

MULTIFAITH ADVISORY
COUNCIL



MFAC

United Nations
Interagency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable
Development

Side by Side: Connecting Sacred Dialogue and Responses in Promoting Gender Equality and Human Rights



Summary

Across global forums, the advancement of gender equality and women's rights continues to face complex challenges, including differing interpretations of key concepts and emerging concerns about resistance to some gender-related frameworks. Despite commitments reaffirmed in the Beijing Declaration, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action, and other key international human rights frameworks, various actors have been expressing alternative perspectives on gender and related issues such as intersectionality, family, and bodily autonomy, which can pose challenges to achieving shared commitments grounded in human rights. The 2025 UN Women report, **"Women's Rights in Review 30 Years After Beijing,"** highlighted that while some gains have been made towards gender equality, gender discrimination remains deeply embedded in structures of economies and societies. The report states that in 2024 nearly a quarter of governments worldwide reported a backlash on gender equality, hindering the full implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.¹



¹ UN Women. (2025). Women's Rights in Review 30 Years After Beijing. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/03/womens-rights-in-review-30-years-after-beijing>



Faith-based organizations and leaders exercise deep influence in communities and thus play a vital role in advancing gender equality. At this time of profound challenges to gender equality, this advocacy brief is a valuable addition to the body of research needed to better understand the various manifestations of pushback and to help inform strategies to uphold women's and girls' rights.

This work also complements UN Women's Push Forward Strategy, by contributing to inclusive spaces for dialogue. Advancing gender equality is not only a human rights imperative - it is a shared moral and spiritual responsibility across cultures and traditions.

Now more than ever, we must draw upon the wisdom of our diverse faiths to build bridges and reaffirm commitments to gender equality.

Lopa Banerjee,
Director of Civil Society Division,
UN Women





UNFPA recognizes faith-based organizations and leaders as crucial partners in advancing gender equality, viewing it as a human rights imperative and a shared moral responsibility. The ICPD Programme of Action, Beijing Declaration, and SDG commitments align with values shared by many faith traditions like equality, compassion, justice, and respect for all individuals.

This advocacy brief, "Side by Side: Connecting Sacred Dialogue and Responses in Promoting Gender Equality and Human Rights," offers valuable insights and strategies for constructive responses to advancing gender equality and human rights. UNFPA believes that empowering women and girls and upholding their rights and choices not only strengthens families and societies, but is central to achieving sustainable development.

We must collectively draw upon diverse faiths and perspectives to build bridges and find common ground. UNFPA is committed to strengthening partnerships with faith-based organizations, encouraging interfaith and multifaith dialogue, and supporting initiatives that show how faith can positively contribute to advancing gender equality and human rights for all.

Ian McFarlane,
Director of External Relations, UNFPA

In this context, faith-based organizations (FBOs) and faith communities have a distinctive role to play in promoting shared values rooted in justice, compassion, human dignity, and equality. Through interfaith dialogue and collaborative action, faith actors are well positioned to contribute positively in advancing gender equality and addressing challenges.

This brief draws on research conducted by the Multi-Faith Advisory Council (MFAC) Gender Working Group. It aims to promote dialogue and strengthen partnerships between the UN and FBOs by sharing evidence and practical guidance on how faith can positively contribute to advancing gender equality. The MFAC was convened by the UN Inter-Agency Taskforce on Religion and Sustainable Development (IATF-Religion) in September 2018 as an informal and voluntary entity, currently composed of 36 UN system accredited faith-based partners, reflecting the diversity of religious expressions with representation from around the world.



Members of the MFAC Gender Working Group. 2025.

The purpose of this MFAC Gender Working Group advocacy brief is to showcase research analyzing statements and submissions by Member State, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society discourse during the **69th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69)** in order to equip key stakeholders including FBOs with insights, language, and strategies for constructive and values-driven responses. We encourage Member States and FBOs to join these efforts in building a compendium of positive faith-based practices that advance gender equality while respecting cultural and religious diversity.

Rationale: Why This Research Is Needed and Why Collective Faith-Based Advocacy Matters

The brief draws from comprehensive qualitative mapping of oral and written statements submitted to CSW69 by UN Member States and FBOs. The analysis highlights both affirming and regressive trends across the 12 Beijing areas of concern outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action. The findings revealed that while some FBOs promote progressive gender narratives, others expressed perspectives grounded in religious beliefs which question certain gender-related concepts like intersectionality and sexual and reproductive health and rights, often emphasizing family or cultural integrity concerns.

In today's increasingly polarized landscape and fragile global context, marked by a crisis of multilateralism, shrinking civic space and severe funding cuts to gender equality initiatives, faith communities have an important role in shaping dialogue and action. These global challenges affect the implementation of international commitments and call for inclusive, respectful engagement with diverse faith perspectives.



Kawther Alkholi speaking with representatives of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding at the UN CSW69 High-Level Multi-Faith Reception. March 2025.



POWER4Girls event during CSW69/Beijing+30. 2025. UN Photo/Mark Garten.

A view of the General Assembly Hall during the Town Hall Meeting with the UN Secretary General and Civil Society on the occasion of CSW69 /Beijing+30. 2025. UN Photo/Evan Schneider.



Faith-based actors bring a distinct and necessary voice to this landscape, grounded in community rootedness, moral authority and long-standing traditions of compassion and justice, positioning them as powerful agents of transformation. However, to maximize impact, a prerequisite is to involve faith-informed responses, ones that emerge authentically from within religious traditions, supported by mutual respect and theological reflection. Sacred dialogue offers a constructive framework for bridging divides and responding to backlash thoughtfully and collaboratively.

This brief is both a resource and a call: to strengthen multilateral efforts through values-based collaboration and shared commitments to human dignity, equality and justice. It encourages **reclaiming a collective prophetic voice**, one that resists distortion, affirms equality, and land promotes inclusion.

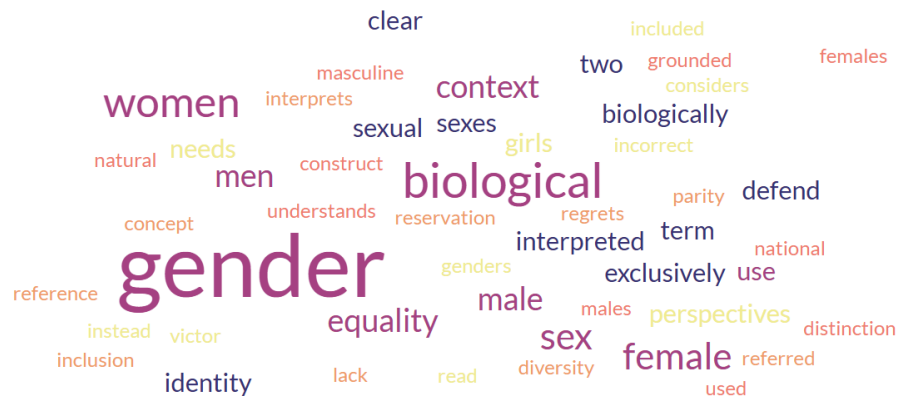


MFAC CSW69 Reception. 2025.

Key Research Findings and Faith-Based Responses

The sacred texts below are indicative examples offered through progressive interpretations within the respective faith traditions. Although historical and cultural contexts have led to diverse understandings over time, these readings foreground values of equality, justice, and mutual respect.

By drawing on these shared ethical foundations, faith actors can strengthen their role as advocates for gender equality, challenge discriminatory practices, and promote inclusive social change in their communities.



Word cloud built from CSW69 research examining pushback language in oral and written statements given by UN Member States and FBOs. 2025.

1. Defining Gender and Gender Equality

Pushback Narrative:

Gender is sometimes framed narrowly as a binary biological concept and equality between men and women. Some actors resist any reference to non-binary or trans identities.

Positive Sacred Text Example:

Indigenous and Two-Spirit Identities: Many Indigenous spiritual traditions have long recognized **Two-Spirit people**, those who embody both masculine and feminine spirits reflecting a sacred fluid understanding of gender connected to spiritual roles rather than biology.²



Collective Faith-Based Response:

Faith traditions call us to honor the sacred worth of every human being. Advancing gender equality is consistent with many spiritual teachings. In the face of organized resistance, faith communities seeking to roll back decades of progress, faith actors have the tools to showcase and affirm that gender equality is a sacred responsibility. Let us build respect. From coordinated campaigns rejecting the concept of gender as “ideology,” to the growing influence of Christian nationalism that frames gender justice as a threat to family, faith and sovereignty, the backlash is real, strategic and gaining ground. Let our communities be bold. Let us respond not only with theology, but with truth. Let us make it unmistakably clear that advancing gender equality is our sacred duty.

² Indian Health Service. (n.d.). Two-Spirit | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Health. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved June 27, 2025, from <https://www.ihs.gov/lgbt/twospirit/>

2. Intersectionality and Discrimination

Pushback Narrative:

Some question the concept of “intersectionality”, viewing it as complex or undermining rights-based approaches.



Positive Sacred Text Example:

Buddhist and Interconnectedness and Compassion for All: The concept of “interbeing” recognizes that **everyone’s identity and suffering are interconnected**. Compassion (Karuna) considers **the complex causes of suffering**, including social and structural issues that affect people differently based on their identities.³

Christianity and Jesus’ Ministry to the Marginalized: John 4:1-42 - Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well.⁴ Jesus speaks to a **Samaritan (ethnic outsider), a woman (gender), and someone socially marginalized (due to her marital history)**. He acknowledges her full humanity and engages her theology, breaking cultural, religious, and gender norms. This story demonstrates **intersectional awareness and compassion** by challenging multiple layers of exclusion.

Collective Faith-Based Response:

Our traditions teach us to love our neighbor and pursue justice without partiality. **Intersectionality means seeing more clearly and acting more justly**. Let us not only preach love, let us practice it inclusively, intersectional, and relentlessly.

³ True Dharma International. (2016). Compassion and service in Buddhism. In V. P. Nanda (Ed.), Compassion in the 4 Dharmic traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Prabhat Prakashan. Retrieved June 27, 2025, from <https://www.truedharma.org/writing/compassion-and-service-in-buddhism>

⁴ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version. (1989). John 4:1–42. Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA.

3. Promoting Women's Human Rights

Pushback Narrative:

Emphasis on women's rights is sometimes critiqued as competing "other priorities" such as religious freedom, traditional family structures, or national sovereignty.

Positive Sacred Text Example:



Islam and Women as Moral Agents and Social Leaders: **Qur'an 9:71** - "The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong..."⁵ **Qur'an 3:195** "I never fail to reward any worker among you for any work you do, be you male or female - you are equal to one another."⁶ When women are given full rights, as **partners in shaping society** through equal political, economic and social opportunities, they **strengthen families, communities, and moral justice**. Upholding women's rights to education, safety, and participation enables them to combat injustice, advocate for children, and build ethical societies.

Baha'i and Women's Rights as Essential to Justice and Peace: "The world of humanity has two wings-one is women and the other men. **Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly.**" - 'Abdu'l-Bahá, **Paris Talks, p. 133.**⁷ This metaphor is central in the Baha'i discourse on gender justice: progress is impossible without the full and equal participation of women.

Collective Faith-Based Response:

Defending women's human rights is a sacred responsibility. **When women (of all ages) rise, communities rise.** Faith can inspire a collective uplift. Let faith affirm equality in social contribution.

⁵ The Qur'an. (2004). In M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Trans.), *The Qur'an* (Surah 9:71). Oxford University Press.

⁶ The Qur'an. (2004). In M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Trans.), *The Qur'an* (3:195). Oxford University Press.

⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá. (1979). *Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911-1912* (10th ed., p. 133). Baha'i Publishing Trust.

4. Family Values and Motherhood

Pushback Narrative:

Some actors express concerns that international frameworks undermine motherhood and traditional family structures and roles.



Positive Sacred Text Example:

Judaism and Family as Justice in Action: Proverbs 31: 10-31 - Describes the multifaceted model of godly womanhood, balancing practical responsibility, business acumen, compassion, wisdom and spiritual depth. She is not passive or ornamental, but **a leader, mother, provider, and pillar of strength, honored in both her household and her community.**⁸

Collective Faith-Based Response:

Faith traditions affirm true family values that uplift and honor all members, recognizing the full humanity and multidimensional contributions and roles of women, not only as caregivers and nurturers, but also as leaders, economic providers, and agents of change. **Let our faith traditions be known not for what they restrict, but for what they restore:** dignity, agency, and equal opportunity. When we affirm both the reproductive and productive roles of women, we uphold families that are strong, inclusive, and just.

⁸ Jewish Publication Society. (1985). *The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS translation according to the traditional Hebrew text* (Proverbs 31:10-31). Jewish Publication Society.

5. Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

Pushback Narrative:

SRHR is sometimes associated with contested issues such as population control and abortion, conflicting with the “right to life.”

Positive Sacred Text Example:

Hinduism (Vedas and Upanishads): Hindu teachings support the woman’s autonomy over her body. Let a woman be the **controller of her own body**. -Atharva Veda 14.1.6⁹

Sikhism (Guru Granth Sahib): We are born of woman, we are conceived in the womb of woman...” Women are revered and honored in Sikhism; protecting their health and bodily integrity is essential to that respect. Promoting SRHR ensures women can make decisions as equals, in line with Sikh teachings on justice and dignity.

Collective Faith-Based Response:

Faith calls for care for the vulnerable and honor the sacredness of life. **SRHR is consistent with** protecting health, dignity and overall the soul of our communities.



⁹ Atharva Veda 14.1.6. (n.d.). In *Atharvaveda: Book 1: Hymn 14: A woman's incantation against a rival*. Sacred Texts Archive. Retrieved June 27, 2025, from <https://sacred-texts.com/hin/av/av01014.htm>

Call to Action



UN Member States

We encourage UN Member States to:

- **Affirm** gender equality as a universal human right and a value shared across diverse faith traditions drawing on commitments in the Beijing Platform for Action, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), ICPD and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- **Promote** positive narratives and sacred texts to support gender equality and counter misinformation as well as regressive narratives.
- **Strengthen** faith literacy through initiatives such as trainings within UN system entities, foreign ministries and international development agencies to enhance understanding and effective collaboration with religious actors.
- **Facilitate and fund** interfaith and cross-regional partnerships and initiatives that promote gender equality.

International, Regional and Sub-Regional Intergovernmental Organizations

We invite international, regional and sub-regional intergovernmental organizations to:

- **Engage** faith-based actors as strategic allies and uplift their voices in advancing gender equality through institutionalizing inclusive consultation mechanisms during global policy processes, as well as offering spaces and opportunities for dialogue and learning on increasingly important factors such as religious literacy. Provide capacity-building support for faith leaders to articulate rights-affirming interpretations rooted in their traditions.
- **Integrate** faith-informed gender equality strategies and approaches across programming, recognizing faith actors' influence on public discourse and rights-based outcomes.
- **Create spaces** for shared learning and theological reflection among progressive religious actors across contexts to amplify rights-affirming narratives.
- **Align** intergovernmental declarations with multi-faith support for human rights through encouraging regional intergovernmental bodies to issue joint statements or frameworks affirming the compatibility of gender justice and faith values.

Faith-based Actors, Religious Leaders, and Faith-based Organizations

We urge faith-based actors, religious leaders, and faith-based organizations to:

- **Affirm** that gender justice and women's rights align with sacred texts, moral teachings, and spiritual values.
- **Participate** in national and international forums to promote religious narratives supporting women's rights, bodily autonomy, and inclusion of all gender identities as expressions of divine justice and compassion, while providing theological responses and alternative interpretations that dismantle regressive rhetoric.
- **Resist** efforts to use religion as a tool of exclusion, shame, or silence and elevate the voices of women, young women and gender-diverse people within faith spaces.
- **Collaborate** across faith traditions and sectors to address the gender backlash with united messaging rooted in justice and peace, and joint initiatives such as submissions, and side events and public statements.

Broader Civil Society and Communities

We recommend broader civil society organizations to:

- **Recognize** faith-based organizations as stakeholders and co-creators of social change.
- **Collaborate** with faith actors to counter gender backlash through coordinated, values-aligned messaging that reclaim moral and spiritual frameworks.
- **Support** the visibility and leadership of faith actors and encourage partnerships with male religious leaders and communities to dismantle patriarchal norms collaboratively. Increase their reach through shared platforms for networking and partnerships for cost-sharing.
- **Bridge** divides between secular and religious approaches to rights and justice through offering facilitating dialogues and mutual learning spaces between secular feminist groups and faith-based organizations to explore common ground and co-develop strategies.



Looking Forward to a More Inclusive Future

**Join the Call #SidebySide4Equality
#Faith4GenderJustice**



Together, we can build a united future where every voice is heard, every faith respected, and every person valued. Let us walk in the footsteps of prophets, sages, and ancestors who stood for justice.

Let faith inspire inclusion, our voices to speak for dignity and our actions to drive stronger transformation together.



Be Part of this Journey

Connect with us to collaborate,
share ideas, or take action together.
Contact us at un.mfac@gmail.com.