

5

GENDER EQUALITY



CO-MODERATORS

Jean Duff, President, Partnership for Faith and Development
Blessing Omakwu, Deputy Director, Goalkeepers,
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

17 ROOMS GLOBAL FLAGSHIP
2021 ROOM DOCUMENTS
NOVEMBER 2021



This document summarizes the ideas and actions that emerged from Room 5, a working group for Sustainable Development Goal 5 on Gender Equality, that convened as part of the annual 17 Rooms global flagship process in 2021. The [17 Rooms initiative](#) is co-hosted by the Center for Sustainable Development at The Brookings Institution and The Rockefeller Foundation. Each Room, one per SDG, was asked to identify actionable priorities that can be advanced by the end of 2022 to improve some component of 2030 outcomes for its respective Goal. Corresponding documents prepared by the other flagship Rooms are available [here](#), alongside a synthesis report prepared by the 17 Rooms secretariat.

CONCEPT NOTE: 2021 ROOM 5

THE CONTEXT

World leaders committed to Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) at the United Nations in 2015 to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030. *Religion has been called “the hardest barrier that women must overcome in the path to gender equality.”*¹ “Religion matters, not only for cultural attitudes but for the opportunities and constraints on the lives of women and girls.”² Religion “is an important factor shaping communities’ norms and aspirations for women and girls. It can be a catalyst for action to improve women’s lives, or it can be a source of conflict and a brake on change.”³

Religious actors have tremendous scale, reach and influence, particularly in geographies with high levels of religiosity.⁴ For example, the global Catholic church runs approximately 220,000 schools in pre-university levels in all regions of the world, educating more than 65 million children and youth; and Catholic colleges and universities educate 3 million—many of these students are not Catholic or even Christian.⁵ Across Africa, where religiosity is high, a 2020 Afrobarometer study⁶ showed Africans are more likely to contact religious leaders than other types of public officials, such as traditional leaders, local government councilors, or members of parliament. An exploratory quantitative analysis of 50 countries and federal states found the level of gender equality has a negative correlation with religiosity, almost the same as with the share of women in parliament and the share of women in the labor force.⁷

Some evidence does exist for the positive influence of faith actors on attitudes and behaviors harmful to women and girls,⁸ especially in relation to child marriage, female genital mutilation, girls’ education,

¹ Vineeta Sharma (2018), *How can Feminist Theology Reduce Gender Inequality in Religion?* Available at: <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/how-can-feminist-theology-reduce-gender-inequality> [Last Accessed October 21, 2021]

² Ingelhart, Ronald and Pippa Norris (2003). *Rising Tide. Gender Equality and Cultural Change Around the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs; Georgetown University (2008). *Challenges of Change: Faith, Gender and Development*, p.5

⁴ Intensity of religious beliefs and/or religious participation.

⁵ His Eminence Pietro Cardinal Parolin (2019). Statement by Secretary of State at General Assembly Hall. Available at: <https://holysemission.org/contents/statements/5d8fab97bc6c3.php> [Last Accessed October 21, 2021].

⁶ Afrobarometer (2020). *Religion in Africa: Tolerance and trust in leaders are high, but many would allow regulation of speech*. Afrobarometer Dispatch No.339.

⁷ Klingorová, Kamila & Havlíček, Tomáš, Moravian Geographical Reports, Vol.23 (2015). *Religion and gender inequality: The status of women in the societies of world religions*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279526649_Religion_and_gender_inequality_The_status_of_women_in_the_societies_of_world_religions [Last Accessed October 21, 2021]

⁸ Le Roux E, Bartelink BE 2017 No More ‘harmful traditional practices’: working effectively with faith leaders. <https://gender-based-violence.jiflc.com/resources/no-harmful-traditional-practices-working-effectively-faith-leaders/> [Last Accessed October 21, 2021]

gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and family planning, human trafficking, female leadership, human rights, and theological understanding. But there remain significant gaps in research, and in the communication of the evidence.

How can faith actors accelerate progress on Sustainable Development Goal 5? This is the question that ignites Room 5 this year.

Religion can be a catalytic force to advance gender equality—and religious actors can perhaps enable the world to cross the last mile to achieve SDG 5. Case studies from faith-based organizations provide evidence of this. There are many faith leaders and theologians advancing gender equality without institutional labels or support.

Despite the importance of faith actors to achieve gender equality and the important work faith actors are doing, global development actors and funders for gender equality often overlook faith actors.

Three topics have been the subject of much global discourse and investment over the years: how development institutions can advance women’s rights and gender equality, gender issues within religions, and the relationship between religion and development. However, the nexus where these issues come together surprisingly lacks discourse and action.⁹ This lack of visibility and support occurs both in faith communities and in global gender equality spaces. Few faith funders support gender equality initiatives, and fewer support initiatives outside a specific denomination or faith. Secular funders are often hesitant to engage faith actors, and when they do, funding is typically siloed by issue.

THE OPPORTUNITIES

Over the last few months, Room 5 has discussed key opportunities to accelerate the positive influence of faith actors for gender equality, including:

1. Amplifying and catalyzing existing and emerging faith leaders, including: women leaders, digital influencers, theologians, and youth leaders.
2. Tackling gender equality opposition movements in religious spaces: current cultural conversations around the(mis)use of religion to advance colonization and racism are an opening to elevate how the (mis)use of religion advances patriarchy.
3. Strengthening the evidence base on the influence of faith on gender equality, including data and stories.
4. Elevating theology that advances gender equality and the rights of women and girls.
5. Building male allies in faith contexts for gender equality.

THE ACTION AREA

Of the opportunities identified, Room 5 coalesced around the **amplification and catalyzation of women leaders who are advancing gender equality in faith contexts as an urgent priority**. In particular, the opportunities to facilitate **cross-generational exchange, knowledge sharing, ongoing connections, and collaboration between these women leaders is critical**. With this in mind, the group was able to secure funding from multiple sources to host a 2-day convening around International Women’s Day in March

⁹ Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, Georgetown University (2008), *Challenges of Change: Faith, Gender and Development*, p.9. Available at: <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/challenges-of-change-faith-gender-and-development> [Last accessed: October 21, 2021].

2022, featuring dialogues with influential women leaders advancing gender equality in faith contexts, as well as workshops to provide for an exchange of views among women leaders and for the sharing of tangible tools to advance gender equality in faith contexts. The group is also exploring a post-convening strategy for community engagement to foster a network of knowledge sharing, conversations, and collaboration.