

ACT ALLIANCE TOGETHER
FOR GENDER JUSTICE

STORIES OF CHANGE



Together for Gender Justice

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#FaithChangeMa

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STRATEGIC
FORUM
PROJECTS

5

COMMUNITIES OF
PRACTICE

250+

FAITH ACTORS
PARTICIPATED IN
COLLECTIVE
UN ADVOCACY

97+

MEMBERS WITH
GENDER JUSTICE
POLICIES

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TOGETHER FOR GENDER JUSTICE

We, the ACT Alliance, are the world's largest ecumenical coalition engaged in humanitarian, development and advocacy work. Our more than 150 members in over 125 countries work in a coordinated and effective way for rights-based and sustainable development.

We are called to work 'together for justice', which includes ensuring gender justice, in our local communities, countries, regions and globally. Human dignity is a foundation to human rights. Religious values are, at their core, about the values of dignity, justice, compassion and love, and we commit to act out of those values, both within and beyond the ACT Alliance.

We recognise our uniquely influential role as faith leaders and churches in collective struggles for gender justice. We can be powerful changemakers in transforming patriarchal attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, towards advancing gender justice. Religious and cultural practices are influenced, developed and motivated by our social, economic and political contexts. We recognise the importance of revisiting scriptures to affirm our values of love, dignity, and justice, while also investing in inter-faith and feminist dialogues.

As an alliance, we celebrate the progress made towards achieving gender justice. The locally led work of ACT Forums and Communities of Practices, who have worked together to mobilise interconnected movements for gender justice. ACT members are also not shying away to engage in dialogue on issues perceived as 'taboo', and protecting women human rights defenders, including people of faith, who are attacked and intentionally silenced, for speaking out for gender justice.

We hope you enjoy reading our stories of change and are inspired to join us on the road to equality.

In solidarity,

Gender Justice Programme

GLOBAL GENDER JUSTICE PROGRAMME

our story

The Gender Justice Programme contributes transformative faith-based methodologies and strengthens collective voice for gender justice, bringing together faith and human rights. From the Solomon Islands to El Salvador, and from Serbia to Zimbabwe, ACT Alliance members are strengthening collective action to address the root causes of gender inequalities, including transforming social norms, and are catalysts for change nationally, regionally, and globally.

An external evaluation of the first phase of the programme (between 2019 – 2024) by Samuel Hall found the programme to be of 'high importance' in today's context of backlashes against gender equality and women's rights, with shrinking civic space and rising fundamentalisms. The programme successfully leverages the narrative of transformative faith actors, whilst also strategically enabling diverse actors across the spectrum of faith leaders, secular feminist organisations, churches and policymakers, to advance gender justice.

Gender justice and feminist principles are embedded in the programme's methodologies, emphasising solidarity; decentralised knowledge(s) and power; and co-leadership. This includes dynamic learning spaces, which affirm collective knowledge building.

Prophetic Voice: As a faith-based alliance, we foster collective agency to speak truth to power, termed 'prophetic voice'. This is essential to counter backlashes against gender justice, address root causes of poverty and injustice, and hold authorities and decision-makers accountable for the realisation of gender equality. We advocate for changing discriminatory and harmful gender norms, laws, policies, and practices on national, regional and global levels.

Strategic Accompaniment: Accompaniment has strong roots in both faith and feminist movements, drawing on theological notions of solidarity, liberation and justice. The method is based on mutuality, agency, shared listening and collaboration to amplify the impact of faith actors, who are co-creating innovative and locally rooted paths to achieve gender equality.

Gender Mainstreaming: A gender and power lens is being integrated into ACT Alliance structures and programmes (humanitarian response, climate justice, migration and displacement, peace and human security), to address power imbalances that restrict the voice and agency of marginalised genders and to develop gender-transformative approaches.

METHODOLOGIES

Conversatorios: A methodology for creating a safe space for conversation to engage in continuous dialogue with diverse actors on various and often difficult topics. In times of increasing backlashes and polarisation, dialogue with people of different backgrounds, understandings and opinions can be transformative to defend human rights and advance gender justice.





**ACT GENDER JUSTICE
COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE
DRIVEN CHANGE**

ASIA-PACIFIC

our story



Cultural norms, religious beliefs, traditional practices, and existing systems in institutions that support patriarchy are the main drivers of gender injustice in the Asia-Pacific region. Harmful perceptions and practices around masculinity and domination of heterosexual orientation in society rooted on patriarchy continue to oppress women and girls. Extreme poverty has pushed many women and girls to migrate to cities where they experience and are more exposed to GBV. Whilst laws are in place in many countries in the region, there is poor implementation of these laws. Women's voices are not heard and their representation and participation in decision making at different levels in institutions such as governments, private sector and Churches are still lacking.

As the Asia-Pacific Gender Justice Community of Practice, to address our context, we identified the need to coordinate, and to build momentum in the region for gender justice, including to educate, inspire, share learnings, and collaborate between members. As a result of the Asia-Pacific Gender Justice Community of Practice, we have begun to build trust and stronger relationships between members at a regional level for gender justice. We have invested in this being a participatory space, for members to shape and collaborate. Yet, there are challenges that we must also acknowledge regarding different time zones, languages, and cultural differences, and the limited available time that members must contribute alongside demanding roles in their organisations.

Our first focus was strengthening the capacity of members within the region to design, or revise gender justice policies that are specific to their context. These involved trainings being designed and facilitated by consultants in the region and creating space for members to share their experiences of advocating for gender justice within their institutions. Members faced challenges with limited human resources, leadership not prioritising gender, and a lack of technical capacity in the organisation to carry forward plans. We positioned our community of practice as a catalyst for change. We do this by working and moving forward together.

We created a space to exchange learnings and members can share/extend their work/research done in a useful way across the region, which creates deeper understandings, and members' gain inspiration. We have also built trust between one another for joint advocacy, and targeted initiatives, for example, recently launching the 'Asia-Pacific Women in Leadership Academy'.

LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

our story



We are a Latin American and Caribbean feminist articulation space made up of women from churches and faith-based organisations of the ACT Alliance. We influence our own organisations, and members within ACT, and beyond them, by sharing good practices, generating knowledge and positioning voices of faith with a human rights perspective in local and global spaces for the promotion of equality of women, girls and gender diverse people.

We act together to achieve gender justice, generate change, and improve the lives of girls, women and gender diverse people. We are rooted in our context, and we not only want to have the capacity to respond, but also to propose in the face of the advancement of fundamentalisms in our region. We work collectively to advocate for the positioning of the economic, social, political, cultural and environmental rights of women and gender diverse people, from a perspective of faith, at a regional level.

We have three priority areas for our advocacy: Gender-based Violence, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, and Women's Economic Empowerment. We promote regular campaigns that are distributed in the channels of each member organisations, and further amplified on social media. For example, we have adapted campaigns, such as the 'Red Bench', and created campaigns, such as 'We pray, but we also denounce', to mobilise faith communities to end GBV. We have also collaborated in position statements from the region on gender justice. Our regional advocacy has been further amplified at a global level, with representation from the region in the UN Commission on the Status of Women, and the UN Commission on Population and Development.

Producing and systematising knowledge is important to our collective work, in 2020, this included creating 'the School of Advocacy for Gender Justice'. In recent years, we have mapped our resources and capacities, including the experiences of overcoming Gender-based Violence, and engaged in virtual dialogues and webinars. Theological arguments have also been developed and we have been able to create dialogue on faith, human rights, and gender justice, including with feminist organisations. We have also been able to create a common understanding of the impact of fundamentalisms and the impact on women in our region. Importantly, we have achieved commitment from members and ACT Forums to the regional gender justice community of practice mission and vision.

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

our story



Ongoing conflict in our region has dramatically escalated gender-based violence (GBV), especially targeting women and girls. In the Gaza Strip, mass displacement and overcrowded shelters expose women and children to heightened risks of exploitation, abuse, and violence. Similarly, in Lebanon, the regional conflicts have led to an increase in domestic violence, harassment, and lack of access to essential services for vulnerable populations. The crisis, exacerbated by destroyed infrastructure and disrupted services, leaves women and girls without safe spaces, access to healthcare, or psychosocial support, intensifying intersecting vulnerabilities.

Our story of the MENA Gender Justice Community of Practice focuses on our collaborative action to address priority concerns in the region. This has included virtual and in-person workshops to share and strengthen capacity on gender policies, transformative masculinities, and gender-transformative leadership. We have also rooted our advocacy in our regional context with climate and gender justice advocacy at COP27, where we amplified our voices that climate justice demands gender justice. Members in the Middle East been working for reform family laws and have conducted a series of studies in Palestine and Lebanon. At a regional level, we have been able to collaborate with theologians and local partners, to provide evidence for collective advocacy for legal reform efforts that address gender inequality in family law systems and creating spaces for interfaith dialogues on gender justice.

One of our most popular initiatives in the Middle East was the Red Scarf campaign created during the 16 Days of Activism, which involved each national form photographing a woman with a red scarf – this became a powerful visual and advocacy strategy to highlight the interconnections between the different contexts where we are working. The campaign also included red bags, produced by a women's economic empowerment project in Jordan, which displayed the images, and acted as a symbol to provoke conversations on GBV.

AFRICA

our story



There is growing recognition that faith actors are critical stakeholders in achieving gender justice, and in the Africa region we are mobilising to address discriminatory laws, transform social norms, and dismantle patriarchal structures, within our faith communities and wider societies. As a faith and rights-based alliance, ACT Alliance is committed to achieving a world free from violence and oppression, which requires fundamental shifts in power-relations, including promoting feminist narratives and decolonial praxis.

Gender injustice is deep-rooted in social norms, expressed through harmful traditional practices, forms of gender inequality and gender-based violence among others. For example, in the Africa region, there are high rates of early child marriages, female genital mutilation, and high inequality. At the backdrop of the Africa Gender Justice Community of Practice was the call from members to contribute and influence more at the regional level, where strategic decisions are drafted, negotiated, and implemented.

Through our regional Gender Justice Community of Practice, ACT members in Africa share experiences, learn from each other, contextualise, and set priorities. We are also beginning to drive joint strategic advocacy and campaigns at local, national, regional, and international levels. Faith actors perceived limited engagement and lack of unified voices and action have attracted references such as being 'Sleeping Giants', which some faith leaders have attributed to limited knowledge and skills on gender justice.

We are waking up the 'sleeping giants' in our region by working together for gender justice. Our journey so far has included virtual and in-person workshops, where we have focused on peer-to-peer capacity trainings on priority issues, including Transformative Masculinities, and Safety and Security of Prophetic Voices. We have also collaborated in GBV campaigns, including 16 Days of Activism, where we have amplified our voices, and collectively participated in the Inter-Religious Faith Changemakers Convention in December 2023.

We are committed to achieving gender justice as a common value that is essential for human development.



ACT FORUM DRIVEN CHANGE





BRAZIL Gender justice in the face of fundamentalisms

The ACT Brazil Ecumenical Forum in 2022 – 2023, implemented a collaboration on gender justice in the face of fundamentalisms. The project enabled an exchange of experiences of overcoming violence between women, children, people with disabilities, LGBTQI+, and older people. Violence is part of the daily lives of women, and churches and faith based organisations cannot close their eyes before her. This violence is a violation of human rights, affects families and communities, and harms sustainable development. Religious violence is also part of the context, deepening and perpetuating the cycle of violence. Hate speech is being articulated, in the Christian case, based on biblical citations, which are taken out of context, to justify situations of violence, especially domestic and family. It is urgent to transform this reality.

If we want to break with this form of biblical interpretation, we bring to light not only the data, but also the stories of women, who are cruelly erased. They are lives that have been dehumanised by hate speech, which arise from a patriarchal, sexist, and fundamentalist society. There are men prepared, with a stone in his hands, to throw it, at the slightest sign of autonomy and decision by women. Our collective work has made visible the issue of gender-based violence; to discuss it in our faith communities. We make campaigns and take to the streets to promote dialogue and strengthen support networks for women.

For example, during the 16 days of activism for the end of violence against women, together with the Latin America and the Caribbean Gender Justice Community of Practice, we facilitated an exchange of methodologies in 2022. It is important to highlight that in Brazil we work with 21 days of activism. We start the actions on 20th November, Black Consciousness Day, in which we reflect and act against gendered and racist violence. The exchange took place for two days, separated by a week, and a cycle was generated, entitled 'Sharing practical experiences of overcoming gender violence'. It is vital that we do not reinforce the culture of rape and hatred, accepting violence as something natural or normalizing it in the life of women, or to see it only as the subject of women.

As a result of the exchange cycle, and the systematisation of material, commitment to achieve gender justice were made; to transform realities of suffering into community action and hope, and to promote the right to a life free of violence.



ARGENTINA

Faith-based narratives for a life free of violence

The ACT Argentina Forum's project 'Nos Contamos' strengthened gender justice and rights-based narratives within local churches. Using different communication platforms, feminist theologies contributed to dismantling fundamentalist discourses, which fuel push backs on human rights and gender equality. The collaboration successfully created spaces for critical reflection on hegemonic gender roles and to develop methodologies to transform masculinities, in the gospels, and life of Jesus. Faith communities worked together to cocreate narratives that affirm language promoting human rights and gender equality, which included SRHR, freedom and dignity. To develop intergenerational dialogue and debates, transmedia platforms were used. These helped to renew attention to the history of the struggle for women's rights and gender justice in light of the current context.

To ensure comprehensive health services for women and girls, and social protection that puts the rights of women and girls at the centre, we created content, which resides across multiple platforms to mobilise faith communities to advocate for greater financial investment from the State. This included advocating for and contributing to the implementation of Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE). Since 2006, this is mandatory across the curriculum in Argentina but continues to face resistance. To address the resistance to CSE, the project included holding various interactive spaces for faith actors to explore CSE in relation to the Bible.

A gospel passage was used as a basis for intergenerational dialogue on reproductive justice. ACT Argentina member, Hora de Obrar Foundation, launched virtual training in partnership with the Ecumenical Network for Theological Education. Resources for various ministries of the church, in particular, those closest to families and communities, were engaged in the programme. While the project was able to mobilise faith communities to affirm human rights and gender justice, there are still sensitivities to overcome in such work. Increasing polarisation in political, religious, and social levels is resulting in fundamentalist discourse that publicly challenges gender equality. This generates resistance to the implementation of related laws and policies.

The use of language and construction of narratives require contextualisation and careful consideration. In this project, we did not attempt to engage in debates with messages of hate which are often legitimised with religious discourse. 'Nos Contamos', publishing across different platforms, intuitively leads audiences to conceptualise the synergies and fill gaps, building resonance and engagement with their daily lives. It also focused on addressing gender inequalities and healing painful lived experiences, which are encountered in churches.

Often younger people of the churches raised their voices and brought the issue onto the agenda. This raises the final challenge the project has sought to address: generating reflections and discussions on intergenerational relations and how to accompany parents raising children with the new context they live in. An important element of the project was to make the commitment to gender justice, countering fundamentalist discourse and eradicate all forms of gender-based violence visible.

By working with faith communities and faith-based partners, the project generated a public voice, rooted in the churches. By ensuring each community could adapt materials according to their contexts, this enabled the participation of a greater number of different faith communities. By amplifying a collective transformative faith voice, the project also connected with secular feminist organisations and strengthened dialogue and collaboration. This was further amplified through advocacy by ACT members in UN advocacy spaces, such as the UN Commission on Population and Development.

ETHIOPIA

Theological reflections and advocacy for gender equality

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) is one of the largest and oldest Christian churches, tracing its roots back to the 4th century. Over 50% of the Ethiopian population claim membership to the EOC. The church has played a major role in influencing and shaping the country's social, cultural, and religious landscape. However, despite the centrality of the EOC in Ethiopian society, there were long-standing misconceptions and controversies surrounding the church's stance on gender justice and gender-based violence (GBV). Several harmful traditional practices, such as female genital cutting, were wrongfully perceived as being rooted in religious teachings, when in fact they were deeply entrenched cultural practices not endorsed by the EOC.

There was a need to address this disconnect between the teachings of the church and the prevailing societal norms. EOC-DICAC in collaboration with Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) and the ACT Ethiopia Forum, set out on a transformative initiative that was designed to develop a robust theological reflection on gender justice and GBV from the perspective of the EOC, and to then disseminate and advocate for these teachings within the church and the broader community. The initial step was securing the highest-level support and endorsement from the EOC's leadership. The theological reflections were blessed by the Patriarch of the EOC, and the Holy Synod. This bestowed upon them legitimacy and facilitated their way for their integration as official teaching methodologies within the church. By leveraging the well-structured hierarchical organisation of the EOC, the theological reflections were able to cascade down and disseminate from the Holy Synod to the dioceses and local parish priests to household through father of repentance.

The project included national advocacy workshops, which utilised the influence of religious leaders to positively shape societal discourses. These workshops brought together the church's administrative and leadership personnel as well as academics, theologians, and theology students, fostering a comprehensive understanding and adoption of the gender justice and GBV-related teachings. The faith-based methodologies employed throughout the initiative were crucial in ensuring the relevance, credibility, and far-reaching impact of the endeavour.

The impact of this initiative has been multi-faceted and far-reaching. This has included fostering a greater alignment between the church's doctrines and the lived experiences of the community. Religious leaders and faith communities are now empowered to take a proactive stance in advocating for gender equality and gender-based violence prevention. The theological reflections are a critical tool for them to challenge harmful practices. Gender justice has now been integrated into theological education systems, which has laid the groundwork for sustained systemic change. By ensuring that the next generation of religious leaders and theologians are well-versed in these critical issues. The church is also witnessing cultural changes, where deeply entrenched patriarchal norms are being challenged, and women are being empowered to advocate for their rights.





PANZ + PARTNERS Churches Promoting Healthy, Safe and Just Communities

Anglican Church of Melanesia (ACOM) in partnership with the Mothers' Union, have been championing gender justice in the Solomon Islands over the long term. Gender inequality, combined with high rates of gender-based violence, contributes to deeply entrenched barriers to change. Around two-thirds of women aged 15–49 report experiencing physical/sexual violence from an intimate partner. The ACT PANZ Forum project, implemented in collaboration with partners, has created avenues to engage with faith and traditional leaders using theological frameworks, and equipped women with leadership skills and confidence to deeply analyse context and experiences of women, girls, and people with disabilities.

This dual engagement has enabled strategic advocacy and awareness raising opportunities within villages, churches, government ministries (e.g. Ministry of Women and Youth and Children's Affairs) and coordination bodies that include other NGOs such as the National Protection Cluster and SafeNet – which support referral and coordination of sexual and gender-based violence services.

ACOM equips male church and traditional leaders, engaging deeply together around issues of gender equality, facilitating open conversations that value faith and culture, delve into theology, while also uncovering, questioning, and re-imagining unjust social norms at a personal and broader church level using biblical frameworks.

In 2021, the Mothers' Union in partnership with ACOM formed a Gender Justice Taskforce in Ysabel Province. The project trained women taskforce members, through mentoring and building leadership competencies, skills, and confidence to plan and work collectively for social change. A key part of engaging with their communities was in conducting a Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion Analysis. Consultation with male diocesan leaders' and working through the well-established church hierarchy was an important strategy, securing necessary permissions, addressing their concerns, and honouring their responsibilities to 'bring safety, peace and justice' for all people. This approach opened new scope for ongoing conversations with leaders and in the communities about gender and social inclusion.

A week-long training equipped task force members to undertake individual and focus group discussions. This opened conversations with 1,487 people from 18 villages (the final report drew on the views of 403 respondents) to understand experiences, behaviours, beliefs, and power dynamics. For example, the need for ongoing awareness raising is supported by findings that 85% of respondents identified reasons they believed to justify a man harming or abusing his wife or partner. Lessons learnt touched on how to manage the large volume of data and ensure data quality, used when replicating the process in Malaita in 2023.

The ACOM team found that the process deepened task force members' understanding of gender justice issues in villages, helped identify priority issues to address, and built confidence to work in partnership with men for change. It raised the profile of concerns faced by people with disabilities, for example around safety and abuse. Women leaders are now speaking out and discussing issues with Chief and church leaders and jointly developing solutions, such as ensuring community/church events do not end too late in the evening creating safety concerns for women and girls as they return home. The task force remains active, continuing community activities and connected with the Anglican Church of Melanesia in championing a vibrant movement for changes.



SIERRA LEONE

Tools to transform masculinities

Sheik Musa lives in the heart of the busy fishing town of Tombo, in the Western Rural District in Sierra Leone. Sheik Musa is a respected community leader and had long been aware of the pervasive influence of harmful traditional practices, and the violence against women, in his community. Yet, it was not until he participated in a positive masculinities project that he found the tools to truly effect change. The ACT Sierra Leone Forum, working with community leaders, collaborated on a project that aimed to challenge entrenched gender norms and foster a culture of respect and equality.

New knowledge was shared and gained, in different sessions and the Positive Masculinity Manual, which equipped participants with the tools to transform harmful social norms. Sheik Musa shared how the project initiated a conscious change in his mindset about gender and gender relations. He reflected on how this was challenging, he was raised in a society where patriarchal and religious values were deeply ingrained. Sheik Musa had always been hesitant to question the status quo. However, as he delved deeper into the curriculum, he found himself confronted with uncomfortable truths about the impact of gender inequalities on his community.

With a new mindset, Sheik Musa became a vocal advocate for change in his congregation and community. He used his platform, like many other religious leaders, to challenge harmful practices and promote gender equality. He delivered sermons on the importance of respecting women's rights and spoke out against violence in all its forms. Sheik Musa also engaged with community members in open dialogue, encouraging them to question their own beliefs and attitudes towards gender roles. He worked with local organisations to implement initiatives aimed at empowering women and girls, from providing access to education and healthcare to promoting economic opportunities.

And slowly but surely, Sheik Musa's efforts began to bear fruit. Instances of gender-based violence began to decline, replaced by a growing sense of respect and equality. Women felt empowered to assert their rights, while men embraced their role as allies in the fight for gender justice. Today, as Sheik Musa looks out over his community, he sees a brighter future on the horizon. Where once there was ignorance and oppression, there is now understanding and hope. And it's all thanks to the transformative power of education and the unwavering commitment of leaders, like Sheik Musa, to build a more just and equitable world for all.



UGANDA

Interfaith Action for Gender Justice and Economic Empowerment

The Church of Uganda, as a member of the ACT Uganda Forum, implemented an interfaith project in the Kumi District in Uganda, which has brought about significant positive changes. Through various church and faith structures, the project has empowered women economically, enabling them to participate in income-generating activities and business ventures. Women gained financial independence but also enhanced their roles in family decision-making processes. The project also contributed to reducing gender-based violence.

The Kumi District, like many parts of Uganda, experiences a high prevalence of Gender Based Violence, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violations. The ACT Uganda Forum project leverages the influence of faith leaders and community structures to address these issues of gender-based violence. Faith leaders and community activists participated in training programmes, which aim to prevent and respond to gender-based violence through using their platforms to challenge toxic cultural practices. Faith leaders have played a crucial role in shaping norms and practices, and theological reflections created because of the project have been used at burial, wedding, marriage ceremonies and in Sunday services.

Alongside the training programme and community outreach with religious leaders, the project supported the formation of a Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs), which have strengthened community bonds and provided women with access to financial resources, fostering a sense of solidarity and mutual support. Hajjat is the chairperson of the Alhaki Muslim Women Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) and stands as a beacon of hope. She has been instrumental in mobilising and empowering women. By pooling their savings and providing small loans, the VSLA has enabled women to start and expand their businesses, invest in their families' education, and improve their overall quality of life.

Hajjat's is also a vocal advocate for gender justice, working tirelessly to address and reduce gender-based violence (GBV) in the Kumi District.

Through the interfaith action for gender justice project implemented by the Church of Uganda, she collaborates with various faith structures to promote awareness and education on GBV, challenging harmful cultural norms and practices. Her journey is a powerful narrative of resilience, leadership, and the relentless pursuit of equality for all.



ACT MEMBER DRIVEN CHANGE



AOA + THE ANGLICAL CHURCH OF MELANESIA

Lighting up the Dark: Women's Safety in Fiu

We, with our partners, are working faithfully over the long term, looking for the beginning of small sparks of change. In the Solomon Islands, the Anglican Church of Melanesia, a partner of the Anglican Overseas Aid (AOA), encouraged the Mothers' Union to form a Gender Justice Taskforce. Taskforce members in the province of Malaita were trained and enhanced their knowledge in working collectively to pursue their rights to safety, protection, and wellbeing.

Rebecca, the project officer, observed that the women's mindset and thinking has changed by being part of the work to strengthen the Mothers' Union Taskforce. In the Fiu village, women are working together to identify a shared problem that they can address. For example, few families have access to a toilet, and most go for open defecation in forested areas or to the beach. Accessing these areas at night is unsafe due to high rates of violence against women and girls, exacerbated by public drinking and drug use. Hence, women of the village developed an achievable, low-cost solution, without the need for external support.

The Taskforce and community members fundraised together to pay for the installation of solar street lights to make Fiu village safer. The streetlights have increased safety for people in their community, including elderly women, girls, children, and people living with disabilities. Alongside the installation of streetlights, a community policy was discussed by key leaders and the broader community and agreed on. This policy begins to address the underlying reasons that women and girls are not safe to move around their village when it gets dark. The Taskforce is also envisaging to ensure the access to sanitation systems for all the households in the village.

Excitingly, the changes made in the Fiu village have already inspired nearby villages to also install their own streetlights, also prompting community conversations around safety for women, girls, and vulnerable people.



**"We are holding hands together."
– Joyce, Senior Headwoman, Kalwani Village**

Anglicans in Development and the Zambia Anglican Council Outreach Programme

Creating Peace by Ending Gender-Based Violence

Joyce is a senior headwoman in Kalwani, a village in Zambia, with grass and thatched round houses and food gardens. Social services, such as a primary school and clinic are far away, and the police station is 20 km from the village. The only form of transport is either by foot or bicycle. Joyce shares how there are practices in their traditions, which are harmful to women and girls. For example, "When a woman dies, her family would always give one of their young girls to the widower as compensation for losing his wife because they want the man's property to stay in their family."

The Zambia Anglican Council Outreach Programme, with support from ABM Anglicans In Development, developed a gender equality project within the community. This included a Gender Action Group (GAG), which comprises 15 members of the local village (roughly equal numbers of women and men), who are trained to sensitise the community on issues related to gender injustice, for example, gender-based violence (GBV), harmful traditional practices, and addictions that can lead to violence. Some are also trained as psycho-social counsellors and provide counselling services to GBV survivors and perpetrators. The project has also reinvigorated the community school, right here in the village. The teacher at the school is also a member of the Gender Action Group, and there are plans to expand the school, with many adults also joining to learn to read and write.

Joyce shared how the gender equality project and the work of the Gender Action Group has had significant impact, "I am no longer being woken up in the middle of the night and asked to solve domestic disputes. The GAG members can help resolve conflicts. They work very hard, and they work with us, as traditional leaders." The local clinic also confirms a reduction in incidences of violence in the home, from ten cases each week, down to two cases. There has also been a reduction in early and forced marriages, and adolescent pregnancies. Another traditional leader reflected on the processes enabled by the project, "We have learned that we need to keep our children at school until they finish, and not take them out early to marry them off."



RURAL ACTION COMMUNITY BASED ORGANISATION

Faith centred Activism to Reduce Violence Against Women and Girls

In many communities in the mid-central region of Uganda there is an acceptance and toleration of violence against women and girls, including forced early and child marriage, sexual assault, and domestic violence. Due to high poverty in the region, girls are commodified, and forced into early marriages to bring wealth to a bride's family. In the region, patriarchal social structures, constructed through socio-cultural practices, promote toxic masculinity and reinforce unequal power and resources, which promotes male privilege and the subordination of women and girls.

RACOBABO, in conjunction with the ACT Uganda Forum members, co-implemented 'the Bridge Project' – which strengthened faith discourses on gender justice and related normative frameworks. This included a male engagement campaign that represented men in nurturing, and supportive roles in the families and communities, rather than as perpetrators of gender-based violence. Significant male leaders were engaged in dialogues on transformative masculinities. This was a space to reflect and unlearn negative notions of masculinity. As a result, the men delivered faith-inspired messages to the public, using mainstream and social media, to positively change the narrative on masculinities in their communities.

Faith leaders were also engaged as trusted duty bearers with the influence and power to positively transform society. Faith leaders can also be 'gatekeepers' in many faith structures, where patriarchy is perpetuated, and the societal roles and responsibilities that men and women are expected to assume are shaped. Faith leaders became powerful changemakers to transform beliefs and practices that facilitate or condone gender-based violence.

RACOBABO, together with the ACT Uganda Forum, and Side by Side, continue to build the capacity of faith actors, to effectively prevent violence against women and girls. This requires a process of community mobilisation, to engage everyone in living out our faith-based values of justice, peace and dignity.



LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION NEPAL

Women Leading Change in the Tharu Community

The Tharu society traditionally embodies a rich cultural heritage, marked by unique customs, however, because of migration many Tharus lost their land. Money lenders provided loans, but then forced them into bonded labour. Exploitation, poor health, unclaimed right to natural resources, weak voice in government decisions, poor access to market, lack of credit for their work and many other associated factors increased discrimination among them. Women experienced intersecting discrimination: as a woman, living in poverty, and from a marginalised community. Women were often confined to the domestic sphere or to farm work and were not visible in leadership positions or public life. Women were not allowed to attend the community discussion and talk in public places. If anyone broke this social norm, she would be blamed for being of a 'bad character'.

LWF through its local implementing partner ran a Transformative Education Program (TEP), which included literacy and empowerment education, for example, orientation on government policies, rights and entitlement, leadership development training, access and control over resources, and their share of the public resources. The training also included the institutional development of women groups, their networks and alliance with like minded organisations, including public awareness campaigns against discrimination and exclusion.

Community empowerment is the crucial factor that challenges systemic inequalities. It was also essential to gain the support from the committed stakeholders to counteract the patriarchal social norms, including religious leaders. Faith actors by recognising themselves as part of civil society and having a solid understanding and analysis of their social and political contexts, which is guided by core religious principles that promote human rights, were able to mobilise their communities. While social and cultural norms, including those rooted in religion, can prevent the unbiased application of and access to basic human rights, it is increasingly evident that religious voices can drive constructive dialogues to enhance the status of women and girls.

Now, a lot of changes have come in society. There has been a flowering social and political consciousness among women and girls from Tharu community. Women are taking part in community level discussion and decision-making processes. Now, women are getting property rights owning the land registration certificates in their own name. Now the women have come to various social positions, including as community leaders, and leading community-based organisations. Many women from other communities are also showing their interest to lead as a community leader. Women have emerged as active and committed leaders now through these platforms and taking their lead roles in community development initiatives jointly with local governments.

Hora de Obrar Foundation

Advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

The Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights programme of the Hora de Obrar Foundation has been developing for several years through projects funded by the European Union delegation in Argentina, the Lutheran World Federation and through alliances with local NGOs. The programme has advanced gender justice through the promotion of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and the prevention of violence against women and girls. In 2019, Hora de Obrar began working with more than fifteen educational institutions that reach a community of approximately 15,000 students, at four educational levels (initial, primary, secondary and tertiary), as well as community spaces for non-formal education. It also holds annual meetings of teachers, managers, students and pastors to share experiences and reaffirm the commitment to the implementation of CSE. During this time, Christian sectors with little access to sexual education, driven by some international organisations, have organised and developed discourses that constitute a risk to sexual and reproductive health and rights, which are functional to fundamentalisms.

Faith communities and their leaders often lack both the tools and theological perspectives to be able to intervene in the social problems that social organisations and States discuss in the public sphere. The absence of training spaces and sometimes a certain distance between progressive theological academies and faith communities has deepened these deficiencies. This situation led to fundamentalisms permeating broad sectors of Protestant and ecumenical believers, including broad sectors linked to FBOs and the same churches affiliated with the ACT. The theological work proposed by both Hora de Obrar and SEDI seeks to recover processes of theological reflection, build community narratives and do theology in a participatory manner with communities and their leaders to address from a diaconal and pastoral perspective, in a responsible and pertinent manner, these social problems that the churches and FBOs themselves have long recognized as part of their mission.

Therefore, we believe that religious-based organisations can and are playing a strategic role in countering violence and the stereotypes that sustain it. Whether from religious sectors or in the name of supposed religious principles, religious-based human rights organisations are in a fundamental strategic position to build narratives in accordance with the needs that arise from the sexual and reproductive health problems present in their contexts. It is essential to make visible and give strength to the discourses and theologies of solidarity, empathy and rights.



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