



**The Brookings Institution  
Center for Sustainable Development**

**and**

**The Rockefeller Foundation**

**17 Rooms Podcast  
“Positive influence of faith for gender equality”  
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*Episode Summary:*

In this seventeenth interview of the “17 Rooms” podcast, Jean Duff and Blessing Omakwu discuss their efforts to accelerate the positive influence of faith actors for gender equality. Duff, president at the Partnership for Faith and Development and Omakwu, deputy director of Goalkeepers at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, moderated Room 5 focused on Sustainable Development Goal number 5—on gender equality—during the 2021 17 Rooms flagship process.

**MCARTHUR:** Hi, I'm John McArthur, senior fellow and director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Brookings.

**KHAN:** And I'm Zia Khan, senior vice president for innovation at The Rockefeller Foundation. This is 17 Rooms, a podcast about actions, insights, and community for the Sustainable Development Goals and the people driving them.

**MCARTHUR:** So Zia, this is our final Room episode, and we're going to conclude with something that you and I care quite a bit about: gender equality.

**KHAN:** You know, John, I find one of the most powerful promises of the SDGs is a commitment to leave no one behind. It's a stated pledge that the Goals and the targets should be met for all nations and all people and for all segments of society. And this year, we took a really concerted effort and really pushed hard, and worked with our moderators to push hard, for gender equality to be present in all of the Rooms. And that meant thinking a lot more broadly than just making sure we had gender balance across the moderators and the participants. But it also meant deep thinking and deep effort and deep attention so that all of the Rooms would consider how their actions are going to advance the needs of women and girls.

**MCARTHUR:** And that last point is an important one for us, Zia, and for our listeners to be aware. We spend a lot of time thinking about how to make sure the gender equality bit doesn't get siloed into the so-called Room 5 conversation on Sustainable Development Goal number 5. Because when we were talking about women and girls we're talking about half of humanity. So we can't tackle equality for half of humanity across the SDG domain without thinking about Goal 1 for poverty, Goal 2 for hunger, Goal 3 for health, Goal 4 for education, and so on and so on. It has to be thought through across all the Goals.

And one of the things that we realize is that a lot of people care about gender equality, but might not know how to take a next step for gender equality within their specialized domain. And so we really encourage this year every Room to think about how whatever they're specialized next step might be, how we could advance the needs of women and girls as a particular objective. And some found that easier to do than others. We have to be honest about that. And so we're going to keep pushing on that moving forward.

But what we've also, I think, decided together as a group in our secretariat is that there are a bunch of arguments to promote gender equality because it helps achieve some other SDG. I call that the instrumentalist approach, as we've discussed. It's probably true and most certainly true in many cases, but that's not a good enough reason on its own. There is a better and more important reason, in my view, to focus on gender equality, which I would call the absolutist approach. It's the fact that the achievement of full human potential and sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities. That sentence I just said, the achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development, is not possible if half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities--that sentence is in the SDG declaration from 2015. And it's something that we've all agreed on as a justice-oriented approach, an absolutist approach, a do the right thing approach that every human being deserves equal treatment and equal opportunity.

And so we as two male co-chairs working with our teams of mixed gender, committed to keep pushing so that gender equality is a common practical ambition across all the Rooms, Zia, since the breadth of issues can only be properly resolved if they're tackled seriously from all angles. And like with everything else in 17 Rooms, we don't pretend to have easy answers. We don't pretend we figured everything out. But we are going to keep experimenting and keep pushing to see how we can help this crucial challenge for all of humanity. Keep making progress across all the Rooms because we don't have a chance in the world of solving it across all of humanity unless we can figure out stuff like this.

**KHAN:** John, I think that's just a super helpful way to look at it. And I'm glad we took a moment to explore this issue about gender equality across all of our Rooms so that listeners have that context, but also the context for this specific Room, Room 5 that we're about to go into, which is about gender equality, and we're really excited about where our co-moderators in this Room landed.

**MCARTHUR:** Exactly. Today, we're going to talk with the leaders of Room 5 on SDG 5 in that context of the broader way we're thinking about it. And SDG 5, of course, is for gender equality. So in today's episode, we're joined by Jean Duff and Blessing Omakwu to learn about their efforts to accelerate the positive influence of faith actors for gender equality. Jean is the president of the Partnership for Faith and Development. She has special expertise in building bridges and effective partnerships between faith-based organizations and the public sector, nonprofits and academia to achieve social justice and community development goals. Blessing leads the Goalkeeper's Initiative at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. She's a self-described Nigerian-American gender equality evangelist and the founder of the She Tank, a modern think tank that supports the realization of equality for women of African descent. Full disclosure to our listeners, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is also a financial supporter of Brookings. Everyone's opinion expressed today is their own.

So, Blessing and Jean, as we say, co-moderate Room 5, a working group for SDG 5 on gender equality in this year's 17 Rooms process. For new listeners, 17 Rooms is an approach to spurring action for the SDGs. It convenes 17 working groups, one per Goal, and asks them to focus on an area within that Goal that's ripe for action and then to define some concrete next steps that can be achieved in 12 to 18 months to make progress. Zia, these leaders of this Room have come up together with a pretty novel approach to a pretty long standing challenge of humanity.

**KHAN:** And John, what's so compelling is this novel approach, I believe, is really the result of how our co-moderators were able to integrate their different perspectives that came from their different stories and work with a really diverse Room to come up with a very innovative approach and a powerful approach to tackle this very important issue. Blessing and Jean are co-moderators of Room 5, the working group for SDG 5 on gender equality. This is their story.

**MCARTHUR:** Blessing, welcome.

**OMAKWU:** Thank you, John. It's great to be here and hi Zia.

**MCARTHUR:** Jean, such a pleasure to welcome you, too.

**DUFF:** Hello, John and Zia. Very good to be back with 17 Rooms.

**MCARTHUR:** Zia, I think this is going to be a good one.

**KHAN:** I do, too. Well hello to both of you, it's such a pleasure to have you here. I'd like to start with a question, if you could just share your journey to how you came to these issues and to 17 Rooms. Maybe Blessing, we could start with you and then we'll go to you, Jean.

**OMAKWU:** Sure. So my interest in gender equality comes from a very personal place. And this year we tackled faith, which I'll come to in a second. But I grew up mostly in Nigeria. I was born in the U.S., but my parents moved back to Nigeria when I was younger. And I grew up with a father who always treated me like I was equal. And so the idea that I was anything less than equal never occurred to me until he got sick. And so when he got sick, we began to see all the ways that women are treated in African cultures when a man is sick or when he dies. And I remember I was about 15 years old. My father had been battling cancer for two years and his family had come from the village, and they had surrounded my mother and they were all making accusations saying, you know, she was trying to kill him, and just all kinds of accusations. And they took him away, and that was the last time we ever saw him.

And I remember someone saying to me, I wish you were a boy, because if you were a boy as your father's first child, you would have had a say. And that was the first time in my mind that this idea of being a boy would make me anything different from what I was. And I remember saying to myself that I don't want to ever see women go through what I saw my mother go through and that I really wanted to fight for women's rights.

My parents were both pastors, and so following my father's death, I saw all that my mother went through because people began to challenge the idea that she should leave the church. For me, it seems strange because they had built this church together, and so that began this lifelong journey of gender equality. For the longest time, I didn't link my background in faith and religion to my work in gender equality. I was really focused on gender equality, went to law school, worked in government, work with NGOs, and joined 17 Rooms as a part of that gender equality work two, three years ago, which was fascinating.

But I began to think about faith and the role that faith plays in gender equality a couple of years ago for a few reasons. One was in Nigeria, there was a bill that failed to pass, a gender equality and opportunities bill. And when that bill was brought before the floor of the National Assembly, we had senators read from scriptures and say this bill cannot pass because it goes against our religion. So we had both Muslim and Christian senators read from the Koran and from the Bible.

And it was just clear the role that religion plays in gender, and I began to think about it more. I had gone to a Christian university so understood theology and just began to study feminist theology more.

Fast forward two years ago, I met Melinda Gates and I was asked to help the foundation understand the role that faith plays in religion. And that's how I met Jean, who is a fantastic expert in this space. I interviewed her when I was doing this research and when I was asked to lead 17 Rooms this year, I thought if we're talking about gender equality we need to think about faith because so often religion is left out of the discourse around SDG 5. But actually, if we're going to achieve gender equality, we need to think about mindsets, we need to think

about gender norms, and what forms norms. Religion is a big piece of that, and so it was great to partner with Jean this year, and I'll pause there.

**KHAN:** That is an amazing story, Blessing, thanks. Jean, over to you.

**DUFF:** Well, growing up Catholic in Ireland was definitely a formative experience in my views on gender, as you can imagine. I was raised, I was educated by extraordinary nuns who were independent, brilliant, academic women leaders. I had a very positive experience of the Catholic faith. But it was only when I kind of got out into the world and began to understand that the equality and the image of women that we understood in the Catholic Church in that very protected environment was certainly not widely held. And in fact, the entire frame of reference was one of inequality and oppression of women. And so being inclined as a justice warrior from early days, that really got my dander up.

And I must say it's been it's been a part of my working interest ever since I've been a young woman. I trained first in clinical psychology, but subsequently in epidemiology. And epidemiology gave me a way to think systematically about measurable differences. And that's really what drives me. I'm interested in measurable differences, which is one of the reasons I love the SDGs so much because of the wonderful work that's been done on the indicators and really layering that down.

I've been working for many decades now in the faith world and the interfaith world and serving as a bridge between faith leaders, faith-based organizations, and secular organizations who are trying to navigate the really complex, difficult relationship between the two worlds to deliver measurable differences and to deliver to deliver good outcomes.

So on the one hand, while we recognize that faith indeed, and all faiths, can have and does have such enormously harmful influence on women and justifies it as given out by scripture, by basically codified by the divine in many cases, we also understand that faith has enormously powerful possibility for positive transformation. And that's what really motivates me in this conversation. It's how faith can deliver; faith leaders, faith-based organizations, and faiths—and by faith I mean, inclusively, all faiths—can deliver real change, social, and cultural transformation that make a difference for women.

**MCARTHUR:** I'm curious, Blessing and Jean, you describe these divides between faith conversations and gender equality policy conversations. But across the divide they're so real within each camp, the issues, if they're camps, is a fair way to describe them. I'm curious, just for our listeners, how much do you think this is a broader divide between, say, talking about policy issues and faith? Is it in the United States vernacular church and state separation? Or is it something that's extra special in gender equality world or extra pronounced in gender equality world? How do you see that difference?

**DUFF:** I think it's extra pronounced in the gender equality world because of the profound differences of opinion and belief around sexual reproductive rights. And so that is a complete no go zone and has resulted in the breakdown of communication between the women's movement, between international development, between religious organizations. When I worked some years ago at the Washington National Cathedral, we initiated a two year conversation among the leadership of those three constituencies to discover whether and how we could go beyond this massive polarization, this massive, massive area of disagreement and find areas of common ground. And once we were able to agree to put this area of

profound disagreement respectfully on ice, if you like, and concentrate on the areas where we could work together, it was absolutely electric.

So it's "yes, and" answer to your question. There is a profound substantive difference of opinion which remains and will carry forward. But there are also areas of enormous common cause and common ground. Through that process, the combined efforts of the people involved, we're able to raise \$1.4 billion of new resources for women and girls. So these constituencies are so powerful when they come together.

**MCARTHUR:** And, Blessing, I'm curious if that tracks your take. And also to add a layer, religion and faith conversations can often be a source of division themselves. You mentioned, you know, Christian and Muslim in Nigeria, sometimes a fault line for the politics of many countries. How do we understand again these layers of what's a broader tension and what is something that specific to the gender equality issues?

**OMAKWU:** Great question. And I agree completely with Jean. I think over the past few years, there have been maybe three buckets of conversations. One has been how do development institutions advance women's rights and gender equality. And then there's gender issues within religion. And then there's a relationship between religion and development. But for some reason, the nexus between religion and gender equality and development, like we never get to that nexus in conversation. And to Jean's point, I think part the reason that happens is the people who have the loudest microphones. I think for the longest time, people who have had the loudest microphones from the faith-based were invited into development circles and vice versa have been those who espouse patriarchal views. But there are so many actors within the faith world who are doing fantastic work to advance gender equality, some of whom we invited into this Room and we can come to in a second.

And I think that part of that gap has been around who gets to have the microphone. Even you mentioned, John, the divide within religions themselves or across religions. There are many people who are promoting interfaith understanding, interfaith cooperation. I don't think that we actually bring those people into the conversation enough. And so that for me has been a huge gap.

But when you think about development itself, religious organizations are the oldest development actors in the world. Religious institutions are the ones who have been providing assistance to refugees, to IDPs, churches. I worked for a while in IDP camps in northeastern Nigeria. I was consulting for the U.N. at the time, but it wasn't necessarily the U.N. who had the biggest trust with refugee and IDP populations. It was the Catholic Church that was providing food and providing trauma counseling. It was a Islamic institution that was providing education for girls. And so these institutions have been doing the work for a long, long time. And I think where the work is now is bringing in those who have an understanding of how to bridge these gaps into the conversation, especially in the SDG 5 space.

**KHAN:** You know, one thing that I'm interested in is as I've been involved in development, it tends to take a very scientific approach. You know, there's different fields of study, epidemiology, metrics, evidence, theories, and its goals are to reduce poverty and help people. And then there's this whole other side of faith, which uses different approaches, but has, as you were highlighting, shared goals, reducing poverty and helping people. What can we learn from faith methodologies to incorporate into what is a more science-driven development field and perhaps vice versa? I'm curious around basically common goals

between traditional development and faith, yet very different approaches and how much opportunity is there to learn from each other. Maybe, Jean, if we could start with you.

**DUFF:** Yes, I'd love to talk to you about that because this is an area of great interest of mine, indeed, different approaches and different methodologies. And a number of faith-based organizations and religious leaders in 2012 started a platform called the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith in Local Communities, specifically to work to increase the quality of evidence from the faith world. So the notion was that we don't need to document stuff, we don't need to tell our stories in a systematic way, we certainly don't need to do research or broadcast the research because the good works speak for themselves. And they clearly were not speaking for themselves, and they weren't crossing the sectoral divides, and they weren't penetrating the prejudice that existed towards faith-based organizations.

So I think in the last two years we've seen a tremendous increase in academia and in the various policy institutes and faith-based organizations in the quality of evidence, an awareness that that really counts. So why does faith work? Why, why is religion, particularly in low-income environments, the most powerful influence for change, for positive change and for negative change? Why is that? It's because of the trust in religious leaders, the position of the trust and their tradition and history of leadership.

And so the question is, what is it about that that is so intrinsically important? And what is it about faith itself and belief itself that makes the change? We call it the heart-mind dialogue, this powerful way that faith itself—belief, hope, hope in the future, hope in in the possible, hope in salvation, and this is universal across all faith traditions and we have different words for it—it's how that phenomenon of heart-mind transformation actually works to make the change. Now that's a lot more difficult to measure.

But very interestingly, one of the members of our Room 5 group was Kerida McDonald at UNICEF, who is their top person for social behavior change. And under her leadership, UNICEF has developed a theory of change known as the Faith in Positive Change for Children methodology, where working with the top change folks, theory of change folks, and measurement folks around the world they've been able to develop a methodology for thinking systematically about how to measure that transformative change that faith brings. So a very interesting evolution of thinking around measurement in things that are so intangible and so hard to quantify.

**OMAKWU:** And once again, I'll agree with Jean around, there's something to be said about the trust that religious actors have with populations. And maybe where I might slightly digress, Jean, is I think that we see religiosity not just in low-income contexts, but also even in high-income contexts. I went to college in Midwest, America, the Bible Belt as they call it. And I think the religiosity that you see there is probably the same with what I saw in Nigeria growing up. But that trust is key.

There was a study that a group, Afrobarometer, did two years ago, 2020, and what they found looking at 34 African countries was that more than nine 10 Africans identify with a religion, and 43 percent had contacted a religious leader at least once during the previous year, and 19 percent said they had done so often.

At the foundation we found that some of our grants that have happened in the family planning space have been super successful when we have engaged faith actors. In fact, there was one

grant we worked on—the NURHI Grant, the Nigerian Urban Reproductive Health Initiative—which was led by local actors in Nigeria. The NURHI project, they worked with local actors, theologians on the ground to build trust. And what they found is that when they were able to build trust with religious actors who could then build trust with populations that people were women were 70 percent more likely to use modern contraception, like there was a huge difference.

And why does that trust exist? I think that faith actors and faith communities are able to reach people at the most personal level. Last week, I went for a faith-based conference. It was a women's conference, women who had come from states all over the world, many people who had come from outside the country, who had sold everything had, you know, taken all the money that they had. There were some who came who and didn't have food, but they wanted to be there. But at that conference, people were speaking to their deepest hurts—miscarriages, speaking to the loss of loved ones. They were reaching people in the way that I think that we are not able to do sometimes in the policy space.

So when we think about COVID, we've seen that we have not been able to increase awareness around COVID in some communities because we don't have trust. We've seen misinformation spread because we don't have trust. There's something to be learned there.

But I also agree with Jean that evidence and data, we don't have that in the faith space. So even when I've been doing some of this work, I keep on hearing things like, well, what data exist to show this link between religion and gender? Or what data exist to show, like, faith actors have been doing x y z in this space? And we have not been documenting enough the positive work that's being done in these cases to advance gender equality. So I'm really looking forward to seeing in this space more data being created around the role, the positive role, that faith actors play. But I'm also looking forward to seeing more relationship building between religious actors in secular actors because we often have the same goals, different means, different philosophies, different ideologies, but often similar goals. So I'm looking forward to more spaces for collaboration along these lines.

**KHAN:** John, this is so interesting. This issue of trust cuts across many of the Rooms in 17 Rooms as we're all learning how, and particularly highlighted with COVID and the pandemic, that traditional quote unquote institutions aren't quite as trusted by everyone. Just witness here in the United States the vaccinations rollout and how we may need to tap other sources' levers of trust to all get to the common goals and change that we want.

**MCARTHUR:** I love the notion of heart-mind conversations, I think that was your phrase Jean. And it really gets down to motivations, I think Blessing, in where you were taking us with those threads. And it's true that it's not just the Goals, it's the motivations and sources of inspiration for people. And maybe that's a nice bridge to what your Room has actually been coming up with as a next step. And for our listeners, this is super interesting, I think, to me and Zia, because this is a massive, not just generational challenge, this is on the order of civilizational challenges, of you know, the depth of some of these issues. But you and your Room have been coming up with a pretty interesting next step on something you think could make a difference in 2022. Do you want to tell us a bit about that?

**OMAKWU:** Maybe I'll first say that I've been part of Room 5 now for the past three years. And my first year in Room 5, 2020, Michelle Nunn was leading Room 5, and I remember sitting at the table, it was I think the last physical convening we had before the pandemic



began. And I remember saying, if we're talking about SDG 5, there need to be people from different generations. This table is not representative of generations. There needs to be intergenerational dialog. And Michelle was like, Okay, great, so why don't you co-lead the Room with me? And that began that journey of us leading together.

And so when I was starting the Room this year—Michelle has transitioned out of leading Room 5—and I was asked take on leadership, I knew that I wanted to continue that model of intergenerational leadership. And that's why it was so great to just have Jean be a partner in this process because she has vast experience in this space, has done similar convenings over the years, and just knows all the key actors. And so that's been fantastic to do together.

Our question this year was a simple one. What would happen if we catalyze state actors for gender equality? What could that look like? And it wasn't about looking at all the challenges. I think that everyone is aware of the challenges that exist in religious spaces around gender equality. Although I'll also say that we have similar mindset challenges outside the faith space. And so there's also a villainization of faith spaces that happens often in secular discourse.

But bringing together these actors, our goal was how do we bring together some of the leading minds on faith and gender equality, people that we know are doing fantastic work to lead change in faith and gender contexts? And together we began curating that process.

**DUFF:** And as you say, Blessing, I think that we're very excited to see change happening. We're seeing really opportunities and things beginning to shift in sometimes centuries-old stances on the part of religious institutions vis-a-vis gender and gender equality.

We were fortunate to have the 17 Room platform for Room 5 to be able to draw together some of the amazing people who are already pioneers and champions of faith and gender equality. And there is a lot out there. There's a lot to build on. So, for example, in Room 5 this year, we were fortunate to have Religions for Peace, which is the largest organization of multi-faith religious leaders around the world, and convening literally religious leadership from every tradition. They, too have a women of faith network, which is a very powerful, multinational, multi-faith organization. And we have learned many lessons from them and their recent assembly of women, faith, and diplomacy. So, for example, the learning and the network that Azza Karam, who's their general secretary, brought to our Room was quite extraordinary.

Similarly, we had the general secretary of Act Alliance, which is a global faith-based organization in 120 countries. They have 140 members, faith-based members, about 30,000 staff. So they're truly an extraordinary organization. And their general secretary, Rudelmar Bueno de Faria, this most extraordinary male leader who has made it his business in a very disruptive and activist way to put gender justice at the center of Act Alliance's work. I can't tell you how extraordinary his leadership is and so to have his voice in the discussion.

We also had Bani Dugal, who is a senior representative of the Bahá'í community. We had Esther Mombo representing the Circle of Concerned African Women theologians numbering almost a thousand strong across the continent of Africa and with chapters in other areas uplifting the role of women in academia and in theological academics, and making sure that those voices are heard, and very excitingly, a very large number of younger women theologians coming on board and feeding into our process through that method.

And then, of course, we had some wonderful academics. Katherine Marshall from Georgetown University, from the Berkeley Center. And Father Stan Chu Ilo, who's at DePaul University. And dear colleague Veena O'Sullivan working for Tearfund, an international Christian organization where she too has led the whole worldwide institution in a prioritization of gender justice as a key to change in achieving the SDGs. Her work has been really extraordinary. Blessing, I've left out a few. I'll toss it back to you. Some of the younger, wonderful younger people in our Room.

**OMAKWU:** Sure. And to your point, we were intentional about wanting to have a mix of people in this space, people in academia, people in development, people in foundations, but also people who are in digital media and doing work across social media. One was Nona Jones, who leads faith partnerships at Facebook and really understands the intersection of faith and technology, also the intersection of faith and race. So it was great to have her in the Room. Candice Marie Benbow, who is the founder of what is called Red Lip Theology. She's a fantastic leader in the new media digital space, is well known online, and does a lot of work thinking about how faith intersects with gender, but also popular culture. Two years ago, she put out something called the Lemonade Syllabus, which was looking at how Beyoncé's work actually illustrates a lot of theology issues, including women in faith leadership, and it had over half a million downloads in like a week or something crazy like that. So she's a great thinker in that space. Amani, who you may know online as a "Muslim Girl," a *New York Times* bestselling author, does fantastic work through her channels online and offline thinking about the role of Muslim women in the contemporary gender equality space and faith, was also part of this room. And so it's been great to have their voices in the conversation.

**DUFF:** And maybe I can just add a little bit there. That were very concerned and very sensitive to trespassing on the fabulous work and leadership that's already going on, and very concerned not to duplicate but to figure out how this process could add value, how it could amplify the efforts, and complement the efforts, and promote the efforts that are already underway and identify the gaps.

So we entered into an extraordinary conversation with these very wise and experienced people about where the gaps were, and where they thought that the power, where if we were to focus on doing something specific that would actually yield a measurable outcome, what would that be? And around and around, and there were so many interesting ideas and possibilities. But the group settled in the end on the notion of focusing on women leading change on gender equality in faith contexts. And that this was an area that was really under known, under served, under focused, that women were definitely agents of change and had been for a very long time, that they were operating in all spheres within religious institutions, within academic institutions, within seminaries. They were lay women, they were ordained women, they were theologians, they were canon lawyers, they were non-religious women advocating for change in religious spaces. And many of them very solitary, and many of them very vulnerable, and indeed in danger, in danger as they raised their profile of receiving hate speech and all kinds of threats. And so the Room really guided us towards a focus on women leading change and gender equality in faith contexts. So the question was what could we possibly do to support, to learn more, to build out their capacity and the wonderful work they're already doing.

**KHAN:** I'd love to dive into this just a little bit about how you came to consensus around a practical action forward, because what I have found sometimes there is a tension between diversity, particularly a diversity of leaders across generations coming from different perspectives on a conversation that doesn't usually happen itself as an intersection of two different areas. And how do you avoid the temptation or the risk of getting to a lowest common denominator just to get agreement with everyone? How do you truly synthesize the best ideas of the Room into something provocative and innovative? So I'm curious if you could tell us a little bit about how did you guide, manage, this diverse group of people to land on a pretty concrete and practical action step that drew on the diversity that didn't step on toes and that everyone's behind? Or were there some tradeoffs you had to make? Did you have to agree to disagree with some people? Did you have to sort of do the, you know, not let the perfect be the enemy of the good enough? I'm just curious if you could tell us, how did you get to that consensus and on the practical next steps?

**OMAKWU:** Jean, do you want me to start?

**DUFF:** Definitely. It's a really good question.

**OMAKWU:** We're laughing because it was a difficult process for the very reasons that you've listed here, bringing together people from different disciplinary fields, people from different generations, different faiths. And I think probably that the tension that was thickest in this Room was—in my perspective, and I'm curious, Jean, if you have the same perspective or a different one—was generational in that there people who said we've been doing this for a long time, we've done this. Why are we having this conversation again? And there were those others who were saying, we respect that this has been done, but there's still work to be done and we need to think about how we continue to build on what's been done. And so I think that that tension was extant in the Room the entire time.

How we were able to navigate, I think, was very tactical. And this is a great place for me to shout out to many people who are supporting our Room, like Alexandra, who was our excellent project manager, and Nathalia, who has also joined our Room. But we had to break up into smaller groups and have conversations in smaller groups. I find that to be helpful. I know that Jean also had some conversations offline. I had a few offline with members of the group. And through having those smaller dialogues we are able to come to a few options.

And then we get to the point of tradeoffs. Hey, we can't let perfect be the enemy of good. Here are the options we have on the table, knowing that everyone in this group also has full time jobs. Knowing that, to Jean's point, we're not trying to reinvent the wheel. But there are many organizations doing great work. But we're trying to connect the dots. And so that a lot of can come back to the conversation with clear ideas and to move forward. But Jean, you may have different perspectives on the process, so I'll pass over to you.

**DUFF:** It was so wonderful working with Blessing, who had been around the 17 Rooms a couple of times before. And obviously I was very new to the process because it was it was a breakneck speed, I have to say, the whole process, and we got started actually even a little bit late. So it was positively miraculous and providential in this case that we were able to come up with consensus and have now a clear proposal to move forward. Yeah, look, there are always tensions in these situations. Faith-based organizations are always incredibly limited in resources. There's an inherent competition sometimes within faith-based organizations, and a great worry given scarce resources that whatever available resources might not be used to

complement and to amplify, but rather to, to duplicate. The other tactic that we used—and again wonderful work by Nathalia and Alexandra—was to draft up concept notes, because we were working virtually, to be able to show documents and so forth for comment. And I think I think people were very generous and helpful and supportive in the end and look forward to their very active participation in the Room 5 process as we go forward.

**MCARTHUR:** Can you describe just in a sentence or two what is the action step that's coming up in 2022? Where did you all land? Because I think it's quite interesting where you're landing, or at least what your next springboard looks like.

**DUFF:** So unfortunately, in our COVID restrictions, we are limited to a virtual gathering. So as I was saying earlier, we decided that we wanted to focus in on something that would be useful and relevant and supportive to women leading change. And we are now planning a virtual event, likely a two-day event, that would foster multigenerational, multi-sector exchange among women leading change and gender equality in faith contexts, which would be what I would call a very horizontal style exchange. We're all actually exhausted by Zoom meetings where people are talking at you endlessly and delivering the definitive word on things. The whole point I think of all of this effort is to listen and learn. So we see this as a learning exchange among women, and we would hope that as a result that connections, new connections be made. Existing resources, existing networks, existing ongoing activities will be complemented and will be strengthened. People will join those networks and will benefit from them and bring their gifts to those networks. So that's the beginning of the idea and maybe Blessing you'd like to add to that.

**OMAKWU:** When we're thinking about what is one action this group can take forward, we had five different sub options that we were working with. And we all agreed that there was one goal that was crucial, and that's the amplification and catalyzation of women leaders who are advancing gender equality in faith contexts. A mouthful. But there are a few things that we thought were important. One is how do we facilitate cross-generational exchange? How do we learn from those who have been doing this work for decades, but also those who are doing this work in new and interesting ways? So to Jean's point, this collaboration across generations is both ways. How do we share knowledge? There is so much knowledge in this space that has been done and has not been amplified, and so that this will be an opportunity for us to gather knowledge and amplify knowledge. How do we facilitate ongoing connections and partnerships? How do we have people say, Oh, you're doing this in this geography and I'm doing this in this geography? And how do we come together? That collaboration between women leaders will be key.

And so we're super excited. It will be a two day convening where we bring together women who are leading change in faith contexts. And a diversity of women—women who are doing work in the blogosphere, women who are doing work in CSOs, women who are activists, women who are in the private sector. All kinds of women who are either informed by their faith or actively working in faith contexts to advance gender equality will be there. We're hoping to have tangible tools that we can share. We're hoping to have meaningful conversations and not just those regular Zoom calls that people come and give, their high level chats. One of the things that I say often is that if you go to a faith convening of any type, there is energy, there is creativity, there is passion. And we want to bring those elements into this convening and hopefully catalyze work that's already happening in the space.

**MCARTHUR:** And one thing you taught, I think Zia and myself both in this process, is the importance of a neutral space for these conversations. I'm wondering if you could just describe a little bit about that because as I understand it, you want to frame this as a Room 5 activity, it's kind of a microcosm of the neutral space that 17 Rooms creates. And with all the resources and all the networks you bring, kind of anyone could have hosted it, but you decided, let's use a new type of space. Maybe you could share a bit about that?

**OMAKWU:** I'll say that a year ago, I mentioned I was doing work for the Gates Foundation, where I was just talking to different faith actors and asking, how should secular actors partner with you to advance gender equality? And I asked every single person I spoke with, including Jane, who was on our interview list and what we heard over and over again is we need neutral conveners in this space. And I think some of that goes to what Jane mentioned earlier around scarce resources. I think that there's always inherent bias when a particular group, whether it be from a particular religion or another host, this kind of convening, there's this idea that there could be bias or that scarce resources will go towards one group or another. And so the goal here is for this to be a Room 5 convening, a neutral convener, we are interfaith. It's not being hosted by any group from any faith, it is a neutral space for actors from different faiths to come and have conversation. Jean, I'll hand over to you.

**DUFF:** Yeah. Very well said indeed. Going to your earlier question about tactics, I mean, I think that was obviously essential. And indeed, going back to the to the work I mentioned earlier at Washington National Cathedral, that neutral space has proven absolutely essential for multi-faith, multisector convenings. And I don't mean to suggest that religious institutions, faith-based organizations, are primarily motivated by scrapping over resources. I mean, that is hardly, hardly the question. But inevitably there are institutional characteristics and ownerships, and it's very possible that leadership by one organization would actually preclude the participation by another organization. And we wanted this to be a very inclusive platform. So, neutral space and a multisector space.

One of the things I'm most excited about going forward, and I know I'm going to learn a great deal, is the emphasis on communications and social media and the participation by young leaders, young faith leaders who are already extremely skilled and activist in that space. And we've heard from a number of the conversations about what Women Leading Change might want and might find useful. We've heard repeatedly a need for scaling up skills in communications and in social media, and so that's going to be a very exciting aspect of this dimension of this of this platform.

**MCARTHUR:** Zia, this is making my heart move and my mind spin in thinking about both the content, but also the approach. And I'm curious, you from the foundation side, see so many different types of efforts of people trying to create change, and you and I have talked a lot about how 17 Rooms can advance or support progress on gender equality across all the Rooms. I'm curious how you reflect on where we are in this conversation?

**KHAN:** It's been a fascinating conversation, and, you know, wearing my innovation hat, any time you can bring diverse networks, diverse disciplines, diverse thinking, diverse generations together, there will be creative sparks. And what I find most encouraging is I recently came across this expression of how small groups can harness and curate courage. Large groups tend to become a bit unconscious. And so the energy that I think this small group that, Blessing you and Jean, have curated as part of 17 Rooms and can disseminate with this upcoming convening and going forward is really, really exciting around all the

levers that need to get pulled on, both from just narrative mindset perspective in so many aspects of life that the COVID crisis really revealed to us as all the gender issues and so many dimensions that we saw in work and we saw in emergency workers and we saw how disproportionately was affecting women and girls. I think there was such an awareness created, and it's energizing to see this opportunity that could come out of it and that 17 Rooms helped accelerate. But so grateful, Blessing and Jean, to you for your leadership and leading this group and building the courage.

**DUFF:** Well, thanks to both your institutions for giving us the platform to be able to raise the importance of faith as a change agent around gender equality, and it's just been wonderful working both with Brookings and the Foundation. I just like to say, with tremendous humility, that our goal is really to honor the vast ongoing work. So we have a small Room, we had small numbers of individuals who themselves represent huge networks. But don't for a second imagine that this work isn't being carried forward by thousands and thousands of courageous women leaders working in faith contexts. And we would see this and we've been very much hopeful that this is a first step, as Blessing said a catalytic step, that joins folks who don't necessarily know each other, that complements existing work, and that would lead, would spark a whole series of follow on activities that would continue to strengthen and support and encourage and honor the work that that is already underway.

**OMAKWU:** I agree, Jean. I'm looking at what we've began as the start of funders also being a part of this dialogue. It's been fantastic to have both Brookings and Rockefeller support this vision. When I said, Hey, I want to curate the Room around faith and gender, I actually thought you both are going to say no, and I'd go about my way. So I was really pleased that you were open to this idea. And I hope that this becomes a model for other organizations who have resources to bring faith actors into the conversation. Because, as Jean mentioned, there are so many people—I have spoken to organizations, theologians, academics, data nerds, I mean, people who are working on this issue around the world and have been doing so for decades, have been doing so on so many different issues. And so I hope that it's the start of many more kinds of conversations like this to come.

I was talking to one theologian a while ago and she said something that still resonates with me all the time. And she says religious people bring with them a belief in the higher power that can propel them to do almost anything. And it's a resource, a different type of resource, that has not been explored enough to drive social change. As I think about the year that we're stepping into and where we've been in the past with Generation Equality Forum, I think that there's so much power and faith spaces that can drive immense and incredible change. And so I hope that this becomes just one piece in so many moving pieces to create change and to get us closer to the SDG 5 by 2030.

**MCARTHUR:** We're going to have to start to tie up this amazing conversation shortly, and I think Zia is going to help bring us home in a sec. But I wanted to ask both of you, because you are so both deep in the trenches on the policy debates, but also so thoughtful on all the tactics as has been so clearly revealed in this conversation—we in the 17 Rooms process this year asked every Room to think about how their action steps, insights could advance the needs of women and girls. We did a survey at the beginning of the process, Say how comfortable do you feel to engage on this content. And we've got a range, not surprisingly, a range of degrees of comfort. People often think gender equality, I'm not expert in that, call the experts. You guys are adding a layer, crucially as you've discussed, around faith communities and gender equality. I'm curious what you think the key learnings are for people

who are working on other SDGs who feel less comfortable to talk about gender and less comfortable to talk about faith. I am sure you each have your own views, so, Blessing or Jean?

**DUFF:** Of course, I'm going to take the faith angle. I mean, I was actually delighted to see that you were looking at every SDG through the lens of gender and very interested in the survey results and encouraging that. What I would hope is that one of the takeaways from this process is that every SDG think much more systematically about faith engagement, because all of the things that we've talked about in terms of faith influence and possibility of positive change applies to every single SDG. And faith-based organizations are working across the board in every SDG area already. And so I would hope that Blessing's leadership in choosing this topic for Room 5 this year will have a ripple effect around how the other Rooms go forward and around their sense of the practicality and indeed the priority of engaging faith as a strategy for change in the other SDG areas.

**OMAKWU:** I'll probably look at the cultural aspect. And I think, Zia, at the start of this conversation, you mentioned the fact that we often do policy and development like a science. And I hope that what we take away from this conversation is that at the end of the day, policy and development is about people, and we can't always tackle this as science. And I think across the SDGs, we need to begin to think about cultural norms—what is influencing how people think, what is influencing how people behave, what is shifting behavior? Faith is one huge piece of that. There are also other things like popular culture. And so I hope that across the SDGs, we begin to look at old issues in new ways and begin to bring in more types of people into the conversation. What I've learned from my work, both in the secular space and in the faith space, is that there is a need to listen to each other. I think that many times we are not having constructive conversations, but also I feel that many faith actors feel that they are instrumentalized across the SDGs, that people come to them when they need something, they come to them when they need to reach their population, and they use them whether it's with HIV work, whether it's with WASH work, whether it's with COVID, and then they leave and don't actually build authentic relationships. And so I hope that the way that we've built relationships here and we're continuing to build relationships we'll continue to do that across faith and secular spaces for the SDGs.

**KHAN:** This has been such a fascinating conversation, and I'm going to ask what I've learned is a very hard, and given the richness of this conversation, perhaps even unfair question—if there was the one thing that you would hope the listeners would take away from this conversation, the work you've been doing in 17 Rooms, what would that message be? Jean we could start with you and then Blessing.

**DUFF:** No fair, Blessing gets to think. Faith matters. Faith leadership matters for gender equality, and it's already hard at work making change, and it has the potential to drive even greater change going forward.

**OMAKWU:** And I'll quickly add to that. We cannot and we will not achieve SDG 5 without faith actors. It's not possible. There was a study that was done a while ago that showed that the influence of faith and religiosity in gender equality is equal to or higher than the number of women who are in parliament or the work force. And we've detailed this in the report from 17 Rooms, so you can see that data point there. But the one thing, we will not achieve SDG 5 without faith actors and the time to start engaging faith actors is now.

**MCARTHUR:** I think we have our marching orders, Zia, to carry this forward, and thank you so much, Blessing and Jean, for all you've done. Thanks for all the incredible people in your Room who have done so much in their life's work, but also in coming together, which is really the spirit of 17 Rooms, taking advantage of this neutral space to bring extraordinary people together to see how they can drive change within and across their own communities. So we are so grateful to you. What an amazing final interview for us, Zia. And SDG 5 is of paramount importance to all of us. But gender equality across Goals one through four and six through 17 is also of paramount importance to all of us. So we thank you for bringing the message to the entire 17 Rooms community.

**OMAKWU:** Thank you for having us.

**DUFF:** Thanks so much.

**MCARTHUR:** Zia, that was an energizing conversation. I don't want to be too trite, but is it weird to say it's renewed my faith in talking about faith?

**KHAN:** John, it's perfectly allowable to say that.

**MCARTHUR:** I'm actually quite intrigued to think more systematically about this, about how we engage faith actors as a broader ingredient for change across the SDGs. The idea of a heart-mind dialogue facilitating change is something that might spark innovation and new approaches across a bunch of fields. And, Zia, it's a super important topic that people like you and I, some people might describe us as having a more technocratic disposition, probably don't think enough about issues of faith, religion, and how they fit into broader policy change.

**KHAN:** John, I think you're on to something. What I see is the culture of those who work on the SDGs, we all tend to speak more to the head—the analytics, the goals, the data, the strategies, the plans. And I think many of us are starting to recognize that we also need to speak to the heart. The faith community knows how to do that. They can speak to the heart. They can create belief. They can motivate behaviors. And we just haven't been able to make that connection very strongly. And I think what Blessing and Jean have done in making that connection for gender equality is an opportunity that we can think about on a broader range of Rooms and on a broader range of topics.

**MCARTHUR:** To learn more go to [Brookings Dot Edu Slash 17 Rooms](#) podcast. This is the final Room interview episode of this first ever 17 Rooms podcast series. We want to thank all of our listeners for joining us on this journey. And in the next and final episode, Zia and I will be sharing some closing reflections on what we've learned, what we're taking away from these conversations, and what we think might come next.

I'm John McArthur.

**KHAN:** And I'm Zia Khan, and this has been 17 Rooms.

**MCARTHUR:** Our thanks go out to the guests you heard today, and also to the production team, including Fred Dews and Alexandra Bracken, producers; Jacob Taylor, associate producer; Gaston Reboredo, audio engineer, and Nicolette Kelly, audio intern. The show art was designed by Katie Merris. Additional support comes from Shrijana Khanal, Ian



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