

Position on gender justice and gender equality in the Church of Sweden's international work

POSITION PAPER ADOPTED BY THE COMMISSION FOR INTERNATIONAL MISSION AND DIACONIA ON 24 APRIL 2012. VALID UNTIL DECEMBER 2015.



Cover image

"Emmaus" by Filipino artist Emmanuel Garibay. The Gospel of Luke tells the story of two disciples who are accompanied by a third person, on their way to Emmaus. The two are grieving over the death of Jesus. When they arrive, the stranger breaks the bread, and they recognize him. It is Jesus Christ who has become alive again

Garibay interprets Emmaus as a tavern in the slums. The motif depicts a woman who shares the bread with two men. The woman has sores on her hands, like Jesus wounds from the crucifixion. She bears the mark of the cross, and is recognized by the astonished men as the risen Christ in our midst, in the midst of the world.

Summary

The Church of Sweden's position on gender in its international work demonstrates the Church's will to promote gender justice and gender equality in its role as an actor in international church cooperation, long-term development, humanitarian aid and lobbying. The starting-point is a theological analysis based on the equal and inalienable value and rights of every individual, as well as the observation that lack of gender justice and gender equality is a barrier to individuals, society and the church - a barrier that leads to personal suffering, violation of human rights and waste of resources.

The overall position is:

1. *The Church of Sweden undertakes to promote gender justice and gender equality in cooperation with the churches and organisations with which we work, within the networks and in the arenas in which we are present and active.*

The overall position is highlighted by further seven strategic positions that address the following areas: 2. Theology for gender justice and gender equality; 3. Gender as an integral perspective in all activities; 4. Sexual and reproductive health and rights; 5. Gender-based violence and sexual gender-based violence; 6. Economic justice; 7. Women and men as social actors and leaders; 8. The Church of Sweden as a meeting place characterised by equal opportunity and security.

The implications of this position are that the Church of Sweden on that basis will need to integrate a gender power perspective in its work, while at the same time gender justice and gender equality represent a separate priority area.

1. Introduction

The Church of Sweden's position on gender in its international work demonstrates the Church of Sweden's will to promote gender justice and equality in its role as a partner in international church cooperation, long-term development, humanitarian aid and lobbying.

This will is based on our conviction that life is sacred, that every individual has an equal and full value as being created in God's image and that every individual is loved through and through and has been created to live a full life.

The Church of Sweden's international mission focuses on church cooperation, long-term development, humanitarian aid and lobbying, in order to bring about a more sustainable and just world. The lack of gender justice and equality is a barrier in all geographical and thematic areas in which the Church of Sweden operates. As a result, we see gender justice and gender equality not only as a separate priority area, but also as an integral perspective for, and essential analytical tool of, all our work.

The following account summarises a number of criteria that govern the Church of Sweden's international work with reference to gender, and their implications in terms of our position. The position also describes the Church of Sweden's roles as international actor with regard to gender justice and gender equality.

The purpose – a healed world and an inclusive church

The aim of the Church of Sweden's international mission is to work towards a healed world and a world in which humankind lives in God's love, which is the origin and purpose of all things. A healed world is a world where gender justice and gender equality prevail. By that, we mean a world where neither gender, gender identity nor sexual orientation are grounds for injustice, oppression or discrimination.

The Church of Sweden aims to promote gender justice and gender equality in cooperation with the churches and organisations with which we work, within the networks and arenas in which we are present and active. Taking up a position is about daring to show who you are so that, an authentic meeting can take place. It also creates the scope for open, honest dialogue.

In the short term, the purpose of our work with our partners towards achieving this vision is to ensure that all efforts pursued in the Church of Sweden's international work promote and contribute to gender justice and gender equality. Striving with our partners to be an inclusive church challenges us and relates to every position and role of actor described below.

Theological analysis in interaction with the times and practical experience

The Swedish Church is an open national church within Swedish society. At the same time it is internationally engaged in development, church cooperation and humanitarian aid. The Church Order, the governing document of the Church of Sweden, lays down that faith and creed are not static but evolving, and are formulated in dialogue with the times.

Neither the creeds nor the doctrine are objects of faith. They describe what the Church of Sweden's conviction consists of and explain the faith. In continuous discourse with other traditions, in preaching and in worship, the Church of Sweden continues to explain its faith.¹

The Church of Sweden's international work is based in a contextual theological analysis. Such an analysis seeks actively to change the context through a spiral process between pre-understanding and encounters with new experiences and ideas. The position on gender is part of this process. Our wish is to pursue an approach in which our context is part of and shapes our identity, and in which we learn from and change through our meeting with others.

¹ *Order of the Church of Sweden (1999)* Section One: The Church of Sweden as an Evangelical-Lutheran faith community

Jesus meets every individual as competent and converses with them about faith and life, whether they are men or women. He calls on the women at the grave to preach the gospel of his resurrection (Matthew 28:10); he encourages his disciple Mary to share in the religious conversation with the men (Luke 10:38-42); and he uses both male and female images to talk of God (Luke 15). Theologically speaking, the aspiration for gender justice and gender equality is based on the conviction that every individual is loved and has been created by God, with the same inalienable value and rights.

The life-affirming theology on which the Church of Sweden aims to base its international work centres on a belief in a God who favours a life in fullness for every individual and for the whole of God's creation. (John 10:10) A life in fullness for all is interpreted such that every individual's ability and faith in the future is at the centre and that every individual has the right to be free of oppressive, discriminatory and degrading treatment and of all forms of physical or mental violence.

2. A world of equality and justice?

The world is not a place of equality. We know, but have been unable to alter the fact, that women and girls are exposed to injustice, discrimination, violence and oppression - simply because they are women or girls. Lack of equality between women, men, girls and boys is one of the biggest challenges facing the world – it creates enormous suffering to individuals and at the same time represents a huge waste of resources. Globally, lack of equality is a direct cause of poverty, lack of education and hunger.²

What do we mean by gender justice and gender equality?

“Equality” means equal rights, obligations and opportunities for women and men in all important areas in life; in other words, women and men should have the same power to shape society and their own lives³. Equality concerns men, women, boys and girls. It is not a women’s issue.⁴

The term “gender” refers to socially constructed roles, attributes and opportunities, associated with biological sex in a given context. Gender also refers to sexual orientation and diversity in how people express their gender identity.⁵ To the Church of Sweden, “gender justice” means stating a clear rights-based perspective on equality, sexual orientation and gender identity.⁶ The term “justice” also has the dimension of having been at the heart of the church throughout its history and has both biblical and theological roots.⁷

In its international mission, the Church of Sweden has resolved that a rights-based and gender perspective should permeate through all activities. The following principles are adopted in the Church of Sweden’s strategic plan for its international work.

Women and men have the same rights and the same value. Equality means that women and men have the same opportunities, rights and obligations within all key areas of life. Within the rights perspective it is especially important to analyze the imbalance in power and influence between women and men. Poverty, and vulnerability in its widest sense, is expressed in a range of gender-specific ways which, from birth, give boys and girls different opportunities. Gender discrimination and poverty are basically expressions of values⁸

The Church of Sweden has a deeply-rooted faith in people’s own capacities and abilities. However, to attain gender justice and gender equality, there may be reason to focus in particular on certain groups. Where a power imbalance exists in such a way that women and girls are subordinated and marginalised, relative to men and boys, it is important to create scope and support for women’s and girls’ empowerment,⁹ as well as targeted initiatives to support these groups. Equality is about power, and also largely about norms, values and roles. For that reason, it is also important to include men and boys to shed light on issues concerning masculinity and male roles in the context of gender justice and gender equality.

² See for example *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*, (WDR 2012) World Bank, 2011

³ Nationalencyklopedin: <http://www.ne.se/j%C3%A4mst%C3%A4lldhet> (Swedish National Encyclopaedia website)

⁴ *På lika villkor. (On Equal Terms) Policy för jämställdhet och kvinnors roll inom svenskt internationellt utvecklingssamarbete 2012–2015*, utrikesdepartementet 2010 (Policy on Equality and Women’s Role in Swedish International Development Cooperation 2012–2015), Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2010.

⁵ The terms “gender identity” used here may refer to the person’s own sense of gender, for example man or woman, and to “gender expression”, meaning how the person expresses gender identity in for example clothes or body language; it may also be used in the sense of “transgender expression”, the term used in the Swedish Discrimination Act to express a basis of discrimination; or “queer”, which denotes an attitude in which means of categorisation on the basis of sexuality or sex are questioned. Gender identity, biological sex, and sexual orientation are not necessarily linked.

⁶ It may be defined as protecting and promoting civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights on the basis of these factors. This requires a gender perspective to be applied to the rights in themselves, as well as to access to such rights by women, men, girls and boys and to strategies for protection and promotion of their rights. See for example Nahla Valji, *Gender Justice and Reconciliation*, 2007: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/05000.pdf>

⁷ The term gender justice is also used for example in global ecumenical networks, with which the Church of Sweden has close links; see for example *It will not be so among you - A Faith Reflection on Gender and Power*, The Lutheran World Federation, 2009.

⁸ From *The Church of Sweden’s mission in a global world. Strategic plan for the Church of Sweden’s international mission and diaconia* 2008

⁹ The English word “empowerment” does not have an Swedish equivalent. It describes people’s inherent or evolving ability to seize power over their own lives, roles, competence and self-confidence.

Why gender justice and gender equality?

Gender justice and gender equality are worthy aims for several reasons. In simple terms, the two main reasons are as follows:

1. Because gender justice and gender equality are a goal in themselves. The issue is justice between groups and individuals, that every individual's fundamental rights should be respected so that no-one is discriminated against or subject to violence or oppression. To the church, it is about asserting and defending every individual's unalienable value and rights, as God's loved children, and as images of God.
2. Because society and every one of us gain from it. In the World Bank's view, equality favours economic development. More equality leads to less poverty and hunger, better health and stronger economic growth, apart from many other benefits to both children and adults.¹⁰ In the church context, we maintain that a church of equality and inclusiveness is the only church that can be a community open to all, relevant to its times and offering scope for many voices and perspectives to play a part in interpreting faith and tradition.

¹⁰ *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*, (WDR 2012) World Bank, 2011

3. The Church of Sweden's position on gender justice and gender equality

The Church of Sweden's overall position¹¹ is:

1. The Church of Sweden undertakes to promote gender justice and gender equality¹² in cooperation with the churches and organisations with which we work, within the networks and arenas in which we are present and active. We do this by recognising, highlighting and acting against gender repression and power imbalances in church and society.

The Church acts towards this end via a number of strategic positions:

2. The Church of Sweden wishes to be part of a theological tradition that promotes gender justice and gender equality. Theology legitimises both cultural expressions and religious norms surrounding gender justice and gender equality and therefore has a decisive role to play. Theology can promote both gender justice and gender equality on the basis of every individual's equal value, full value and a life of abundance. The Church of Sweden sees both men and women as actors in the process of achieving gender justice and gender equality. We challenge theology that acts against gender justice and gender equality.

3. The Church of Sweden is mainstreaming gender in its international work so that decisions are preceded by a gender analysis of the implications of the decision for women and men, boys and girls.
4. The Church of Sweden operates in accordance with the principle of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)¹³. SRHR incorporates the right of an individual to take decisions regarding his or her own body, sexuality, cohabitation, maternal health and reproductive choices. Theologically and ecclesio-logically,¹⁴ the dignity of every individual and our responsibility to be an inclusive church is the guiding principle in the Church of Sweden's view on SRHR. Gender justice and gender equality also has implications in terms of the Church of Sweden's view of marriage,¹⁵ and the affirmation of diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity. It is also important in relation to our attitude towards HIV.
5. The Church of Sweden opposes gender-based violence (GBV)¹⁶ and sexual gender-based violence (SGBV), not only in armed conflicts¹⁷ but also during peacetime¹⁸. GBV includes human trafficking, gender-based violence in close relationships, honour-related

¹¹ Based on the objective: The aim of the Church of Sweden's international mission is to work towards a healed world and a world in which humankind lives in God's love, which is the origin and purpose of all things. A healed world is one which gender justice and gender equality rule. By that, we mean a world where gender, gender identity and sexual orientation are not grounds for injustice, oppression or discrimination.

¹² Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 3 is an objective for equality between men and women, and at the same time is a precondition for the other MDGs, according to the United Nations Population Fund etc.

¹³ UN's Fourth World Conference on Women; *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, (PFA) (1995) § 96: The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.

¹⁴ Ecclesiology, "the theological study of the church", centres on what it means to be the church, and related views, in other words interpretation or practices regarding the church's purposes and activities. Being an inclusive church means consciously taking a position to the effect that every individual is religiously competent and welcome to participate in and contribute to the interpretation of and the purpose of being a church.

¹⁵ According to a decision by the General Synod on 22 October 2009 the Church of Sweden supports and blesses faithful relationships between two adults, irrespective of their gender, meaning that both heterosexual and homosexual couples are entitled to be married in church from 1 November 2009, inclusive.

¹⁶ UN *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women Article 1* 1998. "GBV is any act of violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life".

¹⁷ In situations of conflict, GBV is often practised or tolerated by government and non-government actors.

¹⁸ UN Resolutions 1325 and 1820 describe our guiding principles on GBV.

violence and harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage. GBV is a continuing global problem that takes place in all countries, religions and social classes. GBV directed at women is one of the most commonly occurring crimes against human rights. GBV also frequently affects lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people (LGBTQ people)¹⁹

6. The Church of Sweden promotes gender justice and gender equality in order to abolish poverty and attain economic justice. Lack of equality is a cause of poverty. Poverty affects both women and men. At the same time, it must not be considered a gender-neutral phenomenon, as discrimination against women creates and reinforces poverty. Poverty is the biggest obstacle to educational opportunities for girls.²⁰ Equality is about the conditions affecting both women and men in society and church. At the same time it may require a closer focus on empowerment for women²¹ and on improving the situation for women.
7. The Church of Sweden recognises women and men as religious, social, economical and political actors and leaders in faith communities and societies in conflict situations and during peacetime.²² There is a general imbalance in power and influence between women and men. As a church, it is important that women should also be religious leaders, interpreters of holy texts, preachers of tradition and bearers of the priesthood,²³ which is both a theological issue and an equality issue.
8. The Church of Sweden is striving to be a meeting place characterised by equal opportunity and security.²⁴ Against that background, the Church of Sweden's fundamental position is that any sexual abuse and exploitation of both children and adults is unacceptable and contrary to Christian view of human dignity, to the mission of the Church and to Swedish legislation. When abuse is committed by a person who is ordained to service, it is a breach of the vows of ordination.

19 *LGBT in development, a handbook on LGBT perspectives in development cooperation*, RFSL 2009, p. 20.

20 *Power and privileges – on gender discrimination and poverty*, UD 2004.

21 *The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (PFA) (1995) is an important document in terms of women's empowerment.

22 UN resolution 1325 emphasises for example women's participation as a decisive factor in conflict prevention, conflict solving and the building of peace.

23 The Lutheran World Federation's document of 2009 stresses the importance of women's leadership and the ordination of women.

24 *Vad gör vi nu? Bemötande och förebyggande av sexuella övergrepp* (Eng. *What do we do now? Dealing with and preventing sexual abuse*) (2011) Church of Sweden, Church of Sweden Youth and Church of Sweden's employer organisation.

4. The Church of Sweden as an actor for gender justice and gender equality

The Church of Sweden is an actor in a number of arenas, local, regional and global. We meet people in local parishes and dioceses in Sweden and we maintain relations with churches and organisations throughout the world. We operate within church and inter-religious networks and we function as an actor in international development, disaster relief and lobbying. It is our belief that we are called to strive globally and locally to achieve a healed and just world, in partnership with the whole of the worldwide church and everyone who wants to participate.

This section describes the type of actor that the Church of Sweden seeks to be, in the arenas in which we work. Both humility and candour must be at the core of the Church of Sweden's role as an actor in achieving gender justice and gender equality

The Church of Sweden desires to challenge and question unjust structures and power imbalances in church and society raise issues and engage in discussion. The Church of Sweden can resolve to serve as a prophetic voice and always to come out in support of a fully equal society, from the conviction that the God of Life does not accept anything less. This challenges ourselves as much as others, since power is a dimension of every human encounter and of every relationship.

The Church of Sweden wants to take the initiative and the lead in the work of bringing about gender justice and gender equality. We do this as part of the body of Christ, in partnership with others. Men and women are all part of this body. Our aim is to mobilise joint efforts in church and society to counter oppression and power imbalances, since we believe that the Reign of God cannot break through until we are all reckoned and listened to. The Church has the opportunity of seizing a unique position for taking the initiative to promote gender justice and gender equality in both religious and secular contexts through the network and the arenas in which we work.

The Church of Sweden consists of and wishes to join with women, men, boys and girls of different ages, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, who wish to assert their full value and rights. We believe that Jesus worked to include people in communities with others. He ate and walked with people whom society denied and excluded. With Christ as our image, we want to affirm the joy and pleasure of being human and to celebrate the riches that diversity offers. There are many ways of being human. The Church of Sweden is not positioning itself against anyone but in support of people who are discriminated against and denied their rights.

The Church of Sweden believes in every individual's ability to interpret his or her own life, to be God's co-creator and to take responsibility for his or her own development. That ability may be oppressed and closed off unless people are given the opportunity to fulfil it. On that basis, our desire is to contribute to people's own capacity to assert their rights and to have power over their own lives, livelihoods and identities. We wish to question and create space for discussion of power imbalances and values at individual and structural level that deny everyone's rights, responsibilities and value. An order that is described by important authorities in people's lives as God-given will not be questioned unless the question of who has the right to interpret faith, texts and traditions is asked. The Church of Sweden wants to promote that the worldwide church offers many and differing people the opportunity to interpret, communicate and question their religious traditions and holy texts.

5. Conclusion

This position paper is to serve as a launch pad for the practical work of integrating an awareness approach to gender and gender power structures in all work conducted within international development, humanitarian aid and lobbying and within church cooperation, in order to bring about a change of direction towards full gender justice and gender equality.

The position has implications in that it will be used as a basis for drawing up guidelines and practical tools for integrating gender analysis into our work. The purpose of gender analysis is to highlight the gender power structure and in so doing to demonstrate inequalities between and among women, men, girls and boys regarding resource assets, opportunities, problems and power in any given context, and how norms, roles and relationships are related to gender. Proven experience and constant learning from the practical activities in cooperation with partners are included as a valid and important basis for continued reflection and analysis.

The Church of Sweden wishes to recognise, highlight and act against sexual oppression and power imbalances in church and society. From a starting-point of a life-affirming theology, the Church of Sweden positions itself in support for gender justice and gender equality in order to work as an international actor, towards a healed world and an inclusive church.

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