

## *Policy & Practice Notes*



# Religious Actors for Gender Equality – SDG 5: A Reflection on the Side by Side Faith Movement for Gender Justice

## *Policy & Practice Note*

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### **Abstract**

The article reflects on the practical experience of the Side by Side Faith Movement for Gender Justice (SbS): faith actors often play a decisive role in the formation of values, concepts and beliefs that determine how women and men see themselves and each other and how they thus practise gender equality – or not. In both cases, faith actors are key partners in the transformation of ideas and practices towards achieving gender equality – SDG 5. SbS began in 2015 in response to a gradual dominance by restrictive faith actors' voices in the international debate on gender. Faith-based development agencies and local faith actors already involved in pro-gender-equality practice began building national chapters of SbS to mobilise, organise and strategise our work and have it reflected in international advocacy – including for a change of policy towards improved engagement with religious actors. The article presents this experience in the practical realm of “Community”, whilst the progress made in that realm can only be understood with its intimate link to the realm of “Cosmology”: it is because of what

we believe as faith actors that we do what we do. Therefore, interventions for change (Agenda 2030) must be rooted in people's values, convictions and beliefs if the change is to be sustainable.

## Keywords

religion – sustainable development – gender equality – FBOs – advocacy – policy

### 1 “This Cannot Be!” – Background and History of Side by Side<sup>1</sup>

“Gender justice for everybody, women and girls, men and boys.” This was the vision agreed on by a diverse set of religious leaders and faith-based development actors at the inception meeting of the Side by Side Faith Movement for Gender Justice (SbS) in London in March 2015. Half a year later, in September 2015, the world's political leaders followed suit when the 193 member states of the United Nations approved Agenda 2030 with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 5, which aims to “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.”

SbS is today a growing movement, including 49 member organisations and 14 national chapters. SbS is mobilising thousands of faith-based gender champions, who strive to build communities and societies free of gender inequality – and has established a track record of effective advocacy work at local, national and global levels.

In March 2015, the then CEO of Christian Aid, Loretta Minghella, contributed a rallying call to sister agencies and faith actors. Three messages from her talk kept resonating with me long after:

- In 2014, Minghella had participated in the annual UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). This is a huge gathering of UN member states and up to ten thousand civil society organisation (CSO) representatives who meet to assess and advance the rights of women and gender justice throughout the world. In this space she, like other faith-based actors, had been met

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1 After an introduction the article is structured around the two foci of the conference “Between Cosmology and Community” in Berlin, July 2019. See “Call for Papers”: “Cosmology refers to the ideological dimension, the impact of the formation of mind-sets, belief and knowledge systems, attitudes and behaviour on these processes of transformation. Community indicates active contributions by religious agents to processes of social, economic, ecological and cultural transformation.” Summarized here in ‘Faith Matters’ (*Cosmology*) and ‘Faith Works’ (*Community*).

- with suspicion by many, who perceived faith to be a barrier to achieving gender justice.
- During her participation in the 2014 CSW58 commission she came to understand why. In this setting, some expected a conservative, regressive stance on gender from a faith-based actor. That expected regressive stance was indeed the most vocal and outspoken faith voice at this global gathering. Often in an “unholy alliance” with very conservative political actors.
  - Lastly, her insistent plea to the participants that “this cannot be!”. We are united by our belief that each person is created equal in the image of God and has intrinsic value, dignity and holds equal rights; and we know through our partnerships and cooperation that an overwhelming body of faith-based gender champions toil daily to model and shape gender-just communities. Let us therefore mobilise and demonstrate – also through effective advocacy at all levels – that the genuine faith voice is one of passion for gender justice.<sup>2</sup>

Minghella’s message found a strong resonance in the inception meeting and our next step was to consult many more faith actors at regional and national levels. Out of that grew in the years to follow the Side by Side Faith Movement for Gender Justice (<http://sidebysidegender.org/>), with the global movement being officially launched at the CSW61 in March 2017. Following consultations, development agencies, faith communions and faith-based activist networks worked together with local faith actors already involved in pro-gender-equality practice and began building national chapters of SbS to mobilise, organise and strategise their work and have it reflected in international advocacy, for instance at the CSW, in PaRD and in the UN Women’s Beijing follow-up (see more under *Advocacy* below) to better reflect the faith-based pro-gender justice reality and to better include this important role of religious actors in policies and strategies for change (SDG 5).<sup>3</sup>

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- 2 SbS on gender justice: “*Gender justice is achieved when women and men, girls and boys have equal enjoyment of human rights, responsibilities, life prospects and opportunities, and the power and resources to shape their own lives and contribute to society, irrespective of gender or sex. Gender justice seeks to see all people free from cultural and interpersonal systems of privilege and oppression, and from violence and repression based on gender*” (Brabrant and Brown 2018, 3).
  - 3 In its presentation of the SbS Faith Movement for Gender Justice this article draws extensively on strategy papers, research reports and briefings developed in the first five years of SbS.

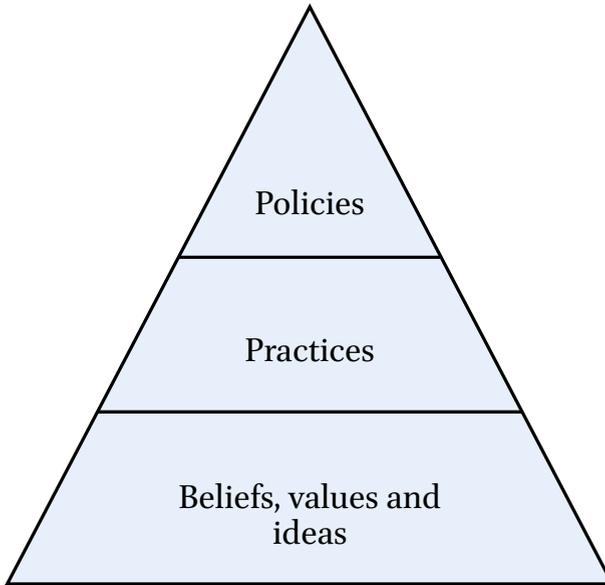


FIGURE 1 Pyramid of challenges and barriers to rights fulfilment

## 2 “... for You Are All One ...” – Faith Matters

“Eighty-four per cent of the world’s population self-identify as members of a faith group” (Hackett and McClendon, 2017). “Faith leaders play a key role in shaping people’s values, norms of acceptable behaviour, life roles and understanding of what constitutes ‘a good life’. For people of faith, this faith identity is core to the development of many of the laws, policies, programmes and relationships which shape and govern the societies in which we all live” (Brabrant and Brown 2018, 3).

This insight quoted from the SbS Advocacy Briefing captures what for decades has been overlooked in development theory and praxis but is now resurfacing as an increasing interest in the role of religion and religious actors in processes of societal change – the new discourse on religion and development.

The rights-based approach (RBA) is mainstream in most development work today, including faith-based development work. In the RBA, change is aimed for at different levels to overcome barriers to rights fulfilment (see the simple pyramid). Sometimes, development actors have engaged mainly with the two top levels of the pyramid (policies and practices) and may have overlooked the importance of engaging with the bottom level of ideas and beliefs – even though this bottom level is crucial for sustainable change. If, for example, the

aim of an intervention is to change the relationship between women and men towards a more equal gender relationship (SDG 5), then new effective policies and recognised practices will bring us a long way. But it is only when these policies and practices are owned by people that they bear real fruit. It is when men begin to see themselves differently and women internalise equality and believe in their equal role that the change becomes sustainable. For then it is rooted in – and supported by – what people believe to be right.

This was clearly demonstrated in a programme planning workshop with colleagues from Uganda where the question was raised, “Who is most influential in forming our ideas about men and women?” There was no doubt in the minds of the participants: the traditional and religious leaders in the villages and all the way up to the national level, through their religious messaging and organisation of the congregational life, are the single most influential element of shaping and challenging people’s understanding of gender justice (Thomsen 2017, 28).

So, religion can promote change as for most people their beliefs inform their ideas. But religion can also block change (as many religious institutions continue to do for women). However, the fact that religion is ambiguous just proves that it is important: it can be either conducive to development or block development, but it is never irrelevant for development if change is to be rooted, lasting and sustainable.

Side by Side interventions always start with consultation. In these conversations, leaders within faith actors (not necessarily ordained) reflect on their theological mandate to champion gender justice. We do not ignore that religion has been and can still be part of the problem, promoting patriarchal practices. We aim to address this in both national and international spaces. And returning to our scriptures and creating space for reflection is key. We need – and the people we invite need – to be part of the conversation, to own the change. We aim to meet people where we/they are.

The importance – and potential – of engaging with the normative narratives of religious communities in work for pro-gender justice change was strongly underlined in research that Side by Side through PaRD (see below) helped commission from the Joint Learning Initiative<sup>4</sup> and used at an official side event at the 2019 CSW63. The research “Religion, Development and GBV”<sup>5</sup> documents that

4 The Joint Learning Initiative is an international collaboration on evidence for faith groups’ role and contributions to local community health and well-being and ending poverty – see <https://jilflc.com/>.

5 GBV (gender-based violence) is a collective term for physical, emotional and structural violence (economic, harmful cultural and religious practices etc.) that is directed at an individual based on his or her biological sex or gender identity.

... a **scriptural/theological approach** has been shown to be particularly effective in working with religious leaders and communities. There is a number of reasons why this is a crucial way of engaging. First, sacred scripture is often inaccurately read and interpreted to justify gender inequality and GBV (Bridger & Sadgrove, 2019; Kaviti, 2015: 501; Sadiq, 2017). Re-reading and re-interpreting such scriptures are therefore important ways of addressing religion's role in facilitating GBV. Second, engaging with sacred scripture is an especially effective way of working with religious leaders, who are comfortable with it, see themselves as experts on it, and trust it. By using sacred scripture, one is engaging through a medium they trust and find authoritative. Third, as many religious leaders have had little theological education, such theological engagement increases their ability to read and interpret their sacred text. In the study on harmful practices, the four FBOs being studied all combined a public health and theological approach, finding it the most effective way of working with religious leaders on these sensitive issues (Le Roux & Bartelink 2017).

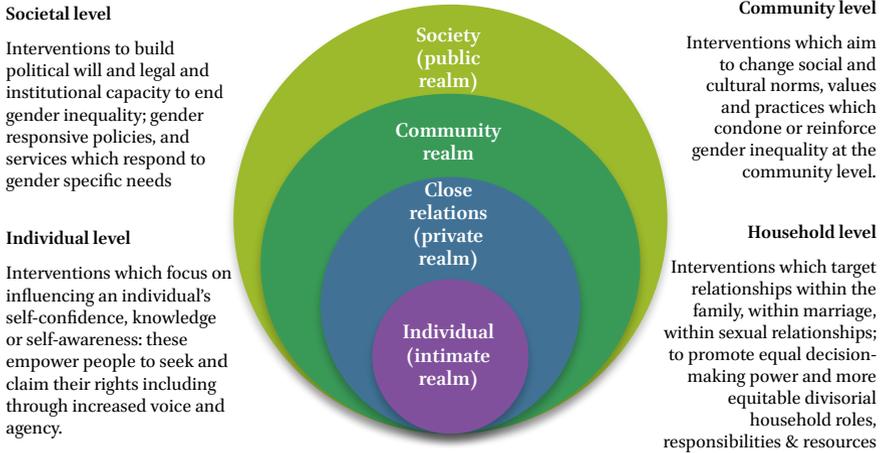
LE ROUX 2019, 13

The research also reminds us not to forget the other layers of the pyramid above. Working with the layers of religion, belief and conviction must go hand in hand with improvement of the structural framework of policies and practices: "... A person is influenced by more than just religion. If society, politics, and family, for example, continue to promote gender inequality and violence, reinterpretation of scripture is often not enough to lead to sustainable attitude and behavior change" (Le Roux 2019, 15).

Yet religion is decisive. And in a Christian context, for instance, it all starts with the understanding of the Christian community – the church – as the body of Christ in its historical and geographical context. In this community, in the church as the body of Christ, there is no male and female division or inequality: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). How can that be articulated and strived for?

### 3 Agents of Transformation – Faith Works

To challenge patriarchal structures of power and create an enabling environment for gender justice, interventions at multiple levels are required: societal, community, household and individual (see graphic below). Faith actors and communities "are present and have influence in each of these 'realms of



Source: DFID PPA Gender Learning Group Theory of Change. 2015.

FIGURE 2 The different realms of power

power' and can play a unique and far-reaching role in achieving and sustaining gender justice" (Side by Side 2015, 2).

*Realms of power in which gender issues are played out. Faith actors can make vital transformative and coordinated interventions in all realms of power:*<sup>6</sup>

The following sections will briefly present a few elements of the active contribution by religious actors in Side by Side to processes of transformation towards reduced gender inequality. "How does Side by Side act as an agent of change?" The listing may indicate a timeline or sequential order. But these elements appear in parallel and blended order.

### 3.1 *Mobilisation and Movement Building*

Many faith-based organisations (FBOs), interreligious councils, councils of churches and faith networks and communities, as well as individuals are already making encouraging progress towards gender justice. However, interventions could be stronger and have greater effect if better coordinated to make full use of this potential. The Side by Side movement is a response to this. We recognise that we will achieve far more for gender justice if we work together. Closer partnerships will more rapidly build on and strengthen existing efforts and lead to deeper, more extensive and sustainable transformation. This would be true even if we were seeing a gradual change for the better.

<sup>6</sup> The DFID quoted as source of the graphic is the UK Department for International Development (now replaced by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office).

UN Women assesses that at current rates it will take 50 years before there is gender parity in national parliaments and more than 100 years to reach overall gender equality.

Unfortunately, we are not just seeing a far too slow,<sup>7</sup> gradual change to the better. On the contrary. At the 2019 CSW63 the UN General Secretary António Guterres bluntly observed that: “Around the world, there is a pushback on women’s rights. That pushback is deep, pervasive and relentless ... We have a fight on our hands. And it is a fight we must win – together. So let us say it loud and clear: We will not give ground. We will push back against the pushback. And we will keep pushing” (Guterres 2019).

For Guterres, as for SbS, the key word is “together”: building a movement is therefore important. Growing a faith movement side by side builds energy. We are stronger, and can be bolder, when we know that we are not acting alone. History shows us that movements can challenge and change unjust structures – from the anti-slavery movement to #MeToo. Therefore, SbS intends to “develop a more focused and coordinated faith response across and within sectors, faith groups, and geographically, e.g., through helping to establish national and regional faith coalitions for gender justice, spaces for inter-faith dialogue and a global faith response to SDG gender targets” (Side by Side 2015, 4).

### 3.2 *Reflection on Faith Mandate*

As elaborated above, under “faith matters”, it is fundamental to draw on and revisit the normative faith narratives. Deepening and widening our understanding of the foundational scriptures of our religions allows for new insights. This potentially transformative and liberating hermeneutics is key to change in faith communities and therefore in what faith communities can contribute to achieving SDG 5.

Interpreting the meaning and consequences of the normative religious text is a key function in most religions – in some faith traditions reserved for a few,

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7 Still women are deprived of their economic, political, social and cultural rights. Extensive research in many fields shows this in painful detail: more women than men are hungry (only 1% of the world’s women own land (!) (2015) and yet they make up 50% of the agricultural workforce in developing countries). Women more often than men experience exploitation, discrimination and violence (women in full-time positions earn 70–90 per cent of their male colleagues’ salary; one in five women and girls reported experiencing physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner within a 12-month period). And women continue to be under-represented in decision-making processes, both where gender justice is openly ignored, and in institutions that claim to be democratic (globally 23% per cent of all national parliamentarians are women, 2016). In situations of conflict and social insecurity, women suffer most. (From PPT presentation by Senior Advisor Elsebeth Gravgaard, DanChurchAid, 2019.)

in others “democratised” to many. Interpretation is also a realm of power that needs to be shared to bring out the fullness of it and avoid corrupting it. As stated in the SbS Advocacy Briefing, “... female faith leaders are key to promoting gender justice within and outside faith institutions”. And later: “Female theologians can be influential actors in interpreting religious scriptures in a liberating way for women” (Brabrant and Brown 2018, 4). Plus, obviously implied: “... and for men.”

Therefore, in the SbS Theory of Change, one of the prioritised interventions pivots around scripture and theological training:

Through such means as supporting national symposiums and coalitions, build awareness, capacity and commitment among faith leaders to challenge and change damaging social norms and address social, political, religious and economic gender inequality issues in their communities **by promoting sacred texts that uphold gender justice**, through gender audits, **religious education and theological training**, and by **using faith-based resources** to advance gender justice in schools and communities.

*Side by Side 2015, 4 – my highlighting*

### 3.3 *Empowerment*

In order to engage with, and where needed to unlock, the potential of religious leaders for improved gender justice, it is important to support these leaders to act – internally in the faith communities and vis-à-vis the wider society. With the fight against GBV in focus le Roux concludes that:

It is important to engage and work with religious leaders in a way that **empowers** them and allows them to take on a “champion” identity. This means seeing them not as obstacles to ending GBV, but rather focusing on the potential role they can play in addressing violence and injustice (Le Roux & Bartelink, 2017; Le Roux & Palm, 2018). Effective interventions offer religious leaders the opportunity to embrace a positive identity (e.g. “encouraging positive fatherhood”, rather than “ending harmful practices”).

*LE ROUX 2019, 10 – my highlighting*

That empowerment includes support of different kinds – including building capacity and facilitating links with political institutions. SbS therefore aims to “support faith leaders and FBOs to engage collectively with government and regional and international policy fora, and the media, to seek laws, policies and services that recognise, prevent and respond to gender inequality” (Side by Side 2015, 4).

Where possible, we bring together diverse faith actors with government representatives, media and gender rights groups. For example, in the DRC, this required an investment of time, to enable gender rights groups (who initially identified faith actors as being part of the problem) to be part of the national coalition (Yoka Mbombo 2018; Brabrant 2019).

### 3.4 *Research/Evidence*

One of the challenges in unlocking the potential of faith actors in the fulfilment of SDG 5 (and of the wider UN Agenda 2030) that SbS has identified is the short-sightedness, if not occasional blindness, of many traditional development actors: “Governments and development actors have been slow to enrol faith actors consistently and support their potential to become key actors in achieving gender justice” (Side by Side 2015, 4). This is rapidly changing. And recognition of this often-overlooked potential – and of the need to engage – was for instance evidenced at the 2019 CSW63 official side event “Unlocking the power of faith-based partnerships: Enabling the right to social protection”. This event was jointly organised by SbS and here one of the governmental co-sponsors, H.E. the Danish Ambassador to the UN, Martin Bille Hermann, acknowledged in his opening remarks that:

At its best religious and cultural norms can be a powerful vehicle for development, for progress and for positive change. But it can also be a powerful adversary holding back, locking societies and family structures. But if we want to change this, we need to engage.<sup>8</sup>

To help open the eyes of traditional development actors to the potential of faith actors in change towards gender justice, SbS will prioritise to “build an evidence base for the efficacy of faith institutions in addressing social, political and economic gender justice issues and convene joint faith-secular spaces to advance gender justice” (Side by Side 2015, 3).

### 3.5 *Advocacy*

Advocacy at all levels is a key element in SbS’s understanding of how to contribute to gender justice. Our advocacy briefing explains it in the following way:

Political, economic, religious, educational, cultural, judicial, and administrative structures can create and reinforce gender inequalities. **Gender advocacy** is understood as the *challenging and changing of these structures and systems that privilege one gender and marginalize another, through the*

<sup>8</sup> As recorded by a note-taking participant.

*influencing of the policies and practices of the powerful. At its core, advocacy is about transformation and justice.* Faith leaders can speak with a unique moral authority and credibility and represent often very large numbers of people. At community and congregation level, where they have a permanent presence, and often at national and even international levels as well, they hold respected positions; they are listened to. They have many opportunities to teach and influence their congregations, including through their sermons, and reach into their wider communities.

BRABRANT AND BROWN 2018, 4 – *my highlighting*

Working at the local and national level, SbS analyses *the local context* and listens to what is already happening in the country to understand the country-specific barriers to gender justice. This involves consultations and analysis to understand each other's perspectives, as well as the structures (political, legal, religious, social) that are allowing and enabling gender injustice. This local, contextual rootedness of advocacy is central:

We support and promote local ownership, we are not a prescriptive movement, and our national coalitions focus on different areas of work (for example, Kenya advocating on the 2/3 Gender Rule, joint advocacy in Uganda on the Marriage Bill, and a collective statement in Malawi against the political violence experienced by women).

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The challenges, experiences and evidence from the local and national advocacy are then taken to the international level – loyal to the initial experience that Loretta Minghella had at the 2014 CSW58, where the pro-gender justice faith perspective seemed to be squeezed out and replaced by a regressive faith voice. At subsequent CSW commissions, SbS has represented a progressive faith voice and perspective in advocating for a change of policy that would better engage with the important role of religious actors – through official side events and additional parallel events, through local SbS chapters' conversations with their governments' delegations to CSW before, during and after the CSWs and in some instances through official participation in the official delegations. This has contributed to some progress (and prevented some regress). One of the notable advances was at the 2018 CSW62, where the governments in the "Agreed Conclusions" § 46 for the first time included a positive reference to the role of faith-based organisations (UN Women 2018).

Another important space for SbS's international advocacy is the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD). PaRD is a tri-party platform of governments, intergovernmental structures and CSOs/

FBOs<sup>9</sup> for policy engagement, learning and cooperation and a partnership for change. Change that is rooted in people's beliefs and convictions and therefore is lasting, i.e. sustainable change. SbS is a member of PaRD and co-chairs PaRD's workstream on gender equality and empowerment SDG 5 – one of PaRD's three work streams: on SDG 3 Health, SDG 5 Gender and SDG 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. The key question in PaRD is this: how can religious actors be better included in development work to achieve the SDG s?

### 3.6 *Challenges and Sustainability*

The SbS experience has been a substantial contribution to the religion and development discourse. But challenges remain, also for SbS: whilst inter-religious cooperation is widespread in local SbS chapters, the vast majority of global SbS members are still of Christian background. More women than men engage in the SbS governance structure. And whilst the impact of SbS on advocacy and policy agendas is notable, it is obviously still incremental. However, while development actors may come and go, faith actors tend to be sustained voices within our communities across the globe. Therefore, investing, supporting and building the capacity of faith actors, who often occupy respected positions within political and social spaces, is a strong and necessary catalyst for transformational change. Engagement with religious actors will thus serve to amplify messages for gender equality.

## 4 Conclusion

Members of the SbS movement are affirmed by the working experience over the last five years that if we

- create greater awareness of the faith and development nexus for gender justice
  - mobilise and support a more coordinated, capacitated and collaborative faith movement for gender justice
  - ensure that government and development actors increasingly recognise and support faith actors as key actors in achieving gender justice outcomes
- then we will accelerate the transformation of damaging gendered social norms, significantly reduce gender inequality, and assist in delivering the SDG s.

9 PaRD brings together eight ministries of development or foreign affairs, seven intergovernmental structures from KAICIID to the World Bank and African Union with seven additional UN organisations in an Advisory Council, and 128 CSOs/FBO s of every background and size, from big global alliances to smaller, national entities.

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