors, the session will look at how the legitimization of violence and the dominant discourse of the war-system in both daily life and statecraft have negatively impacted the way women and girls live their humanity. The session is based on the premise that one of the root causes of gender inequality is the systemic denial of the full humanity of women. Panelists will reimagine a world that actually puts into practice the many faith and secular affirmations that the full humanity of women is constitutive of the full humanity of all, exploring how the difficult realities and the challenges that real change to our global systems and structures will require can be addressed.

3. Session 3: Gender Equality, Equity and Justice: Women Advancing Peace and Security

This session will expand the conversation on the women, peace and security agenda by adding a moral call to action for systemic reform of religious, economic and political structures. As the world seeks to address the changes the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about, the urgency of a new approach to security is clear - an agenda that fosters human security by promoting justice, including gender justice, and the protection of the planet. The panel will demonstrate the strong connection between the security a woman needs in her home, community and nation to the peace the world seeks. Drawing on the experiences of women of faith in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, the panel will offer diverse perspectives to ending gender-based violence, advancing women's leadership and participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, promoting sustainable peace and accelerating implementation of relevant frameworks such as the Beijing Platform for Action, Security Council Resolutions 1325, 2250 and subsequent resolutions, and SDG 16, as well as international law. It will build on our discussions of the previous day, to provide insights into the potential gender impacts of disarmament and demilitarization, outlining a shift away from a Culture of Violence towards life in a Culture of Peace.

4. Session 4: Gender Equality, Equity and Justice: Multilateralism and Intersections with Human Rights

This session will explore why the aims of the United Nations, especially in pursuit of its founding pillars (peace and security, human rights, rule of law and development) and the multilateral processes to address global issues it has produced, have not easily rendered themselves as arenas for women's inclusion, participation, equality and human rights. These same multilateral processes have, of course, produced the Beijing Platform for Action and the UNSCR1325 that provide a normative framework to ensure women's needs, voices and perspectives are included, yet there remains a vast lacuna between agreed standards and actual practice, including financing for gender equality. In the year following the 75th anniversary of the United Nations, this panel will provide a timely consideration of how gender equality, equity and justice seen as cross-cutting values makes for a more robust and inclusive multilateralism. Based on experience demonstrating how the pursuit for gender justice is intricately intertwined with other multilateral agendas, such as human rights and climate justice, the session will look at means by which women's equal inclusion can be made a reality.

5. Concluding Remarks: Moving from the Symposium to CSW65 and Beyond

Drawing from the Symposium discussions, representatives from the faith-based and UN partners will present key points salient to their work, reflecting the renewed commitments to collective action, shared



responsibilities and mutual accountability to take into the Generation Equality Forum and Actions Coalitions to achieve the Beijing Platform for Action, to reimagine the UN and to achieve gender equality, equity and justice.

Sponsoring Organizations:

ACT Alliance, General Board of Church and Society of The United Methodist Church, Islamic Relief, Seventh-Day Adventist Church, Soka Gakkai International, United Religions Initiative, World Council of Churches and UN Women and UNFPA, for the UN Inter-agency Task Force on Religion and Development