

Scoping Study: Looking Back to Look Forward

The Role of Religious Actors in Gender Equality since the Beijing Declaration

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Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities



About the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD)

The International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) brings together governmental and intergovernmental entities with diverse civil society organisations and faith-based organisations to engage the social capital and capacities vested in diverse faith communities for sustainable development and humanitarian assistance in the spirit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. PaRD aims at greater and institutionalised communication and coordination between secular and non-secular actors while fostering collaboration of its members as well as promoting cooperation with existing networks and initiatives. The partnership focuses on joint activities in the following areas of engagement: knowledge exchange, capacity building, and joint advocacy. PaRD is supported by an international Secretariat located in Bonn, Germany and hosted by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, commissioned by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). As an endeavour to support efforts on gender justice, the PaRD Gender Equality work-stream (SDG 5), has commissioned JLI produce this report.

About the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI)

The JLI is an international collaboration between practitioners and researchers to develop and communicate evidence on faith actors' roles in achieving development and humanitarian goals. The JLI Network includes more than 800 stakeholders globally working across sectors serving as an open-access knowledge sharing platform. JLI works through Research, Evidence, Knowledge Partnerships, and Learning Hubs. Learn more at jliflc.com.

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The PaRD Gender Equality and Empowerment work-stream commissioned this research and the report was prepared under the auspices of the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities. The views expressed in the report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect nor are intended to reflect, the views of PaRD, its leadership team, the full body of its members, nor any consensus of members within the PaRD network.

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Executive summary

The International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) brings together governmental and intergovernmental entities with diverse civil society organisations (CSOs) and faith-based organisations (FBOs). It aims to bring greater and institutionalised communication and coordination between religious and secular actors in the spirit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The PaRD Gender Equality and Empowerment work-stream commissioned the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI) to undertake research to mark the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The JLI is an international collaboration of academics, practitioners, and policymakers interested in research and evidence on the role of religion in development.

The purpose of this report is to assist the work-stream in

- a. reviewing the roles religious actors have played in advancing and hindering gender equality since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995;
- b. identifying strategies to overcome current barriers;
- c. understanding the roles attributed to religious actors in UN policy documents.

The report is based on a literature review, prioritising literature published within the last decade, as well as research outputs of JLI members, and the author's doctoral research study. In total 154 journal articles, research reports, and policy briefs were reviewed. Case studies were sourced from JLI members, google searches, and academic articles and development reports reviewed for this study. The gender themes covered in this report mirror the six targets under the Sustainable Development Goal 5.

How have religious actors advanced and hindered gender equality

SDG 5	Advanced	Hindered
5.1. End discrimination against women and girls;	Religious feminist movements have successfully advocated for reforms of discriminatory religious family laws, for example in Egypt, India, Morocco, and Pakistan.	Many national governments maintain reservations to CEDAW articles, such as Bangladesh and Egypt. Both governments maintain that these reservations are based on religious unchangeable laws, while women's rights activists have called them patriarchal. Other nations have ratified CEDAW but still have gender-discriminatory legislation, which often is protected and promoted by national religious authorities (e.g., the Philippines and Lebanon).
5.2. End gender-based violence (GBV);	Religious actors have participated in some efforts to raise awareness about the prevalence and consequences of gender-based violence. For example, in South Africa and Thailand, religious actors have used religious teachings and texts to highlight the negative impacts of GBV and the divide between their 'true' beliefs and patriarchal interpretations of them.	'Marry-your-rapist' laws still exist in many countries and are often protected by religious authorities. The underlying reasons are complex. At the centre are deeply rooted social norms surrounding the taboo of pre-marital sexual relations. Marry-your-rapist laws are believed to prevent the social stigma of pre-marital sex. Violence against LGBT people is also still prevalent in many countries and sanctioned by patriarchal religious interpretations.

5.3. End child, early & forced marriage (CEFM) and female genital mutilation (FGM);	<p>Religious leaders, for example in India, Ethiopia, and Somalia, have publicly spoken out against child marriage and encouraged other religious actors to engage their congregations in prevention efforts. In other places, for instance in Tanzania, religious leaders have come together to collectively announce their commitment to ending FGM. Somali and Mauritanian Islamic scholars have issued fatwas (i.e., religious legal opinions) banning the practice.</p>	<p>In some countries, for example in Egypt and Somalia, some politicians still endorse FGM, in fear of losing votes of constituencies who continue to believe the practice is religious.</p> <p>Religious leaders who perform child marriages continue to resist government-imposed regulations of the legal marriage age. They not only view early marriage inseparable from their beliefs but also fear that with fewer marriages to perform they may lose their social function and visibility.</p>
5.4. Recognise the value of unpaid care and domestic work (UCDW);	<p>Collaborations between international and grassroots organisations in Sri-Lanka, Zimbabwe, and the Philippines have discussed the negative impacts of UCDW, explored the benefits of shared care responsibilities for the whole community, and promoted positive messages from religious scriptures on involved and nonviolent fatherhood.</p>	<p>Religious actors and leaders continue to be at the forefront of defending traditional divisions of labour that are viewed as God-ordained and keep women in domestic roles and privilege men in public and leadership positions.</p>
5.5. Increase women's participation and leadership in decision-making;	<p>There is limited evidence of how religious actors may have contributed to this target. Nevertheless, some actors have embraced religious interpretations that encourage women's participation in decision-making positions, for example in South Africa, Nigeria, and Lebanon.</p>	<p>Women still struggle to attain leadership positions in political parties as well as religious institutions. In some countries, religious parties have been actively restricting women's participation. Religious arguments against women's participation are more powerful in patriarchal societies where gender norms are underpinned by a firm belief that men and women are biologically different, and women are not equipped for leadership roles.</p>
5.6. Ensure sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHRs) and access.	<p>Religious actors are key elements of health services due to their extensive networks and infrastructure in many countries. They have played an integral part in achieving target 5.6. especially by combating religious misconceptions around contraception and family planning (e.g., Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Uganda, Kenya, and Senegal), by lifting the taboo around discussing these issues (e.g., Afghanistan and Bangladesh), by offering HIV counselling service (e.g., Tanzania and Nigeria), and by advocating for a change in national laws (e.g., Argentina).</p>	<p>SRHRs continue to be a contentious subject among religious actors and communities. In some countries including the Philippines, Malawi, Kenya, Uganda, and the United States, religious forces made efforts to restrict women's access to appropriate sexual and reproductive health services and information. In some cases, donor government initiatives included policies that restricted reproductive health rights and access in recipient countries.</p>

Note: Examples of how religious actors have supported, and hindered gender equality exist worldwide and can vary widely across contexts. The examples listed in the table above are the ones discussed in this report.

It is important to recognise that the current COVID-19 pandemic presents a significant challenge to achieving the SDGs. The global pandemic deepens existing socio-economic and political inequalities. COVID-19 has highlighted intersectional inequalities and fragile social safety nets. The poorest and most vulnerable communities are impacted hardest by the outcome of the pandemic. 'The impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated

for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex¹. This puts at risk any progress that has been made in terms of gender equality and women's rights over the past decades.

What is needed to overcome current barriers to achieving SDG 5 in religious contexts?

Choosing partners who are leaders on gender issues in their contexts: International collaboration and partnerships are pivotal for achieving all SDGs, especially now as the world tries to recover from the global COVID-19 pandemic. Achieving SDG 5 is deeply interconnected with achieving other SDGs. For example, SDG 17, which focuses on building inclusive partnerships:

a successful development agenda requires inclusive partnerships — at the global, regional, national and local levels — built upon principles and values, and upon a shared vision and shared goals placing people and the planet at the centre.²

Development has a long history of partnering with international and grassroots organisations. It is important to note that partnering with any organisation supports its legitimacy, its access to resources, and its ideology (including its gender perspectives). Gender experts recommend that to achieve SDG 5, all partners - whether religious or not - should be selected based on their track record on gender equality, including their history of supporting women's rights and tackling gender discrimination.

Encourage religious literacy: Development agencies, throughout their organisational structures, need to promote an understanding of the fact that all religious discourses are context-specific, historically situated, internally diverse, and continually reinforced and altered by both internal and external factors. This means that religions, their belief systems, norms, and practices, are not static but open to change over time. Religious interpretations can both legitimise and challenge gender inequality. First and foremost, religious literacy training must begin by addressing development practitioners' hesitation to engage with the subject of religion (Khalaf-Elledge, 2020).

Conducting comprehensive gender analyses prior to projects and partnerships: The complex ways in which religions interact with gender norms are too often simplified or neglected due to rushed and incomplete gender analyses or insufficient attention to gender analysis reports. A comprehensive, context-specific, and theory-based gender analysis can highlight the religion-gender intersection in a given locality and facilitate the inclusion of religious actors. It can also uncover the patriarchal power dynamics behind religious arguments. A comprehensive gender analysis needs to take into account the intersectionality of gender inequality. This means that inequality does not exist between two internally homogenous groups, men and women, but is experienced differently across multiple levels of social identities, such as ethnicity, age, marital status, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Such analyses require skilled gender advisors and committed project leaders and staff across all levels of development and humanitarian aid.

What different roles have been attributed to religious actors in development initiatives and policies?

Over the past decade, the United Nations and bilateral aid agencies, have produced a series of publications on the links between religion and gendered-development issues. Development reports have acknowledged the vital and diverse roles of religious actors for achieving gender goals and the importance of recognising and including them in development processes. Donor reporting has specifically described religious actors as

- ▶ change agents
- ▶ service providers
- ▶ peacemakers
- ▶ behaviour changers

¹ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/inequality/>

² <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/globalpartnerships/>

- ▶ social mobilisers
- ▶ gatekeepers
- ▶ advocates
- ▶ influencers
- ▶ leaders with credibility

Religious actors are involved in the areas of humanitarian assistance, development aid, and peacebuilding initiatives. For the purpose of this report and the given parameters of this study, the focus is, particularly on development practice.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has hosted several key events on the role of religious actors on issues connected to reproductive health, family planning, and women's rights. For example, the 2008 'Global Forum of Faith-based Organisations for Population and Development' in Istanbul or the 2014 meeting in New York that brought together over 40 religious leaders who jointly denounced violence against women and called on governments to ensure reproductive rights. UNFPA also published various reports addressing the gender-religion link in development. For example, the 2012 paper on 'Enhancing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Well Being of Young People - Building Common Ground between the United Nations and Faith-Based Development Partners' and the 2014 joint report with the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) titled 'Religion, Women's Health and Rights Points of Contention, Paths of Opportunities' which considers diverse religious arguments around SRHRs.

The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) has drawn attention to how religions have been used to perpetuate and legitimise gender inequality. In 2017, UN Women, on behalf of the UN's Interagency Task Force for Religion and Development (UNFPA/UNIATF), launched the Global Platform on Gender Equality and Religion together with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the International Partnership for Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD). The platform aims to enable knowledge sharing and advocacy on the intersection between gender equality and religion.

Nevertheless, development reporting that is not specifically focused on religion continues to evoke the term in an oversimplified and general manner. Such reports typically reference religion as though it is interchangeable with social norms, culture, and tradition. This portrays religion as a single-non-controversial category and does not take into account its many socio-cultural intricacies.

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List of acronyms

SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
FBO	Faith-based Organisation
FIO	Faith-Inspired Organisation
GBV	Gender-based Violence
CEFM	Child, Early and Forced Marriage
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UCDW	Unpaid Care and Domestic Work
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
GPP	Global Philanthropy Project
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
PEPFAR	President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
AWID	Association for Women's Rights in Development
NORAD	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), a network consisting of governmental and intergovernmental entities, civil society organisations and faith-based organisations (FBOs), sometimes referred to as faith-inspired organisations (FIOs), aims to increase institutionalised communication and coordination between secular and non-secular actors. Currently focusing their work on several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a separate work-stream devoted to SDG 3, 5, 6, 13, 14, 15, and 16. PaRD aims to contribute to a more inclusive and effective international agenda on religion and development.

PaRD's Gender Equality and Empowerment work-stream focuses on SDG 5 to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'. PaRD's Gender work-stream commissioned the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI) to support strengthening its evidence and informing its joint advocacy. The JLI is an international collaboration of academics, practitioners, and policymakers interested in research and evidence on the role of religion in development. The Gender work-stream commissioned this research to highlight where religious actors are advancing work towards the Sustainable Development Goal 5 and where they are hindering it while identifying possible pathways towards addressing these barriers.

1.2. Methodology

A literature review was conducted, prioritising literature published within the last 25 years (since the adoption of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action). Since its inception in 2012, the JLI has conducted several scoping studies, reviews, policy briefs, and research projects on gender, development, and religion. These outputs were used as starting points for the literature review (including reviews of the outputs' bibliographies) in addition to the findings of the author's PhD research on gender, development, and religion. In total 154 journal articles, research reports, and policy briefs were reviewed. Significant attention was given to literature prepared by the United Nations, given the focus of this research study. Finally, searches were conducted using Google Scholar, since this search engine includes grey literature. Searches focused on the intersection of three areas:

“ ... to highlight where
religious actors are
advancing work towards the
Sustainable Development
Goal 5...”

- **Religious actors:** For the purpose of this research religious actors are defined broadly as individuals or organisations who publicly affiliate with a religious tradition. It is important to recognise the complexity and diversity of lived religious experiences, as well as that many religious actors exist outside of traditional organised religious structures or navigate between both, secular and religious spheres. The research also acknowledges that findings may be skewed towards organised Abrahamic religions and Western discourses on religion as exiting literature has disproportionately focused on these areas. There is comparatively less understanding of gender and religion in the Global South, especially when it comes to female religious actors and leaders. Large social sciences research - such as the World Value Survey or the Pew Research Center - has focused mainly on Christian contexts. It often uses terminology and research metrics that mirror Christian values, for example, 'faith', 'prayer', 'heaven' or 'hell' (Day, 2015: 98). Such research has made universal claims about gender and religion that has limited validity for religions outside of Western Christian contexts (Sullins, 2006: 838).

This report uses the term 'religion' rather than 'faith' except in cases where other work is cited or the technical term faith-based organisations (FBOs) is used. The definitions of the terms 'faith' and 'religion' in development literature currently lack clarity and consistency. At times they are used interchangeably, while at other times they are listed together as if they refer to two separate elements of the same entity, with neither one defined properly. This report uses 'religion' because the term 'faith' can have misleading connotations and limited relevance outside of Western Christian tradition (Hefferan, 2015: 41).

- **Grassroots efforts:** Where possible the report focuses on initiatives and actors at the grassroots level while recognising that it is impossible to completely isolate these examples and that some actors interact with 'secular' entities and may receive donor funding and/or training from larger development organisations.
- **Gender issues:** The gender issues covered in this report are those related to the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), specifically the six targets under SDG 5:
 - ▶ 5.1. end discrimination against women and girls;
 - ▶ 5.2. end gender-based violence (GBV);
 - ▶ 5.3. end child, early & forced marriage (CEFM) and female genital mutilation (FGM);
 - ▶ 5.4. recognise the value of unpaid care and domestic work (UCDW);
 - ▶ 5.5. increase women's participation and leadership in decision-making;
 - ▶ 5.6. ensure sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHRs) and access.

1.3. Structure of the report

The report is divided into three main sections:

The first section reviews existing knowledge and evidence on the role of religious actors in advancing work towards the SDG 5 over the past 25 years since the Beijing Declaration. This section also includes a brief review of the history of religious actors within development processes and a reflection on methodological challenges when researching the intersection of gender and religion.

The second section examines how and why some religious actors have contributed to the pushback on gender equality and identifies strategies to constructively address some of these barriers. This section also draws attention to religious actors who have faced barriers themselves in their efforts to advance gender equality in their communities.

The third section identifies the roles attributed to religious actors in United Nations' policy documents and other key international agreements that have addressed gender equality over the past 25 years.

2. Religious actors and the advancement of gender equality

Religious institutions and faith-based aid agencies are some of the oldest providers of welfare, social services, humanitarian assistance, and advocacy for social justice reform around the globe. The struggle against inequality and poverty is rooted in deeply held social justice principles that can be found across religious traditions. Prominent examples include the Islamic practice of *Zakat* which requires Muslims to give 2.5 percent of their annual earnings to charitable causes in order to distribute wealth and alleviate poverty. In addition to that, Muslims are obliged to care for widows and orphans and to offer protection to people of all religions fleeing conflict and persecution (Deacon and Tomalin, 2015). Other examples can be found in Indic religions, like Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism that require followers to exercise *Dana* (selfless giving) and *Seva* (service) as individual duties. In Christian contexts, the church has been a major provider of charity, shelter, and social services. In the Middle Ages hospitals were often run by Churches and Monasteries as a result of Christianity's call to follow Jesus's example in helping the poor and reducing their suffering (Ferris, 2005). Churches provided a home for those too handicapped or elderly to work, gave alms to the poor, and had guest houses for travellers and infirmaries for the sick. Nowadays, faith-based organisations (FBOs) provide a platform for communities to exercise their religious charity duties; for instance, donations to people in need are now frequently made through FBOs rather than direct giving. With funds received, FBOs undertake a series of activities to assist those in need and work towards social justice and equality.

Over the past two decades, global development institutions have been prompted to recognise that religions motivate and provide responses to poverty, natural disasters, and human rights violations. A process from 'estrangement to engagement' began (Clarke et al., 2008) spanning Ver Beek's (2000) proclamation that religion was a 'development taboo' to Jones and Petersen (2011) conclusion that the taboo had been broken a decade later. In recent years, the global development industry has been increasingly interested in partnering with FBOs, in large part to leverage their well-established networks, local legitimacy, and outreach channels for achieving development goals (Deneulin and Bano, 2009). Clarke (2006: 845) further notes that FBOs have a particular advantage compared to their secular peers because they can 'draw on elaborate spiritual and moral values' and mobilise 'adherents otherwise estranged by secular development discourse'.

“...the struggle against inequality and poverty is rooted in deeply held social justice principles that can be found across religious traditions...”

In practice, however, partnerships with FBOs are characterised by mutual suspicion (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015). Gender has been a particular issue of concern in the context of faith-partnerships. As Tomalin (2015: 66) contends

it is crucial to view the "turn to religion" by mainstream development actors through a gendered lens, not only because women are more vulnerable to poverty but because, as some observers have expressed, "religions have a male" face in many manifestations of the contemporary global religious revival.

Feminist scholars have argued that gender implications of faith-partnerships have not been sufficiently considered by practitioners and warned of the gender regressive effects of such efforts (for example Tadros, 2011; Imam et al., 2017). Occhipinti (2015) writes that the problem lies in the fact that currently FBOs are either dismissed or uncritically supported. Similarly, Tomalin (2011) warns of a rushed and uncritical adoption of dominant and typically male perspectives within religious traditions. As a response, feminist development literature has explored religion's compatibility with gendered-development goals (see Tadros, 2010 or Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015). Tadros (2010: 1) doubts the ability of FBOs to be 'positive agents for the advancement of gender equality'. She argues that FBOs reflect patriarchal structures, as they exclude women from decision-making processes and are responsible for women's low levels of agency and power due to their limited participation within FBOs. She also points out that religious actors often refuse to engage with individuals and social groups who do not comply with norms regarding gender and sexuality. Seguino (2011: 1317), similarly argues that 'religious non-governmental organisations have a weaker record in improving women's relative well-being than non-religious organisations.

To the contrary, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2015: 563, 566) calls for more evidence behind the argument that FBOs are automatically more conservative and more likely to endorse gender inequality. She points to the history of repression of secular organisations and argues that secular programmes may be just as gender biased. Clayton and Stanton's (2008: 114) assertion that secularism is misconceived as 'objective' and 'natural' supports this argument. Their work suggests that secularism makes assumptions about 'God, the world and humanity just like any other worldview'.

Overall, arguments have been made both for and against the inclusion of religious actors into gender-related development work. While this debate will likely remain inconclusive, scholars and development practitioners have agreed that the role of religion, especially in the context of gender, can no longer be ignored. It is important to now shift the discussion to the need for increased religious literacy to understand how religion and gender interact with each other across different contexts. A conceptual understanding of the intersection of religion and gender has become indispensable for development policymakers and practitioners since 'the religious politics of gender has become one of the most important issues facing humanity worldwide and is likely to remain an issue of increasing relevance for the foreseeable future' (Casanova and Phillip, 2009: 17). The next section provides a review of basic religious literacy principles and some of the methodological challenges involved in understanding the gender-religion nexus in development. This is followed by a collection of examples showcasing some of the contributions religious actors have made in advancing gender work related to SDG 5 over the past 25 years since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action.

2.1. Understanding the role of religious actors in advancing gender equality

Throughout history, religions have inspired both patriarchal and emancipatory social changes. To make sense of religions' seemingly contradictory influences on gender dynamics, the following section briefly reviews some key elements of religious literacy frameworks. The discourse on religious literacy is relatively young and has not yet been introduced into development theory but provides a useful analytical framework to conceptualise the role of religious actors in advancing gender equality.

First and foremost, **religious literacy is not the same as 'being religious'**. Both, Dinham (2016) and Moore (2015) lament that all too often an academic study of religion is confused with devotional expressions of it. This distinction is important as it acknowledges the 'validity of normative theological assertions without equating them with universal truths about the tradition itself' (Moore, 2015: 7). Moore advises that the best way to advance the public understanding of religion is the non-sectarian 'study of religion which recognises the factual existence of

diverse devotional assertions'. Dinham acknowledges that while such a study is essential to all public policymaking, it can never be entirely objective because 'nobody comes from nowhere and there is no such thing as neutrality' (Dinham, 2017: 259). He, therefore, suggests that religious literacy must also entail an exploration of 'assumed secularity'. Consequently, religious literacy is relevant to all development and humanitarian actors, secular and faith based.

An academic study of religions would find that **religions are internally diverse and manifested in different ways across time and space** (Moore, 2015: 1). Researchers have criticised the tendency of referring to religious actors as a homogenous group and warn that such homogenising 'fails to capture the diversity between, and also importantly within, faiths' (Dinham and Lowndes, 2009: 8, 24). The boundaries between the diverse types of FBOs are not always clear. FBOs can incorporate multiple functions and their charitable, humanitarian, missionary, educational, and socio-political motivations may conflict (Occhipinti, 2015). Both Occhipinti (2015) and Tadros (2010) find that – especially when it comes to gender - FBOs of the same religion may differ greatly from each other. Multiple diverging standpoints, roles, mandates, and entry points may exist even within a single organisation. A literature review of both academic and policy documents indicates that Western development discourses generally acknowledge some differences within the Christian faith but tend to homogenise when it comes to other religions. For example, donor documents frequently refer to the 'Muslim World' as if it was a distant, isolated, and homogenous entity (Khalaf-Elledge, 2020). This seems to be a continuation of the colonial-cum practice of 'othering'. According to post-colonial development critique, the idea of *the Other* is underpinned by a deeply hierarchical worldview that was dominant during colonialism. It forged a separation between *us* in the West and *them* in the rest: while the West was enlightened and developed, the rest was backwards and primitive (Chidester, 2007).

Religions are context-specific, historically situated, and subject to interpretation. Moore's study of diverse devotional standpoints and her subsequent recommendations are useful particularly in the context of gender. Her framework of religious literacy calls for an analysis of power and powerlessness, asking 'which perspectives are politically and socially prominent and why? Which are marginalized or silenced and why? Regarding religion, why are some theological interpretations more prominent than others in relationship to specific issues in particular social/historical contexts?' (Moore, 2015: 5). Moore stresses that religions are always embedded in their social, cultural, economic, historic, and political contexts. A power analysis may reveal that practices labelled 'religious' may more likely be social mechanisms to preserve prevalent power structures, rather than eternal and divine laws. Moore uses the example of the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan. She highlights that the Taliban's religious claims differ vastly from others within the same religious tradition. Moore encourages reflection on why the Taliban's gender ideology nevertheless gained social legitimacy over other competing claims in Afghanistan. She suggests that power plays a vital role in lending 'credibility and influence to some religious traditions over others' (Moore, 2015: 6). A danger in the context of religious partners in development may be that - by selecting certain groups - development intercepts local power struggles while elevating some voices over others. Development organisations have been criticised for *choosing* which religion they engage with. This choice is more likely to be in line with organisations' own values and what is considered 'familiar' or 'the least threatening', rather than with realities on the ground (Clarke et al., 2008). For example, U.S. evangelical non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been promoting conservative religious interpretations in Uganda that suited the NGO's own religious agendas. Thereby, they have emboldened Uganda's recent regressive anti-gay legislation³. There is an urgent need to acknowledge development organisations' own religious biases as well as to understand the context-specific expressions of the religion-gender nexus and how religion may be used to legitimise patriarchal power structures that undermine equality.

Religious knowledge production is an ongoing and contested process. Religious texts are continuously (re)interpreted. In patriarchal societies, typically men oversee this religious knowledge production and decide which interpretations are deemed adequate. Interpretations do not necessarily reflect the most gender progressive or gender-equal views that exist within religious groups. All major religious traditions also have a

³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/07/us-evangelicals-uganda-2014724135920268137.html>

feminist dimension and/or women’s rights movement. Feminist literature recommends that development efforts acknowledge the fluidity of religious knowledge production and support the democratisation of such processes by empowering marginalised feminist voices and interpretations (Sharafeldin, 2013).

International development may – accidentally – obscure the dynamic nature of religious knowledge production by only calling religion out by name in negative contexts like gender oppression or conflict scenarios. When religious influences happen to be progressive, they are often described as ‘Western-style feminist’ or in line with ‘Western progressive values’. For example, some journal articles appear to classify women in Muslim countries as either ‘Westernised elite’ or ‘Muslim women’ based on how liberal they are. Gender equal religious interpretations and the role religion plays in ‘positive’ situations is often unrecognised and thus invisible (Khalaf-Elledge, 2020). It also overlooks the possibility of Muslim women to be liberal and feminist without being Westernised. In other words, one does not cease to be Muslim when one exhibits similar traits to those claimed as Western. Instead, development discourses need to expand their understanding of what it means to be Muslim, which reflects a wide and nuanced spectrum just like any other religious identity.

2.2. Examples of local religious actors advancing work towards SDG 5

The examples in this section were selected based on their relevance to the Beijing Declaration more broadly and specifically based on their connection to the six targets under the SDG 5:



Source: <https://www.globalgoals.org>



Discrimination against women and girls remains enshrined in many national laws. In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 'Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women' (CEDAW). It was instituted in 1981 and has since been ratified by 189 states. Six states have not yet ratified CEDAW: the United States, Iran, Somalia, Sudan, Palau, and Tonga. Despite the adoption of CEDAW, many countries continue to preserve national laws that sanction marital rape, wife battering and/or honour killings⁴ (see section 3.1).

Human Rights movements have been battling these laws for decades and religious actors are playing increasing roles in these efforts. For example, religious feminists have been pushing legal reforms in countries where family matters are regulated under religious laws, such as Egypt, India, Morocco, Palestine, and Pakistan (see Badran, 2011; Sharafeldin, 2013; Bradley and Kirmani, 2015). These family laws regulate all domestic matters, including marriage, divorce, maintenance, custody, and guardianship. Reform Activists have argued that these laws are a patriarchal manifestation of religious law and entail a series of gender-discriminatory stipulations, such as the wife's obligation to obedience, the husband's right to guardianship, unilateral divorce, and his obligation to financial maintenance (Sharafeldin, 2013; Sherkat, 1992 in Moghadam, 2009: 1143). Reform activists were driven by the frustration over the widespread misogyny perpetuated in the name of religion and are challenging the monopoly of religious legal knowledge production from *within* the system. As part of this, Islamic feminism⁵ emerged. Led by scholars such as Mernissi (1991), Ahmed (1992), Wadud (1994), Mir-Hosseini (2006), and Badran (2011), it highlights the principles of justice, equality, and human dignity found in Islamic sources in an unprecedented way.

⁴ <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/11-laws-from-around-the-world-that-stand-in-the-way/>

⁵ Some reject the term 'feminism' due to its foreign stigma and call themselves scholars of gender equality and Islam (Badran, 2011). Others prefer to be called Muslim feminists, stressing that while they believe Islam offers a credible framework for gender equality, they do not want a state system entirely governed by Islamic law.

MOROCCO

Islamically-baked egalitarian law

In 2004, Moroccan women's rights activists successfully appropriated Islamic arguments calling for a re-interpretation of Islamic sources and achieved a transformation of the country's ancient Muslim family law. Morocco is now the only country that has an Islamically-backed egalitarian family law. Morocco's case illustrates that Islamically-based legislations are not immutable and that it is possible to reach a legal concept of an egalitarian model of the family within an Islamic framework (see Hursh, 2012; Musawah, 2012; Badran, 2011).

EGYPT

Reform of *Khul* divorce law

Since 2000, the *Khul* law gives Egyptian Muslim women the right to initiate divorce, for which they previously required their husband's permission. It is based on an Islamic prophetic tradition which holds that a woman can divorce her husband unilaterally by forgoing her financial rights. While divorce through *Khul* deprives women of their financial rights, it now gives them a way out of abusive marriages. The prophetic injunction of *Khul* had been deliberately ignored by religious lawmakers and recently brought back to light by reform activists (Sholkamy, 2011; Anwar et al., 2009).

GLOBAL

Musawah - Muslim feminist movement

Since 2009, its members (NGOs, activists, scholars, legal practitioners, and policymakers) from around the world fight for gender equality and justice in the Muslim family. Musawah's advocacy draws from four primary sources:

- Islamic teachings
- universal human rights
- national constitutional guarantees of equality
- the lived realities of women and men

Musawah produces toolkits for advocates and research examining the differences between national Muslim family laws and CEDAW.

PALESTINE

The Women's Committee of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) initiated the implementation of the Lutheran World Federation Gender Justice Policy - a biblically-rooted framework for gender justice in the church - and the creation of a gender-just Lutheran family law. The Lutheran Family Law was adopted in 2015 and gives equal rights to men and women in matters of marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance (Rendon, 2019).



Gender-based violence remains a global problem. An estimated 35 percent of all women have experienced either physical or sexual violence at some point in their lives⁶. This estimate does not include sexual harassment. Women who have experienced physical or sexual violence report higher rates of depression, abortions, and sexually transmitted diseases, compared to women who have not experienced violence. Research has also found that men who witnessed their fathers using violence were significantly more likely to perpetrate intimate partner violence in their own adult relationships⁷. There is a large body of literature concerned with gender-based violence (for example Boesten, 2014; Lloyd, 2013; Keyhani, 2013; Heise, 1998; Schechter, 1982), as well as a growing interest in the intersection of religion and violence (Toft, 2007; Hassner, 2006; Juergensmeyer, 2001). The interplay of religion and gendered-violence has received comparatively less attention. Most frequently explored examples include the role of religion in intimate partner violence (Ghafournia, 2017), female genital mutilation (Abolfotouh et al., 2015), honour killings (Welchman and Hossain, 2006), widow immolation (Sarkar, 2012), and child marriage (Montazeri et al., 2016). Other areas, such as the religious underpinnings of emotionally and physically violent 'gay conversion therapies' have recently also received consideration (Haldeman, 2002).

The United Nations have named religious leaders key allies who are at the forefront of combating GBV worldwide⁸. UNFPA, for example, has called upon religious leaders and communities to address this issue through their structures, sermons, dialogues, and fellowships⁹. This can raise awareness, reduce the social acceptance of violence against women, and promote positive behavioural change.

INDIA

The Campaign of 'Abused Goddesses'

In 2013, an Indian Ad Agency displayed images of battered Hindu goddesses around the country to highlight crimes against women. The campaign declared: 'Pray that we never see this day. Today, more than 68% of women in India are victims of domestic violence. Tomorrow, it seems like no woman shall be spared. Not even the ones we pray to'. However, the campaign received criticism for glamorising violence and was denounced by many as cheap tokenism (Vemuri, 2019).

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

The Tamar Campaign was developed at the University of Kwazulu-Natal in South Africa and has been used across Sub-Sahara Africa since 1992. For instance, by the Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa (FECCLAHA). The campaign uses the Biblical story of the rape of Tamar to help facilitate discussions around sexual violence, stigma and discrimination, power, the construction and normalisation of gender roles, and the power of family and governmental structures to harm or protect women and girls (Nyabera and Montgomery, 2007).

THAILAND

The International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice (IWP) is a 'spiritual-based' feminist organisation working to support grassroots women's activism in Thailand and Asia. Since 2002, it has addressed gender-based discrimination and violence against women. It works with Buddhists and uses Buddhist teachings of compassion and mindfulness to produce a feminist analysis on GBV within a religious framework. Through workshops, women and men explore the 'difference between patriarchal teachings and Buddha's original teachings'. Participants have expressed renewed appreciation for Buddhism and awareness that men, too, suffer from patriarchy and inequalities (Oyporn, 2008: 13).

UGANDA

The Church of Uganda, in 2017, with the support of Side by Side and UNFPA, organised a Gender Justice Run. Over 900 participants ran to advocate for the elimination of gender-based violence in the education system of Uganda as well as throughout the larger society⁹.

⁶ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>

⁷ <https://promundoglobal.org/resources/understanding-masculinities-results-international-men-gender-equality-survey-images-middle-east-north-africa>

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

⁹ <https://uganda.unfpa.org/en/news/unfpa-side-side-church-and-religious-leaders-end-gender-based-violence>



Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) While the global rate of child marriage has declined over the past decade, 12 million girls under the age of 18 are still married each year¹⁰. Child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) results in lifelong – sometimes intergenerational – physical, emotional, material, and psychological consequences. CEFM victims are at significantly higher risk of suffering complications in pregnancy and childbirth, contracting HIV/AIDS, leaving school, and living in poverty compared to their peers. CEFM also increases girls’ risks of experiencing domestic violence, along with other forms of exploitation and abuse, and severely curtails victims’ decision-making power and freedoms¹¹. Boys can also be victims of CEFM at a prevalence roughly one-fifth of that of girls¹².

Historically, CEFM has often been connected to poverty (Lai et al, 2018, in Le Roux and Palm, 2018). More recent research argues that the roots of CEFM are almost always connected to issues of power, patriarchy, and sexuality, which in turn may be shaped by religious beliefs. Religious leaders, along with other stakeholders, play a crucial role in tackling child marriage. They can verify the age of bride and groom prior to a religious marriage ceremony and promote progressive interpretations of religious texts that highlight what the religions say about safeguarding children (Le Roux and Palm, 2018). In countries with religious family law, religious institutions and leaders can demand that the minimum legal age of marriage is set to 18 years.

INDIA

The Institute for Health Management Pachod partners with religious leaders and religious community-based organisations and involves them in all aspects of their programmes to reduce early marriage and keep girls in school. In 1998 they started year-long life skills programmes for unmarried 11- to 17-year-old girls. This has allowed for a delay of marriage and first pregnancy, as well as reduced maternal and child mortality.

ETHIOPIA

Archbishop Markos trained more than 300 religious’ leaders since 2013 in the East Gojam Zone, Amhara region of Ethiopia, to support their own communities in preventing violence against women and girls, specifically child marriage. Markos trains religious leaders at all levels, but particularly community priests from rural areas, where CEFM is most prevalent. Markos training was undertaken as part of UN Women’s programme on preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in Ethiopia. At the end of the training in 2016, religious leaders had developed a 13-point call for action to end gender-based violence in the region, including child marriage and FGM. Religious leaders have gone on to preach about preventing these practices in their own congregations. According to interviews with the workshop participants, the UN estimates that following the training, religious leaders and community members were able to prevent almost 470 child marriages in Guzam and Sinan districts⁸.

NEPAL

The National Inter-religious Network

The network challenges social norms surrounding child marriage and gender-based violence. It has brought together leaders from Baha’i, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Jainism and Islam to publicly affirm their opposition to child marriage and support a legal marriage age of 18 years.

¹⁰ <https://www.unicef.org/stories/child-marriage-around-world>

¹¹ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/new-ohchr-report-child-early-forced-marriage>

¹² https://www.unicef.org/media/files/Child_Marriage_Report_7_17_LR.pdf

Female genital mutilation¹³ has been labelled a human rights abuse and major health risk by feminist movements as well as international bodies, such as the United Nations. While the exact number of girls and women worldwide who have undergone genital mutilation remains unknown, it is estimated that more than 200 million girls and women aged 15–49 from 30 countries have been subjected to the practice. Of these 200 million, more than half live in just three countries: Egypt, Ethiopia, and Indonesia. The practice is also widespread in Djibouti, Guinea, and Somalia. UNICEF estimates that another 68 million girls will have undergone the practice by 2030 unless immediate action is taken to end it¹⁴.

In countries where FGM is performed, the practice is deeply entrenched in patriarchal social norms. While the practice is widespread in African Muslim and Christian communities, it has often been perceived to be an Islamic practice. Literature has emphasised that, in fact, the practice predates Islam and is ‘deeply embedded in cultural understandings of sex and womanhood that are held by both men and women’ (Tomalin, 2007: 15). Scholars argue that the practice continues to be widespread partly because it is assumed to be sanctioned by religion but even more so because it is believed to preserve the modesty of young girls, their marriageability, and thereby the family honour (see Abolfotouh et al., 2015; Okeke et al., 2012). Religious leaders have been playing an essential role in correcting this misconception and ending the practice¹⁵.

TANZANIA

Religious leaders in Nyamakendo

In 2017, fifteen religious and traditional leaders of Nyamakendo announced their intention to prohibit FGM in their villages. ‘We want our girls to study’, asserts Marwa the chairman of the congregation. ‘We want them to succeed as doctors, engineers, nurses and businessowners, and then to come back to [their] village and help others.’ Marwa, with the support of Amref Health Africa, is now advocating for village elders and leaders of other clans to commit to the *Declaration to End FGM* in the region¹⁵.

SOMALIA

Ibrahim Hassan - A Somali sheikh

Hassan currently leads a campaign to end FGM in Mogadishu. For the past seven years, he has been advocating against the practice through sermons at mosques and local media. Change has only happened slowly as religious misconceptions prevail and ‘uncut’ girls are stigmatised. Hassan remains determined to rally religious leaders and politicians to outlaw the practice and enforce the ban: ‘it’s against the Islamic teachings and I will continue to tell people the truth wherever I go to end the practice’ (Ajiambo, 2019).

ISLAMIC FATWAS

Religious legal opinions have been issued forbidding FGM. In 2010, for example, 34 Islamic scholars in Mauritania signed a fatwa banning the practice (Trevelyan, 2010). Similarly, in 2018 religious leaders in Somaliland issued a fatwa banning FGM. Leaders cited Quranic verses that declare that God’s creation must not be altered nor should any harm be done to it. The challenge now is to ensure that an appropriate publicity campaign spreads the fatwa’s message into remote areas where FGM is most common. Without continuous community involvement, the fatwa could also risk driving the practice underground rather than eradicating it (Bhalla, 2018). Regional women’s rights activists have also criticised the fatwa for not banning Type I FGM, which is still the most commonly practised. By doing so it is allowing and legitimising Type I FGM from an Islamic angle and has blurred the boundary between religion and tradition even more (Bowman, 2018).

¹³ While FGM is often also referred to as ‘female circumcision’ or ‘female genital cutting’, this report follows UN viewpoints and uses the term ‘mutilation’ consciously. It more accurately describes the reality of the practice from a human rights viewpoint.

¹⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/stories/what-you-need-know-about-female-genital-mutilation>

¹⁵ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2017/11/feature-tanzania--women-and-girls-seek-refugee-from-female-genital-mutilation>



Unpaid Care and Domestic Work (UCDW) directly impacts gender equality and women's rights. The way economies are measured ignores a large portion of work provided for free daily: women and girls carry out 75% of unpaid care and domestic work in their homes and communities worldwide¹⁶. UCDW refers to 'all non-market, unpaid activities carried out in households – including both direct care of persons, such as children or elderly, and indirect care, such as cooking, cleaning or fetching water' (OECD, 2019). UCDW can have severe consequences on women and girls' ability to participate in the paid economy and on their health and general wellbeing. Moreover, societies as a whole would benefit if families shared UCDW. Shared responsibilities could also remove men's physical and psychological burden of being considered the sole provider and enhance children's 'physical, intellectual, psychological, and social development'¹⁷.

This SDG 5 target calls on countries to 'recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies' and to promote 'shared responsibility within the household'. Literature suggests that there is a strong consensus across most religious traditions on the inherent dignity of every human being and the importance of caring for and supporting children (Hanmer et al., 2009). In 2019, an ACT Alliance¹⁸ statement submitted to the United Nations Economic and Social Council acknowledged the lack of social protection in the care economy. The ACT Alliance consequently calls for state-provided childcare: 'we affirm publicly funded social protection as a moral imperative and as a human right for all, and particularly for those who have been rendered invisible by the current economic and development realities'¹⁹. Nevertheless, there is no noticeable difference between UCDW in religious and non-religious communities. Across most communities, women continue to provide the majority of this work (Hanmer et al., 2009). While religious leaders play a vital role in making UCDW visible and promoting shared responsibilities, unequal care work is often a result of institutionalised patriarchy that reaches beyond community levels. For example, 'men and boys are generally paid more than women and because jobs, especially in low-income countries, tend to be scarce, men's careers are prioritized over women's by both sexes, particularly in situations of poverty'²⁰.

SRI LANKA

MenCare

In 2015, MenCare trained 30 religious and community leaders in Sri Lanka in the promotion of 'involved and nonviolent fatherhood and gender-equitable parenting'. The programme was organised by MenCare partner World Vision Lanka and the Ambagamuwa Area Development Program (ADP) in collaboration with the Sri Lankan National Office Gender Unit. It received technical and financial support from Promundo-US. Participants included Christian pastors, Hindu religious teachers, former MenCare facilitators, and community volunteers from the ADP.

GLOBAL

Musawah - Muslim feminist movement

In 2016, Musawah produced a resource that examines economic and parental rights and responsibilities in Muslim families. It seeks to shift care responsibilities, change marital dynamics, and reduce domestic violence.

ZIMBABWE & PHILIPPINES

Oxfam

In the past few years, Oxfam has been including religious leaders from the onset in their analysis work on UCDW. The aim has been to understand the impact of UCDW on women and involve religious leaders in discussions about possible solutions. Discussions used 'non-confrontational' terms and unpaid care was presented as a societal issue and it was argued that shared responsibility for care would benefit the whole community. Religious teachings from the Quran and the Bible were used to reinforce messages on shared care. In Zimbabwe, Oxfam worked with a religious leader to develop a song about care (I can be a better Man) and in the Philippines, they worked with Imams to raise awareness of UCDW and promote shared care. Imams used the materials that were developed as part of the project during Friday prayers.

¹⁶ oecd-development-matters.org/2019/03/18/why-you-should-care-about-unpaid-care-work/

¹⁷ musawah.org/resources/who-provides-who-cares-changing-dynamics-in-muslim-families/

¹⁸ Global coalition of Protestant and Orthodox churches and church-related organisations engaged in humanitarian, development, and advocacy work.

¹⁹ undocs.org/E/CN.6/2019/NGO/71

²⁰ 2015 - Gary Barker, chief executive director of the international NGO Promundo.



There is a slow increase in women's participation in leadership and decision-making positions. As of February 2019, still, only 24.3 percent of all national parliamentarians were women, compared to 11.3 percent in 1995²¹. Many governments have applied some form of quotas - either legislative candidate quotas or reserved seats - opening space for women's political participation in national parliaments²². Achieving such gender balance in political participation and decision-making is an internationally agreed target outlined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. But an increase in women's participation in politics does not automatically produce more gender-equal policies. Sometimes women merely function as token appointments for diversity without having any real decision-making power. Furthermore, it is dangerous to assume that all women are feminists (see section 3.1). It is difficult to establish what exact role religious actors have played in increasing women's participation in leadership and decision-making roles. On the contrary, there are records of religious leaders actively hindering women's access to leadership roles (see next section).

NIGERIA

Muslim women's civil organisation and decision-making

The Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN) is a faith-based organisation and an umbrella body for all Muslim women's groups in the country. The founding principles in 1985 were to restore the religious identity of the Muslim woman and to re-establish the leadership status which women enjoyed in the pre-colonial era, especially during the Sokoto caliphate. It uses organisational and networking structures inspired by religious values that encourage women to engage in national conversations about education, social services, and civic life (Sarumi et al., 2019).

EGYPT

The appointment of female Imams

In 2017, the Egyptian Religious Endowments Ministry, which supervises the country's 108,000 mosques, announced that it will for the first time appoint female preachers. However, the move is driven by a security agenda: female Imams should teach women about moderate Islam to prevent them from joining 'religious extremist' groups fighting the Egyptian state (Ouf, 2017).

AFRICAN PENTECOSTAL CHRISTIANITY

Pentecostal Christian groups in Africa have been promoting women's participation in their structures. A study has shown that African women are attracted to Pentecostal Christianity because it rejects the socio-cultural status quo of patriarchal societies. This form of Christianity preaches individual prosperity and encourages women to assume leadership positions with religious organisations. (Spinks, 2003; Hackett, 2017)

engaging men and boys in gender equality efforts and a coordinator of the MenCare campaign.

²¹ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures#notes>

²² <http://www.quotaproject.org>



Access to sexual and reproductive health is a basic human right and key to achieving gender equality. It is an integral part of the right of everyone to the highest attainable physical and mental health. This right is enshrined in international human rights frameworks, such as article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESR). When women and girls do not have access to sexual and reproductive health services or are unable to make informed decisions over their own bodies, they face greater health risks, become pregnant unintentionally, drop out of school, miss out on job opportunities, and lose the freedom to plan their future²³.

While **family planning** can be an issue of extreme contention among religious groups, religious initiatives have been playing an integral part in achieving target 6 of the SDG 5. Religious groups have been engaged in a series of efforts, including (re)-interpreting their religious traditions to make health care provisions that protect and advance gender equality; combating religious misconceptions around contraception; lifting the taboo around discussing these issues; and providing reproductive care to communities in remote areas. These efforts have had proven impacts. For example, studies have convincingly demonstrated a connection between faith leaders' approval of contraceptives and men intending to use them (Costenbader, 2019).

UGANDA

The Family Life Education Program (FLEP) is an NGO founded in 1986 by the Church of Uganda Busoga Diocese. It has integrated SRHR services into family planning activities and partners with SRH organisations, such as Reproductive Health Uganda and Straight Talk Foundation.

ARGENTINA

Catolicas por el Derecho a Decidir (Catholics for the Right to Decide) was founded after the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and works across countries in Latin America. Headquartered in Argentina, it is an independent movement of Catholic people committed to 'social justice and women's rights, including sexual and reproductive rights, and the right to live free from violence and discrimination'. In Argentina, it challenges religious fundamentalism from theological and feminist perspectives and mobilises communities to demand access to safe and legal abortion. Through partnerships with universities, it has helped train over 550 health professionals in sexual and reproductive health and rights issues.

KENYA

The Kenya Muslim Youth Development Organization (KMYDO) is a member of the Faith to Action Network and the Girls Not Brides Global Partnership. It has developed a Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) project and introduced an education toolkit inspired by Muslim values in the curriculum of 35 Muslim schools.

AFGHANISTAN

Afghan Mullahs promote birth spacing on national TV. From 2005 to 2006, 37 Mullahs encouraged birth spacing and contraceptive use (pills, injections, and condoms) by quoting the Quran during Friday prayers and on TV. The mullahs' major concern was the health of women and children. The Health Ministry plans to expand the programme nationwide. USAID, the European Union, and the World Bank are involved in the scale-up. The pilot study was funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

NIGERIA

The Nigerian Urban Reproductive Health Initiative (NURHI) collaborates with religious and interreligious actors to increase contraceptive acceptance in urban settings since 2009. The initiative develops resources that reflect Islamic and Christian perspectives on reproductive health and encourages religious leaders to promote the health and social benefits of family planning in their communities (Adedini et al., 2018). NURHI is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

SENEGAL

The Cadre des Religieux pour la Santé et le Développement (CRSD). Since 2014, CRSD promotes maternal health and clarifies religious teachings on birth spacing. In 2016, CRSD scaled-up their workshops through a Training of Trainers model into six regions of Senegal.

²³unfpa.org/press/universal-access-sexual-and-reproductive-health%E2%80%94key-gender-equality

Religious actors have also played key roles in the context of **HIV/AIDS**. Stigmatisation of people living with HIV is particularly strong in religious groups that have associated HIV/AIDS with sin. Examples are often cited from the Muslim or Christian faith where some religious leaders have argued that HIV/AIDS is the punishment of sinful behaviours such as prostitution, homosexuality, sex with multiple partners, or promiscuity²⁴. Stigmatisation and feelings of shame associated with an HIV diagnosis can become internalised and self-directed (Zou et al., 2009). Such feelings can lead people living with HIV to withdraw from social settings, including their religious community (Deribe et al., 2008). Religious communities and beliefs frame the daily behaviours and attitudes of many people living in countries with high rates of HIV/AIDS. Religious beliefs significantly shape individuals' outlooks on living with HIV. People often turn to religion to make sense of and come to terms with being HIV-infected. Therefore, religious actors can not only provide health services but also a sense of peace and hope. Religious groups have also had successes in engaging men and providing safe spaces for them to discuss taboo subjects surrounding sexuality and HIV/AIDS.

TANZANIA

Pastoral Activities and Services for People with AIDS Dar-Es-Salaam Archdiocese (PASADA) is a faith-based service provider of voluntary counselling and HIV testing. It receives funding from the USAID.

LATIN AMERICA

The Latin American Council of Churches is a network of over 200 Christian FBOs across 20 Latin American countries. Its members provide information on HIV prevention and care to people living with HIV, as well as support pregnant women with medical information, care, and family planning services (Tamez, 2012; Smith and Kaybryn, 2013).

BANGLADESH

The Islamic Foundation of Bangladesh provides training to Imams that, since 1998, includes HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention. The foundation is run by the government's Ministry of Religious Affairs and has trained approximately 20,000 imams in HIV prevention. Imams not only enjoy credibility in their communities but also often overcome the social taboo of discussing HIV/AIDS more easily as they address male-only congregations. Nevertheless, there have been shortcomings of the initiative. Many imams only discuss HIV/AIDS in the context of promiscuity, morality, and faithfulness. Many choose not to promote the use of condoms (Islam and Conigrave, 2008).

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA, JAMAICA, THE PHILIPPINES & UKRAINE

The World Council of Churches Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy (WCC-EHAIA) Launched in 2002, the WCC-EHAIA builds the capacity of churches to mainstream HIV into theological curricula and to address the root causes of the epidemic. The programme includes people living with HIV, people with disabilities, adolescents, youth, women, men, grandparents, sex workers, injecting drug users, prisoners, migrants, and other minority groups. According to the WCC, the programme has demonstrated 'the efficacy of linking grassroots, national and regional actors with international decision- and policy-makers'.

NIGERIA

Daughters of Abraham Foundation (DOAF) is a faith-based organisation, established in Abuja, Nigeria. Since 1994, DOAF works to support vulnerable girls and women through a foundation skills acquisition programme. One of the organisation's focus areas is reproductive health, specifically HIV/AIDS prevention.

²⁴ <https://archive.islamonline.net/?p=5233>

3. Religious actors and current barriers to gender equality

The previous section highlighted how religious actors have advanced gender equality and targets under the SDG 5. The following section discusses instances in which religious actors have obstructed these goals. It also draws attention to examples in which religious leaders themselves faced barriers in their efforts to advance gender equality in their communities.

3.1. How have specific religious actors contributed to the pushback on gender equality?

Target 5.1. End discrimination against women and girls

Although 189 states have ratified the 1981 'Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women' (CEDAW) many countries still maintain reservations to specific articles of the convention. Over 60 percent of the 440 recorded reservations are religion-based. The CEDAW provisions that have attracted the most religion-based reservations are those that relate to equality in marriage and family relations (Cali and Montoya, 2017: 3). This has been the case for example in Egypt²⁵ or Bangladesh²⁶. Both countries maintain religious reservations to CEDAW Articles 2 and 16. CEDAW's Article 2 requires states to legally protect citizens against discrimination and thus is at the very heart of the treaty. Under Article 16 of CEDAW states must:

'Take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and in particular shall ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women:

- a) *The same right to enter into marriage;*
- b) *The same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent;*
- c) *The same rights and responsibilities during marriage and at its dissolution'*²⁷.

“...the CEDAW provisions that have attracted the most religion-based reservations are those that relate to equality in marriage and family relations...”

²⁵ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reservations-country.htm>

²⁶ <https://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/6571200.48999786.html>

²⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>

Egypt's State Party maintains reservations to Articles 2 and 16 and issued a blanket reservation 'on provisions which are in conflict with the principles of Islamic Sharia'. CEDAW has repeatedly expressed concern over the 'persistence of a significant number of discriminatory laws and Provisions [...] that deny women equal rights with men' and has urged Egypt to withdraw its reservations (CEDAW, 2010; OECD-CAWTAR, 2014). Egypt stated that its reservation to Article 16 stems from its: 'respect for the sacrosanct nature of the firm religious beliefs which govern marital relations in Egypt and which *may not be called in question* and in view of the fact that one of the most important bases of these relations is an equivalency of rights and duties so as to ensure complementary which guarantees true equality between the spouses [emphasis added]'.

Both, Egypt and Bangladesh have argued that ratifying these articles would go against divine law. Nevertheless, other Muslim-majority countries including Turkey, Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon, and Kuwait have ratified CEDAW without any reservations. International human rights groups have repeatedly criticised countries for asserting full authority, based on religion, to discriminate against women in family matters²⁸. Islamic feminists have also criticised the states' patriarchal interpretations of the Shariah and their disregard for Islamic provisions for women's rights within it (Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Sharafeldin, 2013). They call out the systematic and deliberate confusion of Shariah (divine and eternal) with Islamic law (human-made and open to change). This conflation has provoked unjust family laws that are detrimental to women. Muslim women's rights activists produced an accessible advocacy tool explaining the differences between those concepts²⁹. Along with other activists, they posit that the real cause for gender inequality in national family laws does not result from

Shariah itself but from century-old patriarchal interpretations of Islamic sources that have become normalised over time in Islamic Jurisprudence (*Fiqh*). Scholars have long debated the compatibility of Islam and human rights and have taken different approaches in doing so (Juul Petersen, 2018³⁰). Shah (2016), a UK law professor, has categorised these approaches into three strands:

1. those who advocate strict adherence to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 2. those who think that Islamic notions of human rights are *mostly* compatible with international standards and any conflicting elements can be reformed through reinterpreting the Quran, and 3. those who maintain that Islam is incompatible with Human Rights. This last approach is frequently invoked by conservative scholars and governments who rule their constituencies partly or entirely under Islamic jurisprudence. They often consider the UDHR a form of Western imperialism or interference.

Other countries did ratify CEDAW on paper but continue to have discriminatory laws in practice. These are often driven and protected by religious forces in the country. One example is the Philippines who ratified CEDAW in 1982. Nevertheless, the country's Catholic Church continues to exert a strong influence over national legislation especially when it comes to gender issues, such as reproductive health

Bangladesh ratified CEDAW in 1984 but maintains reservations on Articles 2, 13(a), 16.1(c), and 16.1(f). In justification, the government cited 'conflict with *Sharia* law based on Holy Quran and Sunna'. However, the conflict of CEDAW and Islamic law was neither specified, nor does it account for the fact that around 10 percent of the country is non-Muslim to whom this regulation does not even apply. Additionally, due to non-ratification of Article 2, CEDAW has had little legislative value overall in Bangladesh and remains largely invisible in practice.

²⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/egypt1204/8.htm>

²⁹ <https://www.musawah.org/resources/knowledge-building-brief-1-shariah-fiqh-and-state-laws-clarifying-the-terms-en/>

³⁰ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2018/06/islam-and-human-rights-clash-or-compatibility/#comments>

The Philippines is the only country in the world that does not allow divorce. A bill that would make divorce legal passed the country's House of Representatives last year but has stalled in the Senate. Filipinos who want to end their marriages must get an annulment that proves that their marriage was never valid in the eyes of the church in the first place. However, this is a long and expensive process and is heavily biased in favour of men. As a result, many women are trapped in abusive marriages³¹.

crime³². Lebanon may be the latest but certainly not the only country where pressure from religious authorities has led to the removal of legal GBV protections. Such moves are contrary to the recommendations of the UN Handbook for Legislation on Violence against Women³³, which states that

'where there are conflicts between customary and/or religious law and the formal justice system, the matter should be resolved with respect for the human rights of the survivor and in accordance with gender equality standards'.

Activists warn that exempting matters governed by religious laws from domestic violence law undermines women's security in the home. It creates a legal loophole that allows the abuse and exploitation of household members. Religious actors have also influenced the sanctioning of violence against women outside the home. For example, 'marry-your-rapist' laws still exist in Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, the Philippines, Syria, and Tajikistan. These laws - which pardon men convicted of statutory rape if they agree to marry their victims - are largely protected by religiously conservative elites (Dannies, 2020). They are based on the gendered notions of shame and honour and believed to prevent the social stigma of pre-marital sex. But instead, they send women from one abuse into the next one. In Jordan, according to figures from the country's Ministry of Justice, 159 rapists invoked the marry-your-rapist law between 2010 and 2013 to avoid punishment³⁴.

rights³¹. Since gender discriminatory laws are typically upheld by patriarchal ideologies, it is important to note that other religious traditions and so called 'secular' societies can equally maintain systems that produce unequal law.

Target 5.2. End gender-based violence (GBV)

Many religious authorities still sanction gender-based violence, especially in the domestic realm. For example, religious authorities in Lebanon have obstructed the outlawing and persecution of domestic violence by opposing an article of the country's criminal code that included marital rape as a

A report by the Global Philanthropy Project (GPP) in 2018 on religious conservatism around the world collected case studies on LGBTI rights restrictions from Latin America, the U.S., and Eastern Europe. For example, in Panama, the Episcopal Conference, the Ecumenical Committee, and the Evangelical Alliance made joint statements rejecting the Advisory Opinion OC-24/17 of the Inter American Court of Human Rights about gender identity and same-sex marriage. In a public statement the religious leaders expressed that: 'lately, the idea has been forced on us that the defence of marriage and family is discrimination'. Similarly, in the Dominican Republic in 2016, the Christian Action Group (Grupo Acción Cristiana) and the Biblical Foundation Church (Iglesia Fundamento Bíblico) urged 200 pastors to prompt their congregations to vote for the 'less bad' candidates in national elections, meaning those candidates that were against abortion and same-sex marriage.

³¹ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/29/manilas-abortion-ban-is-killing-women/>

³² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/04/03/lebanon-domestic-violence-law-good-incomplete#>

³³ <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/vaw/handbook/Handbook%20for%20legislation%20on%20violence%20against%20women.pdf>

³⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/jordan-rape-law-vote-repeal-rapists-punishment-marry-victims-womens-rights-sexual-assault-violence-a7870551.html>

In 2017, the governments of Tunisia³⁵, then Jordan³⁶, and Lebanon³⁷ all repealed or reformed clauses in their penal codes that allowed perpetrators to evade prosecution on the condition of marriage³⁸. This has been a historic victory for the women's movement across the region.

The SDG targets 5.1. and 5.2. also apply to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people. These groups experience discrimination and violence on structural, physical, emotional, and sexual levels based on their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics. The human rights of LGBTI people are directly related to the goal of gender equality. The norms and stereotypes that uphold gender inequalities also perpetuate discrimination, violence, and stigma against LGBTI individuals. Sexism, homophobia, and transphobia are rooted in the same ideology that underpins gender inequality. While the SDGs do not specifically refer to (LGBTI) people, its call to 'leave no one behind' could and should include addressing the human rights and needs of these groups. LGBTI people have been repeatedly left behind by national and international development initiatives which have not acknowledge their specific needs³⁹. The impacts of this leave LGBTI people with lower well-being, reduced income, and restricted access to health services and education, among other consequences. Some religious actors have posed obstacles to the realisation and protection of human rights for LGBTI people and communities. For example, many countries still punish homosexuality by long imprisonment or death. Many such laws use religious justifications, such as Brunei, Iran, or Uganda. 67 other UN member states still criminalise consensual same-sex sexual acts, according to ILGA, an international lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex advocacy group. Even in countries that allow same-sex marriage, LGBTI people continue to be targets of discrimination and violence which are often fuelled by religious conservatism⁴⁰. In many countries, conservative groups have gained a strong foothold in governments and can influence national laws. For example, in 2019, the U.S. state of New York repealed its ban on conversion therapy in response to a legal challenge from the Alliance Defending Freedom, a conservative Christian organisation that alleges the ban infringes upon freedom of speech and religion⁴¹. Conversion therapy is a pseudoscientific practice seeking to change someone's sexual orientation. It often involves violence and leaves victims physically and psychologically traumatised (Haldeman, 1999). Conservative religious resistance to LGBTI people most often stems from an ideology that does not acknowledge sexual orientations other than heterosexuality and gender identities other than male or female. Discrimination and violence against LGBTI people are forms of policing and punishing them for not conforming to traditional gender norms (Lloyd, 2013: 818).

The U.S. is at the centre of the debate around LGBTI discrimination through religious exemption laws, according to human rights organisations. In 2015, U.S. lawmakers introduced a bill that would drastically expand existing safeguards for religious liberty. If passed, the First Amendment Defense Act (FADA) would prohibit the federal government from taking action against a person who acted on a religious belief that marriage should be between a man and a woman or that sexual relations are reserved to such a marriage. This would legalise LGBTI discrimination (Johnson, 2018). The bill has been reintroduced to the Senate in March 2018. It has not been signed into law.

³⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/EndInSightMarryYourRapistLaws.aspx>

³⁶ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2017/8/news-jordanian-parliament-abolishes-law-that-allowed-rapists-to-avoid-prosecution>

³⁷ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2017/8/news-lebanon-parliament-repeals-rape-law>

³⁸ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/6/feature-story-of-change-reforming-laws-that-forced-women-to-marry-their-rapists>

³⁹ <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/resources/lgbt-inclusion-and-sustainable-development-goals>

⁴⁰ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/02/19/all-we-want-equality/religious-exemptions-and-discrimination-against-lgbt-people>

⁴¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/09/13/why-nycs-council-made-painful-decision-repeal-its-ban-conversion-therapy/>

Deep shared hostility towards the human rights of LGBTI people has united Muslim and Christian voices in some African countries, for example, Uganda, Malawi, and Kenya. The 2018 report by the Global Philanthropy Project (GPP) found that while ‘African Christians are highly suspicious of Islamic continental ambitions and vice versa [in] sexual politics, however, they are bedfellows’. In these countries, some Muslim and Christian leaders formed strategic partnerships based on their agreement that homosexuality is a threat to their traditional family values. For example, in Uganda, Muslims became part of a Pastor-led ‘Taskforce against Homosexuality’ (GPP, 2018: 36).

Since 2015, research initiatives by the Global Interfaith Network, in collaboration with Act Church of Sweden, have attempted to counteract anti-LGBTI campaigns in the name of religion. Two books were produced to advocate for the decriminalisation of same-sex relationships. The books highlight the principle of human dignity from the perspective of seven religious traditions while challenging the religious verses that are most commonly used to condemn homosexuality⁴².

Target 5.3. Eliminate child, early & forced marriage (CEFM) and female genital mutilation (FGM)

Some religious actors continue to endorse and promote these practices as they deem them necessary to maintain girls’ purity and marriageability⁴³. Even some scholars maintain that FGM - which they prefer to call female circumcision - is an important rite of passage and are thus angered by Western interference (see Emeagwali, 1996). Some government officials have also advocated for an increase of FGM (for example, Egyptian MP Elhamy Agina in 2016⁴⁴). The social norms that underpin FGM, such as modesty, virginity, and marriageability, are widespread and internalised by members in communities where FGM is practised. Additionally, the fear of social stigmatisation targeted at ‘un-cut’ girls is often strong enough by itself to pressure community members into undergoing it. For example, a young girl in Uganda said she feared abuse and insults from her community. She was told that it was a ‘shame to be an uncircumcised girl’ and ‘no man would marry me if I didn’t cut. So I did it’ (Chelimo in 2018, eastern Uganda)⁴⁵.

In 2019, Somali religious leaders urged politicians to pass legislation that would fully outlaw FGM and punish offenders, however, many elected officials have failed to criminalise the practice for fear of losing the votes of those who still believe FGM is a religious requirement (Ajiambo, 2019). Back in 2012, a Somali elder already told the New Humanitarian (formerly *IRIN* News) that men and women alike would oppose such a ban on the grounds of ‘culture, Islam or issues of chastity’⁴³. He argued ‘we can’t abandon something that has helped our girls to stay pure’ and ‘you can’t marry [an] uncircumcised [woman] if you are a true Somali man’.

The case of CEFM is similar in that patriarchal religious actors continue to be involved in the perpetuation of it. According to a 2018 report on Malaysia by the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW) and Sisters in Islam (SIS), the root causes of child marriage are much more complex than poverty or a lack of education. Although these are significant circumstances surrounding the practice, the reasons for CEFM are more often connected to the ‘patriarchal structure of [a] society which embraces and opts for patriarchal beliefs and interpretations of religious texts’⁴⁶. These patriarchal beliefs restrict girls to domestic and reproductive roles, control their sexuality, and commodify them during marital exchanges (Boender, 2018; Le Roux and Palm, 2018). Child marriage is condoned by conservative politicians, including in high-income countries. For example, in 2017, a high-profile republican congressman in the U.S. vetoed a bill that would have banned child marriage in his home state, arguing that ‘it would conflict with religious customs’ (Buncombe, 2017).

⁴² <http://www.gin-ssogie.org/behold-i-make-all-things-new/>

⁴³ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2012/aug/17/female-genital-mutilation-banned-somalia>

⁴⁴ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20160907-egyptian-mp-women-must-undergo-fgm-to-control-mens-desires/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/feb/06/battling-fgm-uganda-kenya-zero-tolerance-female-genital-mutilation>

⁴⁶ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/resource-centre/child-marriage-in-malaysia-its-relationship-with-religion-culture-and-patriarchy/>

The Network Girls Not Brides and Stellenbosch University produced a useful resource detailing why some religious leaders continue to be obstacles in the context of reducing early marriage (Le Roux and Palm, 2018: ii). Their findings present key drivers of religious resistance to ending child marriage, including:

- ▶ Marriage is seen as a religious ritual. The role of arranging and performing marriages forms part of many religious leaders' visibility, value, and identity within their communities. In fear of losing this, some religious leaders contest an increase in the legal regulation of marriage.
- ▶ Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism all have stories and texts that have been interpreted in different ways and used to support forms of child marriage.
- ▶ The support of religious leaders for child marriage is shaped by a religiously driven fear and condemnation of premarital sex, contraception, and pregnancy outside of marriage. Child marriage is often seen as the 'solution' to these issues.
- ▶ Child marriage upholds and manifests patriarchal power – which many religious leaders resist losing. Marriage and family are central issues in contexts where patriarchal religions have ordained men as natural authorities. Child marriage reinforces these patriarchal beliefs, for example by granting the father of a family unquestioned social power to make the final decision about who and when his children should marry.

The authors of this study note that resistance takes many different forms in different parts of the world. The study recommends strategies to address religious resistance, including positive framing of the need for change, building a critical mass, engaging with sacred scripture, and lifting the taboo around talking about sex.

Target 5.4. and 5.5. Recognise the value of unpaid care and domestic work (UCDW) and Increase women's participation and leadership in decision-making

In conservative religious contexts, these targets are often interlinked as they span the public-private divide and relate to the question of traditional gender roles in and outside the home. Religious actors who resist women's participation in decision-making, leadership, or public roles, typically do so based on gendered labour divisions they view as God-ordained. Ideas of masculinity and femininity are constructed in opposition to each other: men are leaders, providers, household heads, while women are followers, supporters, and carers (Klingorova and Havlicek, 2015). These ideas arguably provide a critical foundation for male hegemony over women (see Cornwall, 1997). Such gender complementary also exists in non-religious communities, with the difference that it is justified by *tradition* rather than religion. The idea that men and women are inherently different with natural attributes that qualify them as their separate genders is called 'gender essentialism' (Crompton and Lyonette, 2005: 601). Gender essentialism arguably marks one of the biggest divides between traditional religious standpoints on gender and feminist theory that promotes social constructionism, i.e., the idea that gender roles are not innate but constructed by humans and changeable (DeLamater and Shibley Hyde, 1998).

Sow (2009) argued that women used to be highly respected in traditional Senegalese rituals. They acted as leaders of worship, presided over fertility and possession rites, and acted as religious representatives across various areas. Sow argues that women's role and status in society in Senegal changed after the introduction of Islam to the country. Conservative expressions of the religion diminished women's significance in religious rituals, leadership positions, and in society as a whole. Senegal does have an active women's movement seeking to change discriminatory customary norms and violence against women in the name of religion (Latha, 2010).

Gender essentialism does not mean that religions do not value domestic work. For example, while a large number of religious groups in the U.S. resist government introductions on maternal leave (Pulliam Bailey, 2015), other Americans feel called to advocate for parental leave based on their Catholic faith which they say teaches that both, work and parenthood, are important pursuits (Dallas, 2018). Islamic rulings that entitle women to wages for providing care work including breastfeeding is another example. This entitlement is enshrined in some national Muslim family laws, for example, in Morocco since 2004⁴⁷. Additionally, in Iran, the 1992 Amendment to Divorce Regulations enables a court to assign a monetary value to women's housework and thus force husbands to compensate their wives⁴⁸. As needed as these rulings are in the short-term, they are still based on the notion that 'husbands provide, and wives obey'. In the long term, family laws around care work must recognise that this idea no longer applies. Women's rights activists argue that today both men and women share financial obligations and educational qualifications. Therefore, domestic and care work should be also considered as a shared responsibility. Instead, women have become household providers and continue to carry out domestic care work without being accorded any additional rights. Subsequently, Islamic feminists and women's rights activists have called for an interpretation of Islamic texts in accordance with today's lived realities and the Quranic principles of fairness, love, compassion, and mutual consent.

Women's participation and leadership in decision making

Religious actors have often been obstacles to women's participation in public life and political parties. According to a 2018 OECD report⁴⁹, 'women's representation in religious parties [in the MENA region] was found to be low or nil where women's participation is often used as décor to meet legal requirements'. The exclusion of women from participation or leadership roles in religious institutions has negative impacts on 'women's status in society and limit their opportunities in politics and public life'⁵⁰. Kassem's (2013) research in Lebanon stipulates that religious party leaders have systematically excluded women in politics on the firm belief that they are biologically different and not equipped for such roles. She argues that this conservative anti-feminist discourse offers but 'lame justifications for women's absence'. Clerical interpretations vary across religious parties, some of which are open to the Islamic practice of *Ijtihad*, or independent legal reasoning, and offer women-friendly interpretations (Kassem, 2013).

Azza Karam, former Senior Culture Adviser at UNFPA and incoming Secretary-General at Religions for Peace, also argues that in most patriarchal religious traditions, women struggle to attain leadership roles in political parties as well as religious institutions. She highlights that especially in countries where religious institutions play an important role in determining national policy trends and international platforms, women's representation in them can be considered as a form of political participation. It indicates 'the extent to which these religious institutions sanction women's political participation' (Karam, 2009).

Target 5.6. Ensure sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHRs) and access

There are conflicting viewpoints on SRHRs between and within religious traditions. Some religious scriptures permit, some prohibit, and some do not explicitly address issues related to family planning. Islam is unique in that the embryological development of humans is extensively described and discussed in religious sources and scholarship (Hedayat et al., 2006). Islam generally permits the use of all reversible contraceptive methods and has fewer restrictions when it comes to abortion than other religions (Shabaik et al., 2019). In practice, views and laws connected to SRHR issues can differ widely. Intra-religious divergences when it comes to birth control have been particularly visible across Catholic constituencies of Latin American countries. For example, conservative politicians and

⁴⁷ <https://www.musawah.org/resources/who-provides-who-cares-changing-dynamics-in-muslim-families/>

⁴⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/17/world/iran-panel-backs-divorce-payments.html>

⁴⁹ <https://www.oecd.org/mena/governance/gender-equality-in-public-life/>

⁵⁰ <http://www.wluml.org/node/5393>

representatives of the Catholic Church often clash with organisations like the Latin American Council of Churches or Catholics for Choice who argue that SRHRs fall under the umbrella of human rights. Activism is especially strong and more confrontational where social support for the church is weaker, like in Argentina. On the contrary, in Chile the church enjoys higher social standing, thus activists have employed more cautious approaches (Tomalin, 2007).

Conflicting religious viewpoints on SRHRs have become increasingly apparent since the 1994 UN Population and Development Conference in Cairo which has pushed reproductive rights to the centre of discussions around family planning. Bayes and Tohidi (2001) note that by the 1995 Beijing Conference a strategic Muslim-Catholic alliance had emerged that continues to be resistant towards current thinking about reproductive rights. Other research also expressed concern over how speeches at the Beijing Conference framed women's rights. Couture (2003), for instance, noted that several Muslim and Catholic participants passionately argued for women's reproductive choices to be defined by religious values.

In the Philippines, where over 90 percent of the population identifies as Christian, powerful Catholic influences have consistently shaped and opposed Filipino government proposals to loosen anti-abortion laws. Consequently, the long-standing hostility towards contraception and family planning has contributed to 4,500 women dying from pregnancy complications, 800,000 unintended births, and 475,000 illegal abortions each year (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2014).

Arguably most of the opposition that has come from religious conservatives in the aftermath of Beijing arises in the context of abortion (Smith and Kaybryn, 2013) and has been driven especially by conservative Christian voices (GPP, 2018). O'Brien (2017) explains why the religious pushback in the health arena is so consequential and merits immediate attention:

[...] because of their extensive networks and infrastructure, faith-based providers are a critical component of health service delivery in many resource-constrained countries where governments lack the funding to provide services, and the private sector is poorly developed. In addition, faith-based providers are often well-respected and offer the most advanced care available in many countries.

Malawi's 2015 safe abortion bill gathered considerable support from religious actors because of the high rates of mortality and morbidity from unsafe abortions. However, opposition to it has remained strong from Catholic, Evangelical, and some Muslim leaders. International anti-choice organisations have also reinforced hostility to the bill through meetings and workshops with religious and traditional leaders and outreach campaigns on religious radio. Since 2017, the safe abortion bill has been thrown into further limbo in part because of the restrictions imposed by the U.S. global gag rule (Daire et al., 2018, in Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Consequently, if faith-based health providers are anti-abortion it can have nationwide impacts. This is the case in Kenya where abortion restrictions have been loosened in 2010. However, 65 percent of the country's health services remains controlled by faith-based health providers which means that, in reality, access to safe abortion is limited. As a result, women are forced to resort to unsafe and illegal practitioners (O'Brien, 2017). Because of the religious controversy surrounding abortion some secular development organisations, like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, suggest that it should be addressed as a separate subject or else it could 'get in the way' of family planning (O'Brien, 2017). The 2018 report by the Global Philanthropy Project (GPP) on religious

conservatism around the world shows how religious opposition to sexuality and gender equality has increased over the past two decades due to the establishment of large conservative NGOs. It also includes a table of the main religiously conservative NGOs that work at the United Nations – 16 out of 17 are headquartered in the United States. These well-funded NGOs were founded in Evangelical Protestantism, Catholic, and Mormon faiths in direct response to the UN Conferences in Cairo and Beijing in the mid-1990s. They engage in interreligious alliances and host international conferences to build grassroots support in developing countries. Their initiatives claim to ‘protect the family’ and frequently employ the empty construct of ‘gender ideology’ to attack feminism and LGBTI equality (GPP, 2018). The term ‘gender ideology’ was adopted by the Holy See during the 1994 Cairo Conference to strategically present gender as a model imposed by liberals to disrupt the traditional family. It has since been widely used as a buzzword and short-hand to discredit gender equality efforts and feminist movements (Case, 2019).

Government policies have also shaped gendered politics abroad. For example, a U.S. government policy called ‘the Mexico City policy’ prohibits federal funding for NGOs that provide abortion counselling or referrals, or advocates to decriminalise abortion (Bendavid et al., 2011). The policy was first enacted in 1984 and has since been alternately repealed and reinstated by different presidents. In 2019, this policy was expanded to almost all U.S. global health aid, including organisations providing services related to HIV, malaria, and maternal and child health (Miller et al., 2019). Such restrictions have impacts beyond abortion since many organisations who became ineligible for funding are also major suppliers of contraceptives and family planning information. According to statistical studies, abortion restrictions can have unintended consequences. They can lead to less access to contraception, more unwanted pregnancies, and more abortions - many of which are likely performed unsafely (Miller et al., 2019). In 2021, the new administration rescinded the Mexico City policy⁵¹.

U.S. international HIV/AIDS policies have also strengthened conservative religious voices in developing countries. In 2003 the U.S. Congress created the President's Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) to provide USD 15 billion in international aid to combat HIV/AIDS primarily in Sub-Saharan Africa. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops successfully lobbied for the insertion of a ‘conscience clause’ that exempted FBOs from having to ‘endorse, utilize or participate in a prevention method to which the organisation has a religious or moral objection’ (Miller, 2014: 215). This exemption clause led to the sponsoring of FBOs that promoted conservative religious views that do not mention condoms, which are known to be the best way to prevent sexually transmitted infections. Similarly, in 2008, lobbying by Catholic bishops and Catholic Relief Services successfully delinked family planning services from HIV/AIDS prevention efforts (O’Brien, 2017; Edna, 2008).

Given the U.S.’s influential role in the global development sector, a conversation about religious pushbacks on gender equality must include the U.S. foreign aid policy and how internal U.S. politics influence the restriction of SRHRs worldwide. The GPP (2018: 21) report on global religious conservatism finds that

US politics seems to be the engine of the religious conservative activism working from the civil society in international scenarios, in a search for exporting local “culture wars” to global arenas.

In 2007, the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) identified U.S. foreign aid policy, particularly its AIDS Relief Plan, as the ‘most commonly cited specific examples of international institutional funders investing in work which supports fundamentalist visions’ (Imam et al. 2017: 30 on behalf of AWID, also Santelli et al., 2013). AWID and other rights organisations also draw attention to the ‘disastrous effects’ of U.S. foreign aid policies on gender issues, specifically, the systematic censorship of information about human sexuality and risk reduction, the promotion of medically inaccurate information and ‘miracle cures’ through charismatic faith

⁵¹ <https://www.devex.com/news/biden-repeals-the-global-gag-rule-but-next-steps-will-be-huge-undertaking-98954>

healing, the undermining of sex education, and in some instances, the unintended consequence of encouraging early marriage (Duflo et al., 2012; Imam et al., 2017: 30). In Uganda as well as Kenya, there are several faith-based, overwhelmingly Christian, organisations that provide abstinence-only education to youth. Many of these are financed and supported by the U. S. government (Cohen and Tate, 2006; Imam et al., 2017). Furthermore, U.S. secondary-school materials used in Uganda have been called out for falsely stating that latex condoms have microscopic pores that can be permeated by HIV and that pre-marital sex is a form of 'deviance'. Rights organisations call this 'a triumph of ideology over public health' and have hence expressed an urgent need for science-based approaches⁵².

3.2. Religious leaders who face barriers while advancing gender equality in their communities

There are religious actors around the globe who work tirelessly every day to advance gender equality and daily face barriers and backlashes. Malala's story went around the world. A young woman promoting girls' education, often referring to the Quranic call to seek knowledge, was brutally attacked by religious extremists in 2012⁵³. Malala's story is remarkable but not unique. Around the world, there are many like her fighting to change gender inequality in their communities while using religious arguments. These stories are hard to collect. People outside of Pakistan may have never heard or recognised Malala's struggle for gender equality had she not been so brutally attacked and relocated to the United Kingdom. Below are a few other examples of religious actors who have faced barriers in their efforts to advance gender equality in their communities.

Bindu Ammini and Kanakadurga – the two Hindu women who broke the temple taboo. In 2019, both women were the first of 'menstruating age' to enter the Sabarimala temple in the southern state of Kerala⁵⁴. Both are now in hiding. Kanakadurga, only known by her first name, reported to have been violently assaulted, thrown out of her marital home and disowned by her family⁵⁵. The temple had long barred women between the ages of 10 and 50 from entering, citing concerns over their purity. But in September 2019, India's Supreme Court ruled that this ban was unconstitutional. Subsequently, women tried to enter the temple. For months before Kanakadurga and Ammini successfully entered, crowds of Hindu protesters succeeded in keeping female worshippers out. India's ruling right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sided with the protesters instead of the women. This is in line with the BJP's history of employing conservative religious positions. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and leader of the BJP has claimed that women's ban from the temple is not an issue of gender equality but one of tradition. As such, he argues it is not a matter for the Supreme Court⁵⁶. Religious authorities in India have a long and controversial history with the Supreme Court.

Amal Soliman – the first female Islamic Wedding Officiant. Even though the position is more clerical than religious, Soliman's appointment in 2008 angered conservatives. 'I'm not only the first *maazouna* in Egypt, but in the Arab and even the Muslim world' she says⁵⁷. Soliman had to overcome many challenges. The very first was the clerk's objection when she took her application to the provincial capital. She remembers: 'he felt [I] should not be here doing this. He revolted for his manhood'. But Soliman has a college degree in law, including Islamic law, and knew that there was no explicit prohibition against female marriage officiants. She took her case to the head of the provincial family court and succeeded in having her application be passed on the national Ministry of Justice for

⁵² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2005/03/30/uganda-abstinence-only-programs-hijack-aids-success-story>

⁵³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/10/world/asia/teen-school-activist-malala-yousafzai-survives-hit-by-pakistani-taliban.html>

⁵⁴ <https://time.com/longform/bindu-kanakadurga-women-hinduism-india/>

⁵⁵ <https://time.com/5513055/kanakadurga-sabarimala-hindu-temple-family-abandon/>

⁵⁶ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/triple-talaq-matter-of-gender-equality-sabarimala-about-tradition-pm-modi/story-eYV8oq3uuh4meozdNfJsCK.html>

⁵⁷ <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97778450>

approval. After this, Soliman did not hear back for months until a well-known Egyptian columnist wrote an open letter to the justice minister, urging him to make a decision. A week later, her appointment was announced. Soliman has since inspired other women to take up positions previously only held by men. She has also stopped some marriages that were forced⁵⁸. If she felt that a marriage was forced, Soliman would find an excuse not to finish the ceremony before having a one-on-one with the bride. This is a practice which she says is typically overlooked by most of her male peers: 'if I end up talking to [the bride] and finding out that the marriage is forced upon her, there's no way I could marry them'. Young women have called Soliman a role model. But she herself considers expanding career choices for Muslim women not radical but 'common sense'. Shortly after Soliman's appointment, the United Arab Emirates also named its first female marriage official.

Christopher Senyonjo – *a clergyman and campaigner for LGBTI rights in Uganda*. Senyonjo is a retired bishop of the Church of Uganda. In 2001, three years after his retirement, he was barred from performing religious services. Nevertheless, defying the leaders of Uganda's Anglican Church, he continues to lead services and offers counselling for LGBTI people. Senyonjo refuses to recant his views on homosexuality and argues that church leaders who view it as a disease are misguided. His counselling sessions have taught him that a person's sexual identity is intrinsic and impossible to change⁵⁹. He proclaimed: 'there is neither heterosexual nor LGBT for you are all one under Jesus Christ'⁶⁰. Senyonjo has been branded by his enemies as 'homosexual supporter' making him a target for threats and hate attacks. Since 2013, Uganda's anti-homosexuality law also includes the punishing of all 'allies' of the LGBT community. Subsequently, Senyonjo is risking prosecution and imprisonment each time he offers his counselling services.

Finally, religious scholars and academic discourses that challenge gender inequality have also experienced backlash. Scholars who engage critically with their religion have often been branded and delegitimised as 'Western agents' by the religious authority in their home country and sometimes imprisoned or exiled by their government. Their work powerfully rejects the contradiction between feminism and religion, which is passionately advocated by religious conservatives. For example, Christian feminists have argued that the Bible's gender unequal provisions do not stem from the text itself but from the fact that Christian men have been in charge of interpreting the scripture throughout history. Some Christian feminists have abandoned direct scriptural use altogether in their fight for equality, while others emphasise those Bible verses that opposed patriarchal ideals and expose gaps between scripture and interpretations that privilege men in society (Mohrmann, 2015). The most recent and arguably fastest-growing religious feminist discourse has been Islamic feminism. Over the past decade, Islamic feminist writers across the Middle East have presented their own investigations of Islamic sources and have challenged *Hadiths* (sayings of the Prophet) that perpetuated misogyny (Mernissi, 1991). The earliest gender-sensitive Islamic scholarship was arguably produced by the Moroccan historians Mernissi (1991) and Ahmed (1992). Both scholars were driven by their deep discontent with the patriarchal nature of traditional Muslim societies and the misogynist rule of Islamic law. Their work has been expanded by scholars who have taken a feminist and gender-affirmative perspective to reading the Quran and thereby produced a new gender-sensitive commentary on Quranic verses that highlight gender equality. Examples include Wadud's work 'Quran and Women' (1994), or Mir-Hosseini's feminist reading of the Sharia (1996). Some of these scholars formed part of the consultation team that prepared the 2019 Islamic Gender Justice Declaration. Led by Islamic Relief Worldwide, the declaration is the first of its kind to affirm 'the God-given rights of all human beings as well as our duty to stand up firmly to uphold justice'⁶¹. The declaration has rallied scholars, government organisations, UN bodies, and NGOs to join in a global effort that calls out gender discrimination and harmful practices.

⁵⁸ <https://www.cairoscene.com/In-Depth/First-Female-Wedding-Offician>

⁵⁹ <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/blog/african-voices-equality-reverend-christopher-senyonjo>

⁶⁰ <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/resource/african-voices-equality>

⁶¹ <https://www.islamic-relief.org/landmark-final-consultation-on-gender-justice-declaration/>

3.3. Strategies to address current barriers in the context of religious actors & gender equality

Development practitioners and scholars agree that the struggle for gender equality must consist of a joint effort that brings together actors from within and outside religious traditions. Based on available research, this section identifies three areas that require immediate attention in order to meaningfully proceed towards achieving the SDG 5.

Choosing the right partners: It must be recognised that partnering with *any* organisation supports the organisation's legitimacy, its access to resources, and its ideology (including their gender standpoints). Development has a long history of partnering with international and grassroots organisations. As part of the collective effort it will take to realise the SDG 5, all partners - whether religious or not - should be selected based on their track record on gender equality issues. Ideally, they would be at the forefront of achieving gender equality within their own contexts (Tomalin, 2007; Tadros, 2010; Bradley, 2011). In 2017, the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) called on international development to support and partner with those local actors who are actively enabling people to 'discuss religious discourses that are congruent with human rights and gender justice'⁶². Subsequently, there are two challenges development organisations must be aware of and prepared for:

1. Sometimes these 'gender progressive' or feminist organisations are hesitant to engage with foreign secular organisations in fear of being branded 'Western agents' which would delegitimise them in the eyes of the very local religious authority they seek to challenge (Khalaf-Elledge, 2020). Regardless of this, development organisations would be well advised to continuously identify feminist and women's rights organisations and attempt partnerships with them. At the very least, development practitioners can learn from these organisations to build their own religious literacy and understanding of how religion interacts with gender in specific contexts.
2. Western development agencies have a track record of forming strategic partnerships. In practice, this has meant prioritising partnerships with dominant – often male – actors who are gatekeepers to large sections of the community. A desire for short-term efficacy has in some cases led to negative effects in the long-term, especially because the religious actors with the biggest networks and influence do not necessarily hold the most gender progressive opinions. This presents an inconvenient trade-off for traditional development approaches, which now - more than ever - need to prove their commitment to gender equality. An additional challenge will be to partner with marginalised feminist voices and to speak out against gender injustice - including misogynistic distortions of religion - more boldly without alienating conservative fractions of the community. As research has shown, some may view 'secular development' as interfering with local culture and traditional values (Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Encourage Religious Literacy: Given the global relevance of the religion-gender nexus, it is no longer enough to 'only' engage with religions via external partnerships. Practitioners must acquire basic levels of religious literacy to understand the complex ways in which gender and religion interact and shape gendered-power dynamics in specific contexts (Khalaf-Elledge, 2019). Development organisations should ensure that all staff are trained in basic religious literacy including:

- Understanding that religious discourses, like all discourses, are not static, but context-specific, historically-situated, internally contested, and continually reinforced and altered (Moore, 2015). Additionally, in many cases, it is extremely difficult to define the extent to which practices have religious origins. Practices that are described as religious by some people, may be considered cultural, traditional, or simply patriarchal by other

⁶² <https://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/devil-details-development-womens-rights-and-religious-fundamentalisms>

people of the same religious group (Tomalin, 2007: 28). There is still a general confusion in development literature around these concepts, what they mean, and how they are interlinked. As a result, religion is often used as a single homogeneous category that overlooks all of its internal intricacies. Generalisations and simplifications in the context of religion produce single - often conservative - religious narratives and may overshadow more moderate or progressive standpoints within the same religion.

- ▶ Recognising how religions interact with gender and how religious beliefs can be used to legitimise inequitable gender norms as God-ordained and thus make them seem unchallengeable. Gender norms in religious settings are just as constructed, normalised, internalised, and reproduced as in any other contexts.
- ▶ Understanding how patriarchal and religious power structures are interlinked. In this context, it is important to consider that women may also enact and benefit from patriarchal norms or support fundamentalist interpretations of religion (Tomalin, 2007: 18). Some practices, such as FGM, are virtually entirely performed by women on women. This understanding is important because there is still a widespread notion that increasing female participation alone or partnering with female actors will automatically generate more 'women-friendly' results.
- ▶ Acknowledging the fluidity of religious knowledge production and support the democratisation of such processes by supporting marginalised feminist voices and interpretations (see Sharafeldin, 2013).
- ▶ Understanding religious legislation across different religious contexts and how it is produced. For example, overlooking or perpetuating the deliberate confusion of Islamic law, Shariah, and Fiqh almost always has disastrous effects for women⁶³ (see Section 3.1).

Any effort to build religious literacy within development organisations must begin by overcoming the fear of engaging with the subject of religion. Development practitioners of large Western donor organisations 'remain concerned about the spiritual dimensions of faith' (James, 2011: 9) and fear the 'erosion of [...] traditional secularism' while being dragged into 'sectarian and divisive agendas' (Clarke et al., 2008: 262). Recent research shows that contrary to global policy pushes, addressing religion in practice continues to be largely left to individual discretion and practitioners show an overwhelming reluctance to engage (Khalaf-Elledge, 2020).

Conducting comprehensive gender analyses prior to projects and partnerships: Despite the mandate by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to conduct gender analyses and the abundance of theoretical tools to do so, gender analyses of major development organisations are still insufficient and ill-equipped to identify and comprehend the complex expressions of religion and gender (Khalaf-Elledge, 2019). The Beijing Conference introduced the Gender and Development (GAD) approach, which calls for an understanding of the social construction of gender roles and the structural inequalities and power dynamics that surround gender issues (Moser, 1993; Cornwall, 1997). However, in practice, only GAD's terminology has been adopted. Gender analyses are often conducted by quick desk research, without field interviews, and often *after* partnerships are already formed. The results of these analyses are not studied sufficiently by project leaders and sometimes they are not read at all (Khalaf-Elledge, 2019). A comprehensive and theory-based gender analysis can illustrate the religion-gender intersections in a given locality and facilitate the inclusion of religious actors. It can also draw attention to the intersectionality of gender inequality. In other words, inequality, discrimination, and oppression do not simply exist between two internally homogenous groups, men and women, but are experienced differently across multiple levels of social identities, such as ethnicity, age, marital status, gender identity, or sexual orientation (Crenshaw, 1991). The notion

⁶³ <https://www.musawah.org/resources/knowledge-building-brief-1-shariah-fiqh-and-state-laws-clarifying-the-terms-en>

of 'intersecting inequalities' recognises that combined disadvantages render some people or groups more marginalised and deprived of opportunities than others (Kabeer, 2010). For example, a divorced black Muslim woman likely faces different challenges in life than an elderly married Hindu woman living in the same village. Recently, UN Women has also started to adopt this language as part of the 2030 'Leave No One Behind' agenda⁶⁴. A consideration of intersectionality provides a more nuanced and truthful picture of complex gender inequalities (Yuval, 2006). Such an analysis, however, requires skilled gender advisors and committed project leaders and staff across all levels of development.

Finally, changes in national laws and a holistic ratification and implementation of CEDAW will be needed to fully achieve the SDG 5. Around the globe, advances in gender equality have been rolled back and women's rights are under attack. Religious arguments have been increasingly used to support such setbacks. Conservative parties, in developed and developing countries alike, have embraced religious arguments to justify the legalisation of gender inequality, the control of women's bodies, and the sanctioning of violence against women and girls. Government aid agencies who themselves are permeated by such religious discourses may struggle to convincingly advocate for gender equality and transformative change abroad.

⁶⁴ <https://data.unwomen.org/news/counted-and-visible-global-conference-measurement-gender-and-intersecting-inequalities>

4. The roles attributed to religious actors in development policies and agreements

Over the past two decades, religions' roles in development have been increasingly recognised and addressed at international conventions. After the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, interreligious alliances at national and transnational levels were formed. Both bilateral and multilateral donors have acknowledged the importance of religions in achieving development goals, including gender equality, in their development policy documents. This section highlights some of the key agreements and policies of multilateral and bilateral development organisations in the context of religion, and it discusses the shortcomings of the terminology used when addressing religion.

4.1. Multilateral initiatives

The 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo

Before the conference even started, religious participants were already expressing concerns over its draft plan. Shortly before the conference, the Los Angeles Times wrote: 'the Vatican, its Islamic allies⁶⁵, liberal Catholics, moderate Muslims, the Clinton Administration and the organisers of the U.N. conference appear to be headed for a collision on the road to Cairo'⁶⁶. Human rights activists, including U.S based Catholics for Choice, urged conference participants to not lose sight of the big picture. They criticised the Vatican's stance against contraception and stressed that the conference 'is not about denigrating family, church or religion [but about] improving the economic and social status of women'⁶⁶. The final conference report⁶⁷ did not include a comprehensive discussion of the intersection of religion and family planning. In fact, it barely mentioned religion at all. The opening statement by Gro Harlem Brundtland, then Prime Minister of Norway, briefly addresses the issue of religion and the need to widen the parameters of morality:

“...over the past two decades, religions' roles in development have been increasingly recognised and addressed at international conventions...”

⁶⁵ The Vatican's Islamic allies included the Muslim World League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Muslim World Congress. Unlike the Catholic Church, Islam has a tolerance for birth control and encourages family planning.

⁶⁶ <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-09-02-me-33916-story.html>

⁶⁷ https://www.un.org/supportingdocuments/A_CONF.171_13_Rev.1.pdf

I am pleased by the emerging consensus that everyone should have access to the whole range of family-planning services at an affordable price. Sometimes religion is a major obstacle. This happens when family planning is made a moral issue. But morality cannot only be a question of controlling sexuality and protecting unborn life. Morality is also a question of giving individuals the opportunity of choice, of suppressing coercion of all kinds and abolishing the criminalization of individual tragedy. Morality becomes hypocrisy if it means accepting mothers' suffering or dying in connection with unwanted pregnancies and illegal abortions, and unwanted children living in misery. [emphasis added]

The only other times the report refers to religion were a) in conjunction with other intersectional identity markers stressing the freedom and equality of all people

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person. [emphasis added]

And b) regarding countries' objections to family planning methods that they consider incompatible with national religious values and laws. Those countries included Egypt, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, and the Holy See (observer status to the UN). For example, the Holy See made this statement:

With reference to the terms [...] regarding family-planning services and regulation of fertility concepts in the document, the Holy See's joining the consensus should in no way be interpreted as constituting a change in its well-known position concerning those family-planning methods which the Catholic Church considers morally unacceptable or on family planning services which do not respect the liberty of the spouses, human dignity and the human rights of those concerned.

Meanwhile, the conference statement of the World Council of Churches (WCC) acknowledged the variety of positions among its members on issues related to reproductive health but urged 'open, constructive dialogue'. While the WCC maintained its opposition to abortion as a family planning method, their statement stressed that 'dogmatic assertions which affirm the sanctity of life' must not ignore the 'concrete realities of women's lives' and the 'unjust treatment and systematic exploitation of women'. These lived realities make legal access to safe and voluntary abortion a 'moral necessity'. Consequently, and similarly to the opening statement by the Norwegian Prime Minister, the WCC proposed that

'[...] it is better to place the issues of population in the context of improving the quality of life. Quality of life is enhanced when people can attain their full potential, when the full spectrum of human rights is respected, when people are subjects rather than objects of policies, when they make choices in life and most all, when basic and spiritual needs are fulfilled'.⁶⁸

The 1995 UN Conference on Women in Beijing

While the 223-page report⁶⁹ of the Beijing Conference mentions 'religion' considerably more often

⁶⁸ <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/statement-world-council-churches>

⁶⁹ <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/Beijing%20full%20report%20E.pdf>

than the Cairo Conference report, the term is used in an overall vague and sometimes contradictory manner.

Religion is mostly mentioned in the following contexts:

- ▶ freedom of thought and belief;
- ▶ religions' central role in the lives of women and men;
- ▶ the role of religious actors in the combat of HIV/AIDS and FGM;
- ▶ the barriers faced by women based on social factors including their religious or cultural identities;
- ▶ and violence against women linked to 'traditional or customary practices and all acts of extremism linked to race, sex, language or religion that perpetuate the lower status accorded to women in the family, the workplace, the community and society'.

The report also repeatedly uses the terms 'religious extremism' and 'religious intolerance' but does not specify what exactly is meant by either of these expressions.

The report acknowledges the 'significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds' but stresses that 'it is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms'. The Beijing platform consequently calls on governments to

'take steps so that tradition and religion and their expressions are not a basis for discrimination against girls [...and] refrain from invoking any custom, tradition or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination as set out in the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women'.

On the contrary, in other sections, the Beijing Platform appears to permit governments to discriminate based on religion:

The implementation of this Platform, including through national laws and the formulation of strategies, policies, programmes and development priorities, is the sovereign responsibility of each State, in conformity with all human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the significance of and full respect for various religious and ethical values, cultural backgrounds and philosophical convictions of individuals and their communities should contribute to the full enjoyment by women of their human rights in order to achieve equality, development and peace. [emphasis added]

In the end, the very issue the Beijing Conference sought to avoid nonetheless occurred: various governments voiced objections to the Platform for Action citing religious arguments. The conference report ends by listing all reservations from participating country delegations, including Egypt, Guatemala, the Holy See (observer status to the UN), Iraq, and Libya, all of who expressed their commitment to the Beijing Platform only where it did not conflict with respective religious values or laws of their own countries.

Over the next two decades, multilateral and bilateral development organisations formed alliances and published policy documents on religious partnerships. UN agencies have spent considerable resources on research on religion and development and have produced a series of useful publications. Within the UN system, the work of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) is particularly relevant to the intersection of gender and religion and is therefore highlighted below.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

The UNFPA was one of the first UN agencies to address the issue of religion in development and according to itself, has 'raised the visibility of this FBO conversation within the UN system'⁷⁰. UNFPA stresses the vital role of religious actors for achieving gender goals and the importance of recognising and including them in development processes. For example, UNFPA has continuously called FBOs 'agents of change'⁷¹, 'peacemakers', 'behaviour change-makers', 'community-based service providers', 'social mobilizers', and 'advocates to influence governmental delegations negotiating the sustainable development goals'⁷². The UNFPA has hosted several key events on the role of religious actors on issues connected to reproductive health, family planning, and women's rights. For example, in 2008 the Global Forum of Faith-based Organisations for Population and Development in Istanbul brought together over 150 faith-based representatives from around the world. Different panels discussed issues such as HIV, maternal health, and violence against women and girls. The meeting celebrated three decades of the UNFPA's engagement with faith-based organisations on development issues related to reproductive health and rights, gender equality and population⁷³. In 2009, UNFPA published its 'Guidelines for Engaging Faith-Based Organizations as Cultural Agents of Change'⁷⁴. In 2012, UNFPA produced a document called 'Enhancing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Well Being of Young People - Building Common Ground between the United Nations and Faith-Based Development Partners'⁷⁵. This paper urges greater attention to the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents as well as suggests pathways towards a more effective collaboration between the UN and FBOs on this issue. In 2014, UNFPA gathered a delegation of more than 40 religious leaders from around the world at the UN Headquarters in New York. The participants represented the Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim religions. They jointly signed a Call to Action in which they denounce child marriage and violence against women and girls, emphasise the rights of adolescents and youth to sex education, and call on world leaders to advance access to sexual and reproductive health and ensure reproductive rights as a matter of human dignity⁷⁶.

In the aftermath of this New York declaration, UNFPA together with the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) produced a report called 'Religion, Women's Health and Rights Points of Contention, Paths of Opportunities'⁷⁷. It looks at the diverse religious arguments around some of 'the most sensitive and contentious SRH-related issues, from the perspective of the major faith traditions of this world'. These issues included contraception, abortion, GBV, and child marriage. The report features case studies on Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and elaborates on religious objections as well as 'alternative, faith-based lived realities, interpretations and actions which support the sexual and reproductive rights in question'.

The New York declaration was also followed by a collaboration of UNFPA and the Church of Sweden with support from NORAD which resulted in a 2016 report on the links between human rights principles and religious norms and interpretations⁷⁸. At a UNFPA event in 2019, Azza Karam, chair of the UN's Inter-agency Task Force on Religion and Development at the UNFPA headquarters, stressed that 'SRHR involves some of the most sensitive aspects of life. It requires sensitivity, especially when you link it to religion'⁷⁹. Except for UNFPA's 2030 agenda report, which discusses religion, gender,

⁷⁰ <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/religion-and-development-post-2015>

⁷¹ <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/guidelines-engaging-faith-based-organisations-fbo-agents-change>

⁷² <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/religion-and-development-post-2015>

⁷³ <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/global-forum-faith-based-organisations-population-and-development>

⁷⁴ <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/guidelines-engaging-faith-based-organisations-fbo-agents-change>

⁷⁵ <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/enhancing-sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-well-being-young-people>

⁷⁶ <https://www.unfpa.org/news/religious-leaders-call-action-sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-reproductive-rights-un>

⁷⁷ <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/religion-womens-health-and-rights>

⁷⁸ <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA-WFHR.pdf>

⁷⁹ <https://www.sida.se/English/where-we-work/Global-development-interventions/examples-of-results/innovative-faith-partnerships-sexual-reproductive-health-rights/>

peace, and security’⁸⁰, the agency has largely been able to consider religion beyond a security framework.

The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)

UN Women was established 10 years ago as a ‘global champion for women and girls’. The creation of this UN agency was a response to the fact that gender inequalities have remained deeply entrenched in every society despite landmark agreements like the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)⁸¹. UN Women has drawn attention to how religions have been used to perpetuate and legitimise gender inequality in national family laws⁸². Nevertheless, in some areas, the role of religious actors continues to be overlooked, for example, in the context of marry-your-rapist laws. UN Women has repeatedly condemned such laws, stressed their danger to women, and called on country governments to immediately revoke such legislations⁸³. While many activists, scholars, and journalists have highlighted the roles that religious authorities and religiously conservative political parties have played in protecting these laws and obstructing their reforms, UN Women has remained surprisingly silent on this gender-religion interplay.

In 2017, UN Women, on behalf of the UN’s Interagency Task Force for Religion and Development (UNFPA/UNIATF), launched the Global Platform on Gender Equality and Religion, together with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the International Partnership for Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD)⁸⁴. The Platform aims to overcome communication barriers between ‘faith and secular actors to tap into the rich possibilities for collaboration within, inter, across and outside of faith’. The Platform also seeks to increase women’s leadership and participation in religious institutions. At its launch, UN Women Deputy Executive Director Lakshmi Puri addressed the need to fight the patriarchy:

We need to harness this power of religion to create the new social fact of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Unfortunately, so far in many societies we have misconstrued religious teaching which justifies the “naturalness” and “sacred nature” of the patriarchy in which men are viewed as superior to women, discriminated against, there is gendered division of labour and roles and gender stereotyping, harmful practices like child marriage, female genital mutilation and violence against women justified in the name of religion⁸⁵.

In development practice, the boundaries between religion and patriarchy remain blurred and are - as Puri notes - often ‘misconstrued’. Development approaches have been criticised for ‘paint[ing] religious actors with one brush’ as conservative, consumed by tradition, and resisting change (Ferris, 2011: 623). Similarly, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2015: 569) argues that beneficiaries’ religious beliefs and practices have been rejected on the assumption that they are so deeply embedded in ‘their patriarchal oppressive structures that “they” are suffering from false consciousness that only “we” can overcome’. Religious actors continue to be viewed with suspicion in mainstream development discourses. They are often considered to be inherently subjective and part of the problem.

⁸⁰ <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/realizing-faith-dividend> The report focuses on the role of religious actors ‘as they pertain to gender equality, peaceful coexistence and security considerations

⁸¹ <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2013/07/un-women-the-united-nations-entity-for-gender-equality-and-the-empowerment-of-women/>

⁸² <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/12/reclaiming-gender-equality-in-islam>

⁸³ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2017/8/news-jordanian-parliament-abolishes-law-that-allowed-rapists-to-avoid-prosecution>

⁸⁴ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2017/3/news-global-platform-on-gender-equality-and-religion-launched>

⁸⁵ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2017/3/speech-ded-puri-international-partnership-for-religion-and-sustainable-development-platform>

Government policies have often associated FBO partnerships with a security framework that considers FBOs' actions from a political and ideological rather than humanitarian standpoint (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015). As a result, the support of FBOs has sometimes been tied to non-economic conditionalities, such as a commitment to secular principles, non-proselytisation, and impartial delivery of aid (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015). In the absence of trust-based partnerships, the relationship between development and FBOs has remained largely transactional and based on efficiency and service provision.

Finally, it seems noteworthy that development reporting that does not specifically focus on religion continues to evoke the term in a rather simplified manner. Most such reports, if at all, only mention religion in the introduction along with other intersectional identity markers, such as race, culture, ethnicity, marital status, or age. There is certainly a need for a more considerate and nuanced discourse of the gender-religion intersection in mainstream UN reporting.

4.2. Bilateral development agencies

Between 1982 and 1998, Ver Beek (2000) reviewed policy documents of several major development organisations. He discovered that none of them had indicated policies related to issues of religion and concluded that agencies consciously choose to avoid this topic in their programming. A decade later, Jones and Petersen (2011: 1292) argued that the taboo had been reversed so sharply that it had in fact 'become overly fashionable to talk about religion in development'. This section highlights some of the ways in which bilateral aid agencies have engaged with religion in their reporting, specifically in the context of gender. The agencies discussed were selected based on their overall spending on development aid, their engagement with religion, and the availability of public reports^{86,87}.

In 2002, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) established the 'Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives' which 'liaises with faith-based and community stakeholders in achieving USAID's priority goals'⁸⁸. In 2019, USAID announced its new 'Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement' setting out rules and guidelines while declaring that religious leaders and faith communities are 'better equipped to meet today's most pressing challenges'⁸⁹. Notably, the rise of the 'religious right' in the U.S. since the 1980s and the aftermath of 9/11 have contributed to an increased focus on the role of religions in society (Clarke, 2007; Tomalin, 2015). Mounting political discourses on religious extremism and the War on Terror gave religious actors a new relevance in development. Yet, it also amplified their negative portrayals and association with conflicts, inequality, and security issues (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015).

The UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (formerly Department for International Development) was among the first bilateral agencies to address religion as well as its connection to gender. It has commissioned several research studies analysing this link⁹⁰. The Office was also involved in the launch of the global Platform on 'Gender Equality and Religion'. In 2012, it produced a paper series to guide its work with FBOs, based on 'mutual understanding and respect'⁹¹. The UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, like many other bilateral aid agencies, highlights faith groups as important members of local communities that provide services and inspire confidence and trust. Nevertheless, at times the reporting continues to perpetuate the notion that religion is an inherent, ahistorical, and unique feature of developing countries. For example, some reports that focus on religions begin by stating that

⁸⁶ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/08/foreign-aid-these-countries-are-the-most-generous/>

⁸⁷ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/04/principled-aid-donor-countries-that-give-most-2019/>

⁸⁸ <https://www.usaid.gov/faith-and-opportunity-initiatives>

⁸⁹ <https://www.usaid.gov/faith-and-opportunity-initiatives/us-strategy>

⁹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/dfid-research-outputs/gender-studies-approaches-to-the-relationships-between-religion-and-development>

⁹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/faith-partnership-principles-working-effectively-with-faith-groups-to-fight-global-poverty>

*faith makes such an important contribution to development. Most people in developing countries engage in some form of spiritual practice and believe that their faith plays an important role in their lives*⁹¹.

In 2014, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office launched its initiative 'What Works to Prevent Violence' and has tested GBV prevention strategies in 13 countries⁹². In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), collaboration with faith leaders resulted in over 60 percent reduction of intimate partner violence in 15 villages over two years⁹³. In 2018, the UK government expressed its commitment to gender by announcing that all development partners

*must use their diplomatic leverage and partnerships at regional level to support women's rights organisations and wider civil society, including faith-based organisations, in promoting gender equality and tackling discrimination.*⁹⁴

While the UK has started partnering with FBOs outside of the Christian realm⁹⁵, traditionally, the agency has had closer ties with organisations and individuals of the Christian faith (Clarke, 2007).

In recent years, Sweden's development cooperation SIDA has partnered with religious actors across development themes. SIDA stresses religious actors' key roles in realising gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights. In 2017, SIDA partnered with UN Women and funded the Men and Women for Gender Equality programme in Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, and Palestine⁹⁶. SIDA has also financially supported women's rights organisations in their research and advocacy work on gender and religion (e.g., Musawah's knowledge building work on equality in Muslim Family Laws⁹⁷ or the Association for Women's Rights in Development's work on the links between religious fundamentalism and gender equality⁹⁸). In 2019, SIDA co-hosted an event on SRHRs and religion with UNFPA which brought together civil society members, UN bodies, scholars, and religious actors to discuss innovative approaches. SIDA acknowledges both, religious actors' positive contributions in the context of gender equality, as well as religious laws that are gender unjust and religious resistance to some aspects of gender programming.

Even though Australian Aid is not among the ten biggest development spenders, it appears to stand out when it comes to engaging with the intersection of religion and gender in development, at least on paper. Its 2016 gender strategy does not directly address religion, nevertheless, it makes a relevant point for the consideration of religion and gender in development: it challenges development practitioners' hesitation 'to press for gender equality for fear of imposing western cultural norms'. Australian Aid's argues that this fear is not legitimate. It reminds Western practitioners that cultural norms surrounding gender equality are not unique to the West, but 'governments around the world are committed to gender equality, and each country we work with has a women's movement pressing for progress'⁹⁹. It is unusual to find bilateral aid agencies explicitly challenging this developed vs. developing country binary.

⁹² <https://whatworks.co.za/global-programme-projects/tearfund-drc>

⁹³ <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/uk-aid-britain-republic-congo-drc-sexual-violence/>

⁹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dfid-strategic-vision-for-gender-equality-her-potential-our-future>

⁹⁵ <https://www.devex.com/news/top-dfid-ngo-partners-a-primer-81391>

⁹⁶ <https://www.sida.se/Svenska/aktuellt-och-press/development-talks/inbjudningar/what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-man-in-the-middle-east/>

⁹⁷ www.musawah.org/knowledge-building-briefs

⁹⁸ <https://www.awid.org/2018-supporting-feminist-movements-thrive-and-disrupt>

⁹⁹ <https://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment-strategy.aspx>

5. Concluding remarks

This report provides an overview of the roles that religious actors have played in the context of gendered development goals over the past 25 years. While the discussion in this report was structured around the gender contributions and obstructions of religious actors, the gender-religion nexus in 'real-life' is much messier. Complex interactions of religion and gender cannot be meaningfully reduced to linear causal relationships. Rather than attempting to establish whether religious actors are 'good' or 'bad' for gendered development goals, it is critical to acknowledge that religions and gender politics are intertwined in all countries, high and low-income alike. Whenever religion enters the public sphere and becomes powerful in politics, it tends to orbit around gender issues. Patriarchal gender norms are packaged in the language of religion because it legitimises them. It makes them appear divinely ordained and unchangeable. This interplay of religion and gender is a global phenomenon and merits attention as a category of analysis in its own right. A conceptual understanding of the context-specific expressions of religion and gender can reveal deeply entrenched patriarchal power dynamics. Addressing the interplay of gender and religion is therefore at the very heart of achieving gender equality. Not recognising this dimension of development further marginalises local feminist voices and women's rights activists who risk their lives attempting to reinterpret religious texts and reform unjust laws.

Moving forward, it is pivotal to ensure collaboration between all development actors - secular and non-secular alike. Such efforts should be rooted in religious literacy and underpinned by a strong shared commitment to gender equality, while acknowledging that, as is the case with any structural change in history, there are no shortcuts or quick fixes. Achieving gender equality can take generations and is highly context-specific.

“...religions and gender politics are intertwined in all countries, high and low-income alike...”

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