

Re-conceptualizing Women and Girls' Economic Empowerment through a Feminist Spiritual Perspective

Feminist faith actors have a pivotal role to play in the economic and social development of their communities. Without recognizing and effectively partnering with feminist faith-based actors, the Sustainable Development Goals cannot be achieved by 2030.

The Faith and Feminism Working Group is a civil society led coalition, targeting the gender equality discourse at the United Nations. It is comprised of faith-based organizations, scholars, secular organizations and social justice groups working towards gender equality through the lens of faith and feminism.

We call upon diverse faith traditions to promote the fair and equitable treatment of women and girls, and eliminate gender-based discrimination and violence. Our resources, including feminist knowledge and spiritual and sacred texts, emphasize the sanctity and interconnectedness of all human life and ecological systems. Throughout the statement we have chosen the word “spiritual” to signify the individual’s experience of making meaning of the sacred, which includes but is not limited to participation in organized religious communities. We advocate for the use of spiritual wisdom to address not only the political, cultural and socio-economic categories that disempower women, but to offer a holistic “economy of life” in lieu of patriarchal economies centered on inequality, profits and resource depletion.

At present, the global economic system has left women and girls vulnerable and threatens their overall wellbeing. Confinement to rigid gender roles has often excluded them from decision-making and access to information in public and private spheres. Patriarchal religious discourses have promoted and supported this exclusion.

Yet studies of numerous faith communities reveal that women and girls use their faith to counter patriarchal norms and seek economic autonomy. Unfortunately, their efforts are often undermined by existing political, cultural and socio-economic systems sustained by patriarchal scriptural interpretations. Lack of access to education, discriminatory legislation on divorce and inheritance, and a labor culture that undermines unpaid domestic work continue to present major roadblocks.

The Faith and Feminism Working Group wishes to bring to the attention of the Commission the following questions to identify and share existing religious resources as well as challenge religious practices that undermine women’s contributions to vibrant economies:

1. How do we make visible existing egalitarian religious resources while strategically challenging interpretations of religion and religious texts that undermine women's diverse roles in the economic sphere?
2. How can Member States and United Nations agencies intentionally work with feminist faith-based communities to offer positive alternatives to the extremists' cooptation of religions? How will these alternatives challenge the capitalist, market-driven model of economics that marginalizes and commodifies women and girls?
3. How can Member States and United Nations agencies support the re-conceptualization of the nature and purpose of work and wealth through a positive spiritual vision?
4. How can we ensure that economic negotiations and trade agreements prioritize the economic empowerment of women and girls, including those who are among religious minorities?
5. How can we heighten awareness that economic inclusion and opportunities for women and girls are pivotal in preventing violent religious extremism?
6. How can we address and overcome religious practices that promote fundamentalist uses of sacred texts, and justify economic disempowerment of women and girls?

With these questions in mind, we urge the international community, Member States and United Nations agencies to take into account the following recommendations:

To the international community:

1. Support and partner with feminist faith leaders, theologians and faith-based organizations to challenge religious interpretations that undermine women's economic empowerment.
2. Encourage and partner with feminist faith leaders, theologians and faith-based organizations to strengthen the implementation of Agenda 2030 to realize the Sustainable Development Goals.

3. Encourage and support feminist women of faith in spiritual leadership and decision-making roles. Support efforts that challenge limiting gender stereotypes.
4. Support the participation of feminist women of faith at policy fora to share lessons learned, best practices and challenges in defying and countering socio-economic inequalities.

To United Nations agencies:

1. Develop “faith literacy” at the United Nations that makes visible existing faith-based resources that provide a basis for gender equality and justice.
2. Encourage the development of an interfaith committee to convene inclusive faith voices within United Nations spaces and explore strategies to counter violent religious extremism.
3. Strengthen collaborative efforts with feminist faith-based organizations, helping them hold state machinery accountable for religious fundamentalism which undermines the implementation of ratified human rights treaties and conventions.

To Member States:

1. Repeal discriminatory legislation and policies, especially those based on religious grounds, that deny women’s full and purposeful economic participation and benefit, access to education, decent employment, and adequate health care, including sexual and reproductive health.
2. Work with faith feminists to devise targeted policies and programs to implement Sustainable Development Goal 8 through a gendered perspective, to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
3. Work with faith feminists to devise targeted policies and programs to implement Target 5.4 of the Sustainable Development Goals, to recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate. These measures should further ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal and equitable

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access to opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

The Faith and Feminism Working Group recognizes that in order to advance these recommendations, effort will be required to replace the often confrontational dynamic between secular and faith based proponents of gender equality. It is vital to recognize that such tensions are often rooted in conceptions of culture and are driven by broader political agendas, geopolitical realities and in spaces where religion is instrumentalized and political fragilities are exploited.

This group recommends that the United Nations, Member States, the Commission, academics, advocates and civil society reflect and consult on the need for religious and secular actors to work together, to create a narrative that encompasses the ideals inherent in respective worldviews—a narrative that focuses on our common humanity, on justice and the establishment of a prosperous and peaceful world civilization for all.

Organizations signing on to this Statement

1. ADVANCE
2. ACT Alliance
3. Alexandra Small, Yale College, Class of 2018, Global Affairs and Ethics, Politics, and Economics
4. American Academy of Religion -Women's Caucus Steering Committee (AAR-WC).
5. Ayesha S. Chaudhry, Ph. D, Associate Professor of Islamic Studies and Gender Studies, University of British Columbia
6. Baha'i International Community
7. Bandana Rana, Saathi, Nepal – Strategic Director. UN CEDAW Committee Member (2017-2020). 1325 Action Group Coordinator
8. Carter Center
9. Christian Aid
10. Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches
11. Dr. Jackie Ogega, Mpanzi Empowering Women and Girls Inc.
12. IMA World Health
13. Karin D. Ryan, Senior Advisor for Human Rights, The Carter Center
14. Lutheran World Federation
15. Muslims for Progressive Values
16. National Alliance of Women's Organizations
17. Presbyterian Church (USA)
18. Shafferan Sonneveld, LL.M, B.A (Hons)
19. Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries
20. Soulforce
21. We will Speak out
22. World Association for Christian Communication
23. World Young Women's Christian Association