



Gender Equality and Women's Rights 30 years after Beijing: **So close yet so far**

Reflections from
12 gender justice advocates



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This resource is a collection of reflections from 12 gender justice advocates, who have over the years worked to contribute towards the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Three of the profiled individuals were part of the LWF delegation in Beijing in 1995. These reflections are part of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Action for Justice unit analysis of progress on gender justice and women’s human rights since the landmark document was adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women.

LWF is sharing these reflections to offer insights on how far we have come since Beijing, progress made in the last 30 years, the gaps that remain and some recommendations to strengthen the work going forward.

The Action for Justice Unit is the advocacy hub of the LWF and accompanies LWF member churches, country programs and partners on advocacy, following the local to global approach.

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Action for Justice

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DR MUSIMBI KANYORO

The human rights agenda is our agenda

Dr Musimbi Kanyoro is a former Director of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Women in Church and Society program, where she championed gender justice and the inclusion of women in church leadership. She also served as General Secretary of the World YWCA, championing the rights of women and girls within faith communities. Later on she worked at the David and Lucile Packard Foundation where she focused on advancing women's health and reproductive rights. Between 2011 and 2019 she served as the President and CEO of the Global Fund for Women, where she expanded the organization's impact, supporting women's rights and grassroots movements across over 175 countries. She has remained active in various roles, including serving on boards and as an advisor to numerous international organizations. Kanyoro is also involved in mentoring young leaders.

In 1995 she led the LWF delegation to the fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. When asked about the progress made since then she says: "The biggest progress is the consciousness that Beijing brought to many women from all over the world, the consciousness that we have issues and no one is going to bring us the liberation on a silver platter – we need to take action by ourselves, as women, in our communities, in our families, with our governments, with our countries. And change is going to come when we're actively involved."

The following interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

I became a Lutheran at boarding school, and I stayed Lutheran

I grew up in a Quaker family, in a small village in western Kenya. For the Quakers the emphasis is on peace, living in a community, and supporting one another. I became a Lutheran in high school. At that time many boarding schools were sponsored by different faith groups, and part of their intention to get students from different places was to convert them. They just baptized you without even asking your parents, it was like survival, you let yourself be baptized so you could stay in that school. So that's how I became a Lutheran, and I stayed Lutheran.

Working for women was not a conscious decision

There was never a time in my life when I decided I would work for women; in fact, I never thought I would. My intention was to teach at university because I am a trained academician in the area of linguistics. Then LWF invited me to work with them and I ended up staying ten years in Geneva. That is how I started working with women. Before that, in 1985 I participated in the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the UN Decade in Nairobi. Having just returned to Nairobi with a PhD from my graduate studies in the USA, I was part of the local hosting group in Nairobi. While I was helping my country with the documentation, I was also getting to know the importance of organizing, and that there are issues that are common to all of us as women. It doesn't matter where you are, the issues are similar.

After Nairobi, I also participated in the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, and in the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, with a focus on sexual and reproductive rights. So, all of that prepared me for the Beijing Conference, where I was the key person for the LWF. I made the connections and arrangements not only for myself but for many women from different Lutheran churches to participate. I was then fully working with women in the LWF Women in Church and Society (WICAS) program.

The consciousness that Beijing brought on women's issues has been the biggest win

We can never say that we haven't make progress since Beijing. There has been a lot of progress. And for me the biggest progress is the consciousness that Beijing brought to many women from all over the world, the consciousness that we have issues and no one is going to bring us the liberation on a silver platter – we need to take action by ourselves, as women, in our communities, in our families, with our governments, and with our countries. And change is going to come when we're actively involved. That became very well spelled out in Beijing. It had been done by those before us over the years. In Beijing the number of women who came meant that we were no longer a minority to be neglected. We were over forty thousand women together in one place, declaring that the human rights agenda is our agenda.

But we have not won the war yet

It has been accepted that gender-based violence (GBV) is a reality and that we need to deal with it in its many forms, including partner violence, making it public and political instead of a private domestic issue where no one should intervene. That became louder in Beijing. It's still loud today. It is discussed at the level of the United Nations, and it is discussed in the countries where it exists, which is everywhere. Has it gone away? No. We are conscious of it, we name it, we make laws to prevent it, we put it in conventions so people can rally around it, and that is progress. But we have not won the war yet.

Women have also become conscious that their bodies are their asset as well as the origin of most problems, in particular related to women's reproductive and sexual health and rights. This was important in Cairo and Beijing, but it is now the weakest area regarding progress. It puts women in the most vulnerable situations, including rape, sexual trafficking, lack of contraception, lack of choices in how women choose their partner, etc. Sexual and reproductive rights are easy to attack in order to diminish women.

The third gain is that women realized that having economic empowerment gave them more decision-making power and got them a place at the table. And for that education is key, it helps people realize their rights and design an economic being by employment or entrepreneurship. Women in Beijing were highlighting microfinance, and it has expanded so that the goal of women owning their own bank account is still at the top of the agenda of women's economic empowerment.

Beginning again at zero

It is however disheartening that we can go so far in making progress and then be pushed right to the back to begin again from zero. In the last two or three years I've seen policy after policy on gender equality, formerly accepted by governments and religious groups, being questioned and even revoked; women sharing a place at the table being relegated right to the back; reproductive health laws being re-abolished; women going into priesthoods now resisted by younger men; and younger women buying into that and saying, "My place is in the home, I don't want to be a feminist like my grandmother or my mother." I did not know we would be yearning to go back. I cannot be 100% critical of their views, but I am surprised.

COVID uncovered many vulnerabilities that women still face all over the world as we saw then; increased gender-based violence and poor attention to women's health. The post COVID political climate has been demarcated by political instabilities, wars, various disasters from floods to drought and fires, political and religious conflicts followed by election of world leaders who deny human rights of people and especially women. No country is safe from such issues which will further make women vulnerable and dilute or erase the hard-won achievements made in Beijing. It is not an easy time for keeping hope alive but opting for hopelessness and apathy is not an option. Christian hope is about believing in things we do not see. Believing in the impossible and waiting for it with joy and celebration. When we continue to believe and pray in God's grace for all creation, we do so with full trust that women too are destined to the reign of God."

Sustaining the resilience of women is essential

I have found that things that help ordinary people to be resilient are important. Many women have the responsibility to take care of the children, of the elderly, of the home, of their religious community, etc. For them to be able to do these things they need policies that enhance the systems that relieve women from things that exhaust them, that violate their well-being at the level of the mind or the body, and that remove hope. It may be that climate change has wiped out the way you used to produce your food; it may be that the wage earner that you depended on is no longer there. Women are made vulnerable when things that help them being resilient are taken away from them. We should work on structural issues that help women to sustain the resilience, like education for women and girls. We need to be able to say that there is no profession for which you cannot find qualified women. You want engineers? Here they are! You want lawyers? Here they are! Kindergarten teachers? Here they are! We must never tire to achieve policies and laws that point toward what women need, because whether they are practiced or not, we can call upon them and they help us to rally around what we want.

Harness the power of technology

Signatories to the Beijing Platform for Action need to be reminded that they made commitments, and women need those commitments to be fulfilled. There is also a need to consider the issues we did not address in Beijing. One is the knowledge that we now have on climate change and its effects on the lives of women and girls. Another is technology and its impact on women. A third, the understanding of women's power to organize: we were forty thousand in Beijing and we thought we were so many, but now we know we can meet in billions. And most importantly, back in 1995 not many countries had the youth bulge that they have today, where 60% of the population are young people, and young people who have not lived a single day without the internet. So, we need to utilize these new things to make life better for women. And if we see that women are dropping out of their ability to use technology, we have to be aware of it and quickly jump on the wagon. And when we see women courageous enough to stand for elected positions, we have to support them. These are areas that we need to work on, and where we can make the biggest difference.



PRISCILLA SINGH

Churches say “No” to violence against women

Priscilla Singh is with the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church in India. Between 1998 and 2008 she served as Secretary for Women in Church and Society (WICAS), the then Gender Justice and Women’s Empowerment program within the LWF. Prior to that, Singh served as the Asia Regional Coordinator for WICAS, in which capacity she advocated for the rights of Dalit women.

During Singh’s term in the LWF office, WICAS focused on the issue of violence against women and challenged LWF member churches to treat this issue as an matter of faith and emphatically to say “No” to violence against women. The WICAS publication, Churches Say “No” to Violence Against Women was widely translated and distributed, and as a result over thirty projects aimed at reducing violence were run by member churches around the world. Other foci of the office included training on gender justice, gender and power – including the publication A Faith Reflection on Gender and Power; leadership training both at the regional and national levels; and intentionally including a gender component in all LWF development projects.

In 1995 Priscilla participated in the World Conference on Women in Beijing. When asked about it she said: “It was a celebration. The NGO platform that convened before the conference gathered women from all over the world; women from rural areas sold items and collected money to come. It was truly a global event from the bottom to the top.”

The following interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Spirituality has been my strength

I was born in Chennai, India, as the third girl in a pastor's family, my father and my mother fourth and third generation Christians. My father would be posted every five years to a different place, from Chennai to Geneva. I had a very spiritual background, with morning and evening prayers, attending all church services. Spirituality has been my strength, I consult God first and I've always wanted to excel not for money, position, or power, but for God.

Affirming the liberating potential of religion

I have always questioned what's right and wrong. As a pastor's daughter I saw women suffering, and my mother was a pioneer of women's work in the church; abused women would come and she would help spiritually, physically, and financially. My parents inspired in me a sense of justice. I was the third girl child, and in India seventy-two years ago I was an absolutely unwanted burden; it is still so today for many girls. I was also not pretty like my sisters: I was dark, and people segregated me from others, treated me like the ugly duckling. This irritated me and from an early age I wanted to excel; I had many abilities: I could sing, dance, do sports, and I was always first in class. Leadership was natural to me – you put me in a slum and I'd be the slum leader.

One of my sisters was married into a rich family and at twenty-six she was widowed and abused. It was then that I understood that violence against women can take many forms, from the physical to the emotional, economical, and others.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action that came out of the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women identified violence against women as one of the priority concerns of the international community,

and one particularly deserving urgent response. I used the broad definition of violence against women provided by Beijing and we wrote the book *Churches Say "No" to Violence Against Women*. As I say in the book, religion is often used as a tool to oppress women. One task of people of faith is to affirm the liberating potential of religion as expressed in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action: "Religion, thought, conscience and belief may and can contribute to fulfilling women's and men's moral, ethical and spiritual needs and to realizing their full potential in society." We need to live out this expression and take measures to correct the theologies, policies, and practices that oriented to the contrary.



The Beijing conference taught me not to be afraid to confront

The Beijing conference in 1995 was a celebration. The NGO platform that convened before the main conference gathered women from all over the world, women from rural areas sold items and collected money to come. It was truly a global event from the bottom to the top. I've attended many global meetings, but this was different: the whole world and all of women's issues were represented there, and everyone had a voice. Everyone could speak in the different platforms, everyone had the flexibility to choose what they wanted to attend, hear, or say. The meeting taught me the power of words, how each word has to be stranded together to make meaning, for example the difference between equity and equality. The meeting also taught me how to negotiate internationally, not being afraid to confront, and using my power because of my experience, my local expertise.

After Beijing women went from being passive beneficiaries to becoming participants.

The Beijing Platform for Action has twelve critical areas of concern, and they all begin with “Women and . . .”: Women and Education, Women and Health, etc. Women went from being passive beneficiaries to becoming participants. It was after Beijing that I started working on gender mainstreaming, using gender analysis as a necessary tool to help us understand the attitudes, roles, and behaviors of men and women conditioned by religion, culture, patriarchy and how they could be changed. At that time feminism was used as a dirty word, particularly in the Global Southern; it was seen as seeking individual claims, imposed, and Western. So as a woman concerned about justice it was a baggage you had to carry, and gender became that tool that I could work with. I worked on violence against women, I worked on faith reflections on gender and power, I worked on the issue of leadership, water, and many other things. I even worked on global warming – if only the church had listened back then! We have come full circle now with the climate emergency and its negative impacts particularly on women and girls.

If I stand tall, it is because I stand on the shoulders of those who came before me

As I went about my work, it always surprised me that I had so much power, spiritual power, the power of working hard and inviting vast knowledge, the power of having an international network of women who can shake and make things happen. These women listened to me and took on my dreams; sometimes we would speak different languages but a smile would break and make all differences go away. The power of women is one of the biggest gifts from God. Everyday working at the LWF was a pleasure for me; I worked very hard and my work was acknowledged. As a woman in India where there’s patriarchy, where there’s hierarchy, your work as a woman is never acknowledged. But the LWF had no such restrictions: if you performed you were acknowledged and then you were able to perform even better. But I could only do this because of all the work that the pioneers in feminist theology had done before me. As the African proverb says, “If I stand tall, it is because I stand on the shoulders of those who came before me.”

We need to talk in the language of the people

The most effective strategy is to link our interventions to women’s lived experiences. When you talk about feminist theology you’re theorizing, but when you talk about violence against women, you’re touching women and girls’ lives in the most intimate way. We need to talk in the language of the people. We need to promote women and girls’ agency, hand over the responsibility to advocate for the change they would like to see. For example, when we published Churches say “No” to Violence Against Women, people read it and translated it by themselves because it talked to them, giving the translations away for free and forgoing copyright.

The concept of gender has been diluted, and women have lost the power

I have a criticism of the current approach to gender justice. When we use gender as an analytical tool it works to help us understand where we are and where we should go. But gender has been diluted and women have lost the power. We need to go back to our distinct focus on women and girls.



CHRISTINE GRUMM

Building movements that can make a difference

Christine Grumm has worked both in the church and with secular organizations to build an agenda of social change and justice, concentrating on change within communities on the ground as well as institutions and systems. She served as the first vice president of the then newly formed Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and as the Deputy General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in Geneva, Switzerland. During that time, she worked with church leaders both in the United States and around the globe in the development and execution of their public voice as well as overseeing the organization's strategic plan and governance implementation. She went on to become the CEO/President of the Women's Funding Network (WFN) for over a decade. The story of how the Global Women's Funding Movement enabled women from all walks of life to harness the power of money to free themselves from oppression is told in her recent book, *The Uprising of Women in Philanthropy*, co-authored with nine others.

In 1995 Grumm participated in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing as part of the LWF delegation. When asked about their role in Beijing, she says: "Our job was to represent women's rights issues from the perspective of faith-based organizations."

The following interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Very strong religious background

I grew up as the daughter of a Lutheran missionary with generations of pastors and bishops in my family tree. I grew up in a multicultural community in a small town in Hawaii, so I was exposed to a lot of different religions. Then my father took a parish in California and we moved there. I trained as a health educator, and worked in the area of reproductive and maternal and child health for a number of years in California.

I don't remember not thinking about gender justice and women's rights.

You don't wake up one day and say you want to work for gender justice. You don't actually make that decision. I grew up in a family of seven children, five girls and two boys, and we were raised to be very strong and opinionated. I was in a family that was very supportive of all the things I believed in, all the things I worked with, and of my whole being as a woman. From very early on I did a lot of work around movement building: the antiwar movement, the farm worker movement launched by Cesar Chavez, an American labor leader and civil rights activist . . . even if a lot of that was very misogynistic. What brought me to the women's movement, besides the sense of being aware of injustice in the world towards women, people of color and what we call "the marginalized," was that often women's rights came at the bottom with people saying, "Oh, well, women. . .we'll get to that!" From a career point of view, I think what specifically pushed me to work with gender justice was working in women's health care and reproductive rights. But I don't remember not thinking about women's rights.

Presenting the role of faith within the women's rights movements in Beijing.

I was part of the LWF delegation at the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing. Our job there was to participate in the non-governmental organizations' platform of Beijing, to represent the women's rights issues from the perspective of faith-based organizations. In Beijing we had on the one side the Vatican and the Catholic Church, and on the other side the Protestant churches and communions like the LWF and other churches that were much more open and saw gender justice and women's rights as a key issue. Our objective was to present the role of faith within women's rights movements. That involved setting Bible study workshops, faith and women's rights workshops, etc.

Rebuilding where institutions have failed

Despite the massive work on promoting gender equality and women's rights, the issues have not radically changed in the last thirty years – I wish I could say they had. Here in the United States, it's better than what it was thirty years ago, but worse than what it was five years ago, and now we're coming to a time when it's really hard. We are going to be organizing all over again to uphold women's rights here and globally. We fought for everything: an end to early and childhood marriage, laws giving women more access to government positions, representation, protecting women's rights in disasters and war zones where often women and children are most impacted, among other concerns. The issues have not radically changed, in some places it has changed a bit and in others it has gone backward, and a lot of that is because of the 'church', not necessarily the Lutheran Church.

The question then becomes: Do we battle against the church as one of the major institutions that is holding back women's rights? I have not lost hope, but it reminds me of when I spent time in South Africa during apartheid when colleagues used to say "hope is a verb." Hope is something you do; hope is a part of movement building. Now we'll have to rebuild and build up where institutions have failed, come in with movement building. How do we use the institution of the church to move the justice and human rights agenda forward? In Beijing we were able to get some things and language through, which led to the next United Nations Conference and the Millennium Development Goals moving forward. Violence against women was high on the agenda and we talked more about it; but I think institutional violence will be tough and we'll need to talk more about it.

Thirty years after Beijing we need to be ever vigilant.

No area has made truly notable progress since Beijing, but the areas of reproductive rights, economic development, and violence against women have changed. There are more reproductive rights activated at country level now than there was thirty years ago, including the advent of the contraceptive pill; technology alone has changed that trajectory and reproductive rights are not going away again.

Economic development has definitely changed. In the United States and in Europe the majority of wealth is going to be in the hands of women or in their names. Women have more access to monetary resources, and educational resources, not only in the West but also in the Southern hemisphere and the East; there are more women who are professors, who have master's degrees and have positions in political leadership. The harder part of the question is: Does that mean that for women at the bottom of the pile life is getting better? Surely middle and upper classes have seen positive change, but for women who don't have the same opportunities, life has just become harder. How do we reverse that oppression? Another concern is that authoritarian rule is happening in many places across the globe and it can reverse gains that have been made over the years. While there has been change, you really need to break that change down and analyze who is benefiting and who is not on all those issues.

Patriarchy is still incredibly engrained

The last election in the United States of America has surprised me. I am surprised by people's inconsistency in issues relating to racism and ethnicity, their discourse about the electorate, and with so much fear that they vote against their own self-interest. Second, I am surprised how women are allowing things to happen that are again against their self-interest. The oppression of women is so deep that they cannot even support the things that will push them forward and make things better for their daughters and granddaughters, and for their sons and their grandsons. It's a surprise to me that when we have the opportunity, we do not take it, in numbers. Third is the incredibly ingrained role of patriarchy. With all we know about women's ability to function in the world, that they can do whatever they set out to do and how important they are to the functioning of the family and the community, the patriarchy continues to lift up its ugly head and gobble up wherever it sees a path that's not filled.

Movement building is at the core of making a difference in the lives of women and communities

Movement building. There's no other way. Movement building is at the core. It's all about gathering women who come from all walks of life, coming together saying: we have to come together and make a difference. That's the power we have. If we want to make change, this will only happen when large groups of people come together, women and men, willing to lose their lives, if need be, to make a change. The question for an institution like the church is: What side of the movement is the church going to be on? Is it going to be part of the movement, outside of the movement, or against that movement? For us on the progressive side, movement building is critical, and throughout my career I've been a community organizer because what happens is that people continuously work against their self-interest. If we can turn people around to focus on their self-interests – not their own economic interest but their personal interest that honors their children and grandchildren – they'll stand up and fight.

Women are movers and shakers, and we can bring about the change we want to see

As we look ahead, I do not want to be simplistic because we are in a complex situation. My first message is that we cannot take our eyes off the right way to go, off the need to build movements. It's not the time to sit back and say we cannot change this. It's time for some of us who are older to train and work with younger women, but it's not going to take only younger people, it's going to take all of us – non one is allowed to be outside.

My second message is that we need to understand that women's rights are at the heart and soul of all other rights, because if a woman does not have her rights, then a family does not have their rights, and a community does not have their rights. Women must be at the center of getting those rights.

My third message is about hope, I'm a big believer in hope, and as someone said, "the work of God will never take you where the grace of God cannot keep you." It's one of my most favorite quotes. Hope is something that in the midst of the worst time, the biggest trials and the most pain, projects us forward; it pushes us. Hope is alive, it's a verb, and for people in faith-based communities the grace of God will keep us in hope.

And my final message is that we as women have a lot of resources and gifts that can be brought together: financial, educational, leadership-wise, community-wise, movement building-wise, so we need to stop thinking of ourselves as vulnerable victims. We are survivors. And we are also movers, shakers, and we can make a difference with our money. Our book, *The Uprising of Women in Philanthropy*, is a good roadmap for where we need to go from here; we have power, and when we bring together our resources and focus on changing world injustices, we'll beat the patriarchy. And we'll be joined by our brothers and our siblings, because together we can make a difference. I'd like to read a quote from the book, as a take on the wonderful saying in the world of development that if you give a person a fish, they'll eat for a day, but if you teach a person to fish and they'll eat for a lifetime. In the world of women's funds this is how we think:

If you give a woman a fish, she'll feed the family first and most probably go hungry; if you teach a woman to fish, she'll feed the family first until the lake becomes polluted or they take away her fishing rods. However, if you give women resources and access to community capital, they'll buy the lake, feed their families, keep the lake environmentally clean and have something to pass on for generations to come. As a movement, we're about building sustainable community capital to support women and girls who are ready to buy the lake and/or steward it forever.

(The Uprising of Women in Philanthropy, p. 55)



REV. BAFANA KHUMALO

Another world is possible

Bafana Khumalo is the co-executive director and one of the co-founders of Sonke, a critical partner in LWF's advocacy work regarding positive masculinities and the engagement of men and boys in gender justice. Bafana is an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa and volunteers his services to the Tembisa East Parish in Johannesburg. Khumalo holds a bachelor's degree in theology (hon) and masters in theology from the University of Natal in South Africa.

Khumalo has a long history of engagement in the annual Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which takes stock of progress in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action. When asked about the progress made since Beijing then, he says: "In South Africa we have a lot to celebrate: South Africa has one of the world's most progressive constitutions, which includes a justiciable Bill of Rights. However, our country is also home to some of the world's highest rates of violence, including gender-based violence."

The following interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Encouraged by the Lutheran heritage on matters of faith

I have been involved with the youth movement in my church since my early days. When I was young, I became a leader in my congregation before answering the call to the ministry. I have always been encouraged by the Lutheran doctrine on matters of faith; I try to interrogate what is happening around me through this lens. I'm guided by the principle of the importance of Scripture in my life and I've made others aware of that importance so that they too can make sense of what their faith journey is about.

I was always struck by women's leadership

In my youth I was an activist against apartheid, both in society and in the student movement, because before being a student you're a member of society. In the protected environment of the university, it's important to debunk the ivory-tower mentality and keep in touch with who you are and where you are from, and not forget the community. That was back in the eighties, a very difficult time in South Africa, with lots of violence. During that period, I was always struck by women's leadership and resilience. They provided support to the communities as part of building the democratic culture, which was predominantly male. Women were only elected as secretaries in the structures, and that did not sit well with me. When I was nominated for Student leadership, I withdrew my nomination in favor of electing a woman candidate, but another man came forward and was elected. If we believe in democracy, we cannot say that women's struggles must wait.

I joined the Institute for the Study of the Bible, which was a program started through an initiative by a group of women from Amaoti, one of South Africa's provinces, to ask big questions without easy answers: Why are we experiencing so much violence? What's God got to do with this? We brought the academy and the community together to look at the Scriptures for answers, we brought tools for analysis, we developed Bible study methods, we trained community lay leaders drawing from our own indigenous knowledge systems. We have been running this for thirty years, you could say since Beijing, and we have spread it throughout the country, region and globally. The element of gender is pivotal to the program because it was started by women and it has provided them with leadership on key questions regarding access to land, prevention of violence, etc. This has stayed with me wherever I go as a minister. The majority of people supporting the church, both in terms of numbers and resources, are women. And yet, the leadership is predominately male. How do we challenge the power inside the church to acknowledge female leadership and transform the structures to accommodate their needs? The struggle is ongoing. We have had the first black woman leader in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa only after 40 years of our existence, and I believe that in the near future they will be the dominating force amongst the leadership because there are more and more women emerging as leaders in parishes and congregations.

Multilateral forums are important spaces to influence the leaders of the world

My organization, Sonke, advocates for progressive legislation and policies on gender equality, gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights (including HIV and AIDS) to empower and protect women, children and vulnerable men, and to cultivate positive masculinities. Sonke offers technical expertise to national processes of drafting legislation and policies; uses the courts and Chapter 9 institutions to hold public figures accountable for their actions; supports communities to participate in public advocacy action; and lobbies government institutions to uphold the rights of all, but in particular those of marginalized groups. Like the LWF, Sonke sees multilateral platforms as important spaces to influence the leaders of the world to advance gender transformation, and for several years we've been engaging with governments to hold them accountable on the commitments they made.

At the Commission on the Status of Women in 2025 we will celebrate thirty years of Beijing, and we need to reflect upon how far we've come. We've advanced in terms of policy and representation, there are milestones like the CEDAW process that continues to hold governments accountable, or in our region the Maputo Protocol, but the challenge is in their implementation: Beijing highlighted twelve critical areas of concern in terms of women's human rights, but their implementation is uneven. At Sonke we're doing research in a few countries to see how far they've come in three of the critical areas (Violence against Women, Women and the Economy, and Women and Health) and where the gaps are so that we can make recommendations.

We must be vigilant so that the positive trajectory of change continues

In South Africa we have a lot to celebrate: the country has one of the world's most progressive constitutions, which includes a justiciable Bill of Rights. However, our country is also home to some of the world's highest rates of violence. Sexual violence, including domestic abuse, rape, assault, and murder, are far too common. Similarly, there are a vast number of human rights violations daily against marginalized groups such as prisoners, sex workers and migrants, women, and children. What is particularly horrifying is that some of these cases are perpetrated by law enforcement agents or community leaders. Violence in South Africa is systemic and normalized – and has to be challenged especially by the church!

One area where we've seen a significant shift is education. At the time of Beijing, when a family did not have enough resources they would prioritize the boys to attend school; now many girls attend primary education all the way to higher education. We see young women graduating from STEM fields, we see women as CEOs, we have women in the cabinet and in the parliament, but we'll have to be vigilant so that the positive trajectory of change continues. One area where I am concerned is violence against women: the levels are very high, five times the global average, and it links to the high rate of HIV/AIDS, which is driven by patriarchy.

Equality and justice are values that we hold dearly as part of our faith

Despite broader changes at national level the slow response of the church to embrace transformative approaches is disappointing. LWF has a Gender Justice Policy but the uptake by member churches is slow; there is a tacit resistance to the implementation of the policy that I find very disappointing. As people of faith, equality and justice are values that we hold dearly as part of our faith. For years we've had debates about the ordination of women, and how much pain this has caused in the body of Christ, that people do not recognize that women are also created in the image of God and should be provided the space to lead. I am sad that in the church we have not lived up to the notion of what Christ said in terms of equality. At the same time initiatives like the Decade of Women have allowed us to focus on the challenges that women face, and the narrative within the church has shifted. I am excited by initiatives like Thursdays in Black: we dress in black and we start the conversation, we say that rape is not acceptable, and more people join. We also have the We Will Speak Out campaign focusing on gender-based violence (GBV) from a faith perspective; and we have Faith Action (in South Africa) as a cross-denomination consortium that brings people of faith together to discuss how we as a religious community can bring down GBV, training clergy and lay people, providing tools, creating safe spaces for survivors where they inform us on how to best support them.

Fostering positive masculinities

At Sonke, our approach to foster change has been to approach men with a positive sentiment. In our society men are portrayed as rapists, abusers, etc. We, instead, ask them what they can do to make a difference in the lives of their family and the community, we provide them with the tools, we explain how patriarchy impacts their sisters, their daughters, their wives, their mothers, and it is important that they contribute positively. The results of the Men Care program are amazing: men find it gratifying to share the household chores because they find a space they can share with their children and partners, families appreciate them, and they are less prone to use violence. Unexpected results include men improving their health-seeking behavior, they say, "I have children and I want to see them graduate from school, so I need to be healthy."

Another world is possible where women are recognized

As we mark thirty years since Beijing, we should acknowledge the bravery of the women who met in Beijing and had the vision of developing the Platform for Action thirty years ago that is still relevant today and push leaders to live up to their commitments. Women cannot afford to wait another thirty years to have equality. We all must do what we can to advance the BPfA in our countries, the church and communities. Another world is possible where women are recognized, treated with dignity, and are not afraid to walk in the street, respected in their own right, and acknowledged for their leadership in society. Many challenges in the world today have to do with toxic masculinities; men with patriarchal views who want to show who has the biggest gun, and they send the young ones to the frontline to die. See what happens when women take leadership: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia set a precedent as the first elected female head of state in Africa. The world, at the moment, needs women in leadership to change the trajectory of where things are going. We remain committed to working with others to make this a reality.



JOANNA LILJA

Negotiating gender equality at CSW: A game of chess

Joanna Lilja is Strategic Adviser at Act Church of Sweden, which is the international department of Church of Sweden, one of the LWF's member churches and long-standing partner in the work for gender equality. She is also a member of the ACT Alliance Gender Justice Reference Group, where she has been chairing the advocacy task group. Joanna is one of the cofounders of the Global Campaign on Equality in Family Law. She has previously been on the steering committee of Side by Side: Faith Movement for Gender Justice as one of several other engagements.

Joanna is a Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) champion, if that phrase exists. She has been part of the official Swedish government delegation to CSW since 2019, taking part in what she calls the dancing game: "All negotiations are like a game of chess, where progress depends on the joint effort by the negotiators and civil society, including faith actors. I know our engagement is important because I can hear arguments that I've made being used by the government officials at the negotiations to push for progress, for instance on issues relating to discriminatory laws, multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination or social protection."

The following interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

A personal relationship with the church since childhood

I grew up in a Lutheran context. The Church of Sweden was a state church when I was born, so you automatically became a member, until the year 2000. My grandmother was very engaged in the local church, and it was because of her that I went to Sunday school. I was the first child to be baptized in the new church in my diocese, which was converted from a supermarket! My confirmation allowed me to develop a more personal relationship with the church. Growing up, I also visited other churches with my friends from school, but I always felt that Church of Sweden was my home.

Gender justice as a dinner-table conversation

In my family, social justice was always present in the conversations around the dinner table. In fact, my dad used to say that if there was one thing I could not stand it was injustice. My engagement has taken me on many different routes, but gender justice has always been an issue close to my heart. Gender injustice is so widespread, and it permeates everything, I have always had a strong conviction that people should be treated equally.

Sharpening texts and pushing for progressive CSW outcomes

I started engaging with CSW around 2017–18 and in 2019 I was selected to be part of the official Swedish delegation for the first time. As a church, we have never been an obvious choice to represent Sweden at the most important annual UN gathering on gender equality. Sweden is one of the most secular countries in the world and there is a certain skepticism toward religion, in particular when it comes to gender equality. But since 2019, I've been selected to be part of the delegation as an advisor to the government.



The Swedish delegation is headed by the Swedish Minister of Gender Equality and includes diplomats, government officials, government agencies, and a few civil society representatives. It is a privilege to be part of the state party delegation as it gives us access to intel, documents, the negotiation room as well as the negotiators, and opportunities to give input on issues and language.

Nowadays access to the negotiations is very restricted and only state parties' delegates can enter the negotiations. This limits the ability of civil society to contribute with concrete suggestions in the negotiations and hold governments accountable for their actions. Negotiators are rarely experts in gender equality, and they require support from civil society to sharpen texts and push for progressive outcomes. That's why it's so important to have civil society in the state delegations.

In my role as an adviser, I seek to bring the main concerns of women and girls around the world to the Swedish Minister of Gender Equality and the delegation, sharing their experiences, lived realities and calls for action. I can only do this thanks to input from our partners and networks such as the LWF. Another big part of my work in the delegation is to listen to the negotiations, give live input on key issues, as well as research references to previous UN resolutions and CSW agreed conclusions that can be used by the negotiators as arguments to uphold previously agreed language or promote progress. Given the current pushback against gender equality, much of our work is unfortunately focused on holding on to the gains already made, despite concerted efforts to also push forward and secure new progress.

A theology that upholds gender justice

In the current global pushback against gender equality, religion is often used as an argument by some states and certain religious actors to hinder progress in the area of gender justice and women's rights. This has led to a widespread skepticism toward religion and religious actors among women's rights advocates. As faith actors, we need to speak out when religion is used to hinder progress and threaten achievements already won. By making our voices heard at the CSW – in side events, parallel events, and in dialogue with different countries' delegations – we can challenge such arguments and the common misconception that religion and gender equality are incompatible. The LWF has an important role to play here, being a communion of churches with a theology that upholds gender equality. We also need to move outside our own circles, outside our comfort zones and reach out to other actors to form strategic alliances to counter the pushback. This is already happening in many spaces, and it must continue.

Women's rights are once again under threat.

I think it's worth taking a moment and reiterate that women's rights are human rights in light of the current pushback against gender equality. The reality is that women's rights are once again under threat. Those opposing gender equality are well organized and well-funded, and they are mobilizing to stop progressive and inclusive language in UN agreed conclusions and resolutions. It can even be argued that it's unlikely that the Beijing Platform for Action would have been adopted if it was presented today. In view of the current pushback, it is more important than ever to stand up for human rights and to affirm that women's rights are human rights.

In the Beijing Platform for Action, governments pledged to “ensure equality and non-discrimination under the law and in practice” and “revoke any remaining laws that discriminate on the basis of sex.” There have certainly been positive developments over the last decades with an increased number of countries seeking to ensure gender equality in national constitutions and secular legislation. However, discriminatory legislation continues to keep women and societies from reaching their full potential. Family law is one area of legislation that is crucial for the fulfilment of women's rights but is often ignored or overlooked in reviews. This is deeply problematic as it regulates matters such as women's legal status before, during, or after marriage, the legal age of marriage, domestic violence, marital rape, custody of children, inheritance, as well as ownership of land and property. It covers several rights set out in the CEDAW convention, for instance article 15 on equality before the law and article 16 on marriage and family relations. Yet, reform of family law, especially religious family law, is taking place at a glacial pace. Family law is of particular interest to faith actors, as in many countries this area of law is often either religious or heavily influenced by religious norms and actors. Religious actors can play a crucial role in reforming discriminatory family laws, through advocacy in their own religious communities to promote legislative change, shadow reporting to the CEDAW committee as well as sharing positive examples of law reform. One fantastic example is the work of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land to adopt a gender equal family law, which is unique in the Middle East.

The resilience of gender justice advocates and women human rights defenders keeps us going

Although I know it, I still get surprised by the resilience of gender justice advocates and women human rights defenders. Sometimes working for gender justice can be overwhelming, and yet you meet extraordinary people working in very difficult circumstances of oppression and shrinking space. They are challenging patriarchal structures, and the repercussions for them can be very serious, but they keep on working. They are a true source of inspiration.

Grounding advocacy in lived experiences of women and girls

All our advocacy at the CSW must be grounded in the lived realities of women and girls in all their diversity. That's how we can measure progress, mobilize for change, and accelerate progress. The work of the LWF and other civil society actors is instrumental, advocating from the local to the global but also following up, holding governments accountable for decisions taken at the global level. It is furthermore essential to form strategic alliances. We need

to mobilize together to counter the strong pushback. To me “together” is a key word because as individuals we can only do so much, but as a collective we are much more powerful and can make real lasting change. We need to work together, although it’s easy to be frustrated or scared and allow the pushback to divide us. Strategies and policy documents like the LWF Gender Justice Policy are very important as they help us to advocate for gender justice and explain that our engagement is grounded in theology.

Time for action is now

Now is the time to walk the talk and put words into action. We are thirty years down the line and progress is painfully slow. It’s really time for governments to invest in gender equality so that the next generation will have more rights than we do. Strategic alliances between governments and civil society, including faith actors, are essential for accelerating progress and achieving gender justice.



RANJITA BORGOARY

Women's networks are key in the work for gender justice

LWF Council Member Ranjita Borgoary was until recently the women's desk secretary for the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in India, where she developed programs on women's empowerment and leadership. In 2018 she attended the UN's 62nd Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) as an LWF delegate. The CSW is an intergovernmental platform that tracks the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The theme of CSW62 was "Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and empowerment of rural women and girls." When asked about what it was like to attend CSW, she says, "It was like being in a big ocean and having to learn how to swim."

The following interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Born into a pastor's family

I am from an indigenous community in Assam, in the northeastern part of India. I have been Lutheran by faith since my childhood, as I was born to a pastors' family. My spiritual life was largely shaped by my parents' teachings and Sunday school, which was a very big part of my upbringing. As a rural, indigenous woman I have been exposed to many opportunities, but I never thought I would one day attend a global event like the CSW.

I never thought I would be a gender justice activist

I studied social work because I like to work with people in the community. When I started working for the church and creating spaces for women to speak out and be recognized I learned a lot through LWF programs. I also never thought I would attend the CSW. I was a rural woman; I was not aware of many larger global issues, and some topics felt too complex to understand during the conference. I was wearing my traditional dress, and I met other indigenous women who also felt the same. It is important to properly orient and train women for their participation and leadership, otherwise they are just loitering around. I felt well supported by LWF.



Not alone in this struggle for women's rights

Coming from a small village in India, already landing in New York City was overwhelming. But I was conscious that I was carrying the hopes and dreams of thousands of indigenous women and girls across the globe. Once at the CSW, I was struck by the many panel discussions and stations with information, and I wanted to go to all of them, as they all resonated with me. I found some peace in the morning devotion session with other ecumenical women. This is a great space for people of faith to connect and network. I met many great women who were proudly speaking out for gender justice and strategizing on how to confront resistance and backlash. It was then that I understood that I was not alone in this world advocating for women's rights.

Rural women are deprived of their human rights, including access to education. In India, most rural women must travel to other towns for higher education and due to the low economic status, most women cannot pursue their studies. So being a rural woman and getting an opportunity to be part of CSW was a great achievement, a dream come true for me.

CSW not only provides a platform to discuss issues affecting indigenous women: it is also a transformative space as it enhanced my confidence as a simple rural woman to a confident advocate who can speak for the marginalized and silenced rural women. The fact that the CSW has prioritized indigenous/rural women in its deliberations gives me hope.

With the experience of my participation in CSW62, I felt proud to be a woman and I was challenged to work a lot more for women and girls. I was empowered to train and motivate others to speak out. Therefore, what I would say today is that I believe that providing grassroots women with skills and training is key to giving them the confidence to speak out. Alone, we cannot bring change – we need to be many.

Strengthening gender justice within the church

While the CSW opened my eyes to the broader issues affecting women, “Women in Power and Decision-Making” as well as “Violence Against Women” are two Beijing critical areas of concern that are closest to my heart and where many challenges remain. Whilst we have seen some progress, it is not at the pace we would like to see it.

I will start with the church, which is a very critical institution. In India we have twelve member churches, and all leaders are men. It was very sensitive to speak about gender justice until 2013 when the LWF Gender Justice Policy was adopted. It has helped us to raise awareness, engaging in theological reflection, what it means to be equal and respect each other, and speaking out against women’s discrimination in church committees. Some churches have started ordaining women, although they are not always accepted in the ministry. Still, some would question: How can a woman pastor bless a man? As a community of faith, we need to continue having a conversation about gender equality inside the church and with our congregations before we look at broader society.

In rural areas like where I come from, we also need to share information about how to prevent violence against women and protect survivors. Rural women from the north embark on long train journeys to the larger cities in the more industrial south. Many leave at the promise of a decent job by an agent, only to arrive and find themselves locked into a so-called “beauty parlor” or trafficked for sex. Child marriages are also prevalent, so we raise awareness in schools and colleges, we provide a toll-free number so the children themselves can reach out.

The problem of sex trafficking and child marriage are not unique to India. Many countries grapple with this reality despite child marriage being outlawed in most instances. The global community needs to do more to end violence against women and girls.

Strength in the women’s network

Like me, many women activists are looked down upon, criticized, and even suspended from their jobs. My strength has been the support I have found through the women’s network, a network of more than six hundred women who exchange and support each other, via online platforms and meeting twice a year when possible.

Prioritize the protection of women and girls

My call to the signatories of the Beijing Platform for Action is to prioritize the safety and protection of women and girls. Our country is not safe for women and girls, and in fact no country in the world is safe. In August, a 31-year-old doctor trainee was raped and murdered at a Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata, India. India has many laws addressing gender-based violence, but the laws need to be implemented. As we look at thirty years since Beijing, more efforts should go toward implementation of gender justice commitments as well as enforcing existing gender justice and women’s rights mechanisms.



PASTOR SANDRA ROZENBERGA-SAAVEDRA

Holding governments accountable makes a difference

Pastor Sandra Rozenberga-Saavedra serves as a Pastor at the Trinity congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile (IELCH) and she also leads the Women's Pastoral Ministry of IELCH. Pastor Sandra works faithfully to empower Chilean women and to promote gender justice and women's rights in both church and society. For Pastor Sandra, women's rights are a central field of interest both personally and professionally.

In March 2024 Sandra participated in the United Nations (UN) Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) for the first time. Participating in the CSW was a huge opportunity to experience and explore the very core of global policy and follow up on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPfA). As part of her ongoing advocacy on women's rights, Pastor Sandra was also part of the Chile civil society group that engaged with the Committee of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) on gender-based discrimination in Chile during the 90th CEDAW session in October 2024.

The following interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Expressions of religion forbidden

I grew up in Latvia, at a time when it was part of the Soviet Union, and any expression of religion was forbidden. My grandmother sometimes took me to church for Christmas but we had to hide so the neighbors would not find out. The independence in the early nineties brought openness and liberation, and I started attending Sunday school more regularly. After high school I enrolled for a theology degree. At the time there were not many pastors, and most were old men. During my second year of study, I got a special designation from the archbishop to work as a pastor even though I was not yet ordained. I was later ordained when I was in exile in Chile.

An unexpected path

God is so great and so inexplicable that he leads us down unexpected paths. I wish I had a more elaborate story about my decision to work on gender justice but I do not. After years of the Lutheran World Federation's call for churches to mainstream gender in their daily work, my church recognized the need for this and for a dedicated gender focal person, and so I put myself forward. I have been leading the Women's Pastoral Ministry for two years. As stated in its declaration, the women's ministry of the Lutheran Church is formed from the need to organize as



Lutheran women – who represent 80 percent of Lutheran congregations – and to create a nationwide body of work that promotes the exchange and knowledge of the gifts that God has given us to be active women within our congregations. The women who make up the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile are housewives, heads of households, and professionals in different areas of social work. Most come from humble neighborhoods and need to strengthen their self-esteem and recognize their contribution to the church and the broader society in Chile.

CSW as a key engagement platform

CSW68 was an eye opener for me as I participated in a wide array of discussions on various aspects of gender justice. It is important to bring the multiple issues affecting women to the attention of governments and civil society that take part in global policy conversations. I realized that CSW provides us an opportunity to interact with government officials in a way that we cannot do in our countries. We have both formal and informal interactions at CSW. There is therefore scope to hold them accountable for their commitments.

In Chile, there are several women's groups who do not have the privilege to elevate their issues to the global level. These include older women, many suffering from physical and mental disability, and some in the rural areas who are unable to read or write. I was therefore fully aware of the immense responsibility I had, representing the multitudes of women who cannot make it to CSW. I was particularly excited to see the close link between the CSW themes and the BDPfA. I was really inspired to continue with my work locally and link it with other global processes focused on protecting women and girls' rights.

Gender equality firmly on the global agenda

Thirty years after the BDPfA, gender equality and women's rights are visible on the global agenda. There is also increased participation by civil society organizations to hold governments accountable to their commitments, not

just regarding the BDPfA but also other international mechanisms such as the CEDAW convention, the Human Rights Council, as well UN special procedures.

It is also encouraging to see the church taking its place in the public space and contributing on policy making. We are a trusted actor. Before the Law on Violence Against Women was passed in Congress in Chile, we were invited by the Ministry of Women to intervene in front of the Chilean Constitutional Court. We coordinated with women of different faiths and non-governmental organizations and succeeded in maintaining language on non-sexist education in the text of the law.

My church also submitted a shadow report to the CEDAW Committee's Eighth Periodic Report of Chile highlighting women's human rights violations in Chile. We commended the government of Chile for putting in place a normative framework that is progressive and includes a recent and comprehensive law on violence against women. What is lacking is implementation and more education of the general population on women's rights as human rights, in the school system and beyond. This is even more so in the regions far from the capital, Santiago de Chile, where there is a deep macho mentality.

Our shadow report focused on the following topics: human trafficking, prostitution, economic rights, and the abuse that is happening at state-run children protection homes. There were around 20,000 illegal adoptions in recent years; the stealing of children is a lucrative business for criminal groups. The high rates of teenage pregnancy and sexual abuse of teenage girls is also concerning. Other organizations working on diverse issues prepared their own reports, twenty-three in total, so we coordinated in order to find consensus and have one joint oral statement during the review session.

I also see progress in the involvement of young women in gender justice issues. They are very empowered; they organize themselves in non-governmental organizations and feminist organizations and raise their voices.

Although there has been progress in tackling violence against women, the main challenge is the culture of silence. Many women who come to church have suffered in silence. They've suffered at home and at work. It's hard for them to talk, let alone report. I remember once I was talking to my congregation about grief, and one woman expressed at the same time her grief after the death of her husband and her joy at her captivity being over after so many years of intimate partner violence.

Human encounters keep us going

It never ceases to amaze me that in moments of great difficulty, of stress, when you don't know where to go, the paths open up thanks to encounters with people. These encounters all have a human face; there are small details by which you don't expect a person to surprise you, and then you see that a seed has already been planted. What has worked very well with the demographic profile we have in our community, mostly middle-aged and older women, are the thematic workshops on gender justice: gardens, handicrafts, medicinal therapies, etc., which allow them to learn and use their newly acquired skills to start a business and earn income.

Tackling new issues

As we continue to work hard on issues already covered by the BDPfA, I call on the international community to consider those topics that were not discussed in Beijing but have huge impacts on women and girls. For example, technology has advanced at great speed. It brings opportunities to widen our reach as gender-justice advocates, but at the same time it has caused great harm to women and girls. We need a framework of sorts to safeguard the interests of women and girls.

I would also like to see increased financing for gender equality by governments. As civil society we do not have adequate resources for this work.



MIRIAM MAGDALEN ALUM

The community-engagement approach is very effective

Miriam Magdalen Alum is one of the leads in the Gender Justice work at the Lutheran World Federation Uganda. She has participated in the annual Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which takes stock of progress in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action. “Seeing such a large number of women coming together for a common cause at CSW67 was an impactful experience. When we’re many, we attract more attention, we share ideas, and we begin to see that we share many similar challenges but just at different levels depending on context and which part of the globe we are located. The collective voice is powerful; As a result of the collective voice, the CSW67 adopted agreed conclusions on “Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls” but we need to hold our governments accountable and monitor the achievement of certain milestones for candid deliberations at the next CSW.”

When asked about the progress made since Beijing, Miriam says: “In Uganda we have seen progress in terms of legal reform and policies being adopted based on recommendations from Beijing and related UN Conventions. Having in place these normative frameworks has enabled us to have a clear roadmap to promote gender justice.”

The following interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Going to church has shaped my life

I was born into a religious family. My father was a reverend before he passed away, my mother then took over the responsibility of the household and was a Mother's Union worker, and my sister is the Mother's Union coordinator as well as an ordained priest. Going to church has shaped my life: I was a youth leader from the early years of my career until now where apart from my work I continue to contribute when I can.

My mother's courage and resilience inspired me to work for gender justice

For as long as I can remember, my work and that of my family has been on gender justice. When I was little and I was sent to fetch water, I would pass by elder women's homes and I would fetch water or wood for them. If I was late getting home my mother would ask why and then she would understand. I saw my mum's quest for fair treatment as a widow in a male-dominated space, how she handled multiple cases of domestic violence, speaking up for marginalized women and girls, mobilizing blankets/bedsheets/clothes and food for vulnerable elder women and girls, encouraging



every boy or girl to go to school without discrimination and her vow to have all her children attain the highest level of education (even though she was denied the opportunity to attend secondary education in preference for her brother). Her courage and resilience inspired me to work for gender justice. At university I started to understand the bigger picture of gender inequalities; I studied social sciences and majored in gender and development; Dr. Catherine Anena (RIP), my lecturer at Makerere University greatly inspired me as to how I could pursue a gender course and help the community. I went on to complete a master's degree, during which my peers would praise my passion for gender justice.

It will take many years to close the gender gap despite progress in some areas

Reflecting on the status of gender equality, there has been some good progress although challenges remain. Uganda has seen progress in terms of legal reform and policies being adopted based on recommendations from Beijing and related UN Conventions. For example, the Uganda Gender Policy of 2007, the Domestic Violence Act of 2010, the Female Genital Mutilation Act of 2010, the Parliamentary Amended Act of 2020, the Public Finance Management Act of 2015 that mandates government institutions to allocate a budget for gender programming, amongst others are positive steps in the right direction. We even have a Male Engagement Policy in place – who would have imagined that in a context like Uganda!

As LWF Uganda we also walk the talk. Remarkably, for the first time in the history of LWF Uganda, we now have a woman as Country Representative, and it gives us a sense of pride.

Another area where I have seen progress in my lifetime is in the area of women and education. When I was a child, little girls would be enrolled in primary school in lesser numbers; but now there is more awareness and parity in terms of numbers, which can be attributed to government commitment to the education-for-all policy through the Universal Primary Education (UPE), Universal Secondary Education (USE), and Tertiary and Business Technical and Vocational Education and Training (BTVET) initiatives. To enable girls to stay in school and complete their education, the government introduced the school re-entry policy targeting teen mothers, the 2021 abridged curriculum for primary level to compensate for time loss during COVID-19 lockdown, and Menstrual Hygiene

Management (MHM) in schools. At the university level, the government maintained the Affirmative Action, whereby 1.5 points are awarded to girls at the point of entry, and the students loan scheme. Where we can improve is in the quality of teaching and learning, in ensuring that they complete schooling all the way to secondary and higher education, and that they further engage in STEM.

Financial inclusion and vocational training programs in Uganda have improved women's economic participation, contributing to greater financial independence and leadership opportunities. Despite these positive changes, women still face significant economic barriers, including a persistent gender pay gap and concentration in low-wage, informal sectors. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2023), it will take 132 years to close the gender gap, with many women lacking access to social protection in informal employment.

More investment needs to go towards increasing women's political participation. We have 189 women in parliament out of 556, accounting for 33.8% of representation. In the political arena the challenge for women goes beyond representation to having their decisions respected by the men that sit at the table, instead of being challenged and degraded in the political campaigns.

The global digital gender gap is a concern

In 2023 I participated in CSW67 which focused on Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. This resonated with me as LWF Uganda has been actively using Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) to prevent and respond to Gender-based violence (GBV). Some of the key issues shared during the discussions at the CSW were: gender stereotypes and cultural norms often hindering women's and girls' access to digital technologies; limited access to education especially for women and girls, which affects the utilization of ICT; economic inequalities, high costs of mobile phones, the internet, online harassment, and infringements on digital rights, weak internet connectivity and the lack of comprehensive legislation that addresses sexual abuses and offences.

My key reflections from CSW67 were that governments need to create an empathetic society for ICT usage for all women and girls, design and enforce laws and policies that protect the users, and, most importantly, enhance women and girl's opportunities to Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) programs, then we would go a long way in closing the gender digital gap.

The resilience of women in Uganda continues to surprise me

Despite seeming insurmountable challenges, the resilience of women in Uganda surprises me. We work with refugees, over 80% of them women and children fleeing from the war in South Sudan, Sudan, the DRC, and elsewhere; they suffer abuse on the way, and yet they arrive to a refugee settlement here and they say, "We stand strong, and we move on." We also work with the host population, which has complex problems associated with harmful cultural norms and traditions including early child marriages, Female Genital Mutilation and others, but some of these women and girls have chosen to persevere through pain anticipating a breakthrough not only for themselves but for their children, grandchildren, sisters, brothers and their communities. These women are relentless in their pursuit for freedom from violence and abuse. We also applaud some of the men and boys who have continued to join forces for Gender Justice because they have understood that is not only about women but justice for all. These are the true heroines and heroes and their sacrifices should not be in vain but rewarded.

Community engagement is an effective strategy for change

In our context, what works is the community engagement approach. We identify influential people and the Role Model Men (RMM) in the community to pass on information related to gender justice to fellow men and boys. We have Male Action Groups (MAG) trained on GBV, human rights, protection of women and girls, child protection, etc., that act as a bridge between our programming and the community. We have platforms for discussion with men and boys or women and girls only, or mixed, where we discuss traditional norms using approaches such as Start Awareness, Support and Action (SASA!) an evidence-based community mobilization approach to prevent violence against women etc.

We have community activists who are identified by the community as champions for gender equality. We have diverse community groups that raise awareness in the community through music, dance, and drama and it is very effective in passing information and promoting peaceful co-existence. We collaborate with, build the capacities of and hold campfire dialogues with cultural and religious leaders and hold them accountable for gender justice because of their gatekeeping role in the community. Also, we promote leadership training and mentorship for women and girls to enhance their visibility and influence in the political and economic spheres.

Gender equality is not a privilege but a fundamental right

Thirty years after the Beijing Platform for Action, the progress made is commendable, but there is still much to be done. Gender equality is not a privilege, it is a fundamental right. Women continue to face systemic barriers, and global crises such as pandemics and climate change exacerbate these challenges. The commitments made in 1995 must be renewed with urgency and backed by actionable policies, adequate funding, and political will. To achieve true gender equality, signatories must work collectively to dismantle the remaining barriers and ensure that the vision of the Beijing Platform is realized globally. Women's empowerment is the key to achieving lasting peace, stability, and development for all.



KALEB SUTHERLAND

Young people of faith are closest to the world's most pressing problems

Kaleb Sutherland leads the International Leaders Program of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), growing access to higher education, internationalizing campuses, and forming globally-connected leaders. He has participated in the annual Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which takes stock of progress made in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action.

When asked about the progress made since then, he says: “There has been meaningful involvement of young adults in UN decision-making spaces, especially on the part of the Lutheran World Federation. “Meaningful” is an important word because it is a matter of centering our voices, not only of filling a quota. We have had the opportunity and the strength to show up as youth and young adults to contribute toward progress on the commitments made in Beijing. We celebrate that we’re moving the needle, even though at a slow pace.”

The following interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Women as the foundation of communities

I grew up in a Christian family in a rural community in the United States of America. There were many educators and teachers in my family and in my community, people who felt that their identity as people of faith called them to the vocation of teaching. This has influenced my experience of communities of faith and how I see the world of education relating to my own vocation. Specifically, the role of women as the foundation of communities of faith was present throughout my childhood. As a child I could not articulate it as such, but it was women who held the community together, in contrast or even in conflict with the fact that that particular denomination did not permit women to serve in institutional leadership roles. The system did not reflect the reality, and it created in me both curiosity and anger that now inform how I show up in my work to make systems more equitable.

Showing up in the struggle for justice

I do not think there was a single event that made me decide that I wanted to work for gender justice but there are many small stories that accumulated over time. I credit a lot of my interest and passion for this work to the women mentors in my life that provide me with examples of what it means to show up in the struggle for justice. One formative story I can think of is shortly after finishing university when I spent time in South Africa through an ELCA program called Young Adults in Global Mission. I had the opportunity to engage in volunteer community service alongside the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa. I lived in a church compound that hosted a lot of events, and my room was next to the center's kitchen. The kitchen was the epicenter of the community and was a space primarily run by women. In a time when I needed community, those women graciously invited me to join them to prepare and serve meals to the center's guests. Geographically and culturally, I was in a very different place from where I grew up, but I felt at home because it reminded me of the women-led spaces in my childhood. I often think back to the foundational life lessons I learned in that kitchen that deeply shape my work in gender justice today.

Showing up boldly and inviting young women to the front where they belong

I always say that one of the greatest gifts of being part of the global Lutheran communion is that our collective organizing power gives us access to advocacy spaces. I have been very fortunate to participate in the CSW over the last decade as an advocate and as a facilitator of the experience for others. I work with the ELCA's International Leaders Program, which is a longstanding collaboration with other Lutheran member churches to grow access to education and leadership, with a strategic emphasis on youth and women. For the past ten years, we have been working hard to reverse historic trends that left women – especially young women – with unequal access to these opportunities. With input from our stakeholders, a lot of strategic planning, experimenting, and growing over time, our team developed new initiatives to invite women to pursue formal education and other types of capacity-strengthening initiatives.

The focus has been strategically on young women in their late teens and early twenties because, in many contexts, women at this pivotal point in their lives face family and community pressures that keep them away from formal education. Part of our commitment to these leaders is to open invitations for them to practice leadership both inside and outside the classroom, to help root their academic experience in the contextual realities where their leadership will play out. One example of this has been the chance to invite program participants to the CSW as part of the LWF delegation. They are passionate gender advocates and they show up in these spaces either confirming their already existing call to advocacy or experiencing it for the first time and finding out that they want to weave it into their careers. CSW is an enormous event, and I'm proud that we as the LWF delegation are often some of the youngest people in the room. We're boldly showing up and inviting young women to the front, where they belong. In collaboration with the LWF advocacy staff, my role has been to help extend the invitation, create the space, make sense of the complicated world of the UN, and encourage people to explore it and make the necessary connection points.

The system has a long way to go

There has been meaningful involvement of young adults in UN decision-making spaces, especially representing the LWF. “Meaningful” is an important word because it’s a matter of centering our voices, not only of filling a quota. We have had the opportunity and the strength to show up as youth and young adults to make progress on the commitments made in Beijing. We celebrate that we’re moving the needle, but we are aware that the system has a long way to go to sufficiently center the voices of young women, indigenous people, people with disabilities, and others. This is not just nice to have, it’s essential.

In terms of recommendations, we saw some hopeful movement at the ECOSOC Youth Forum in New York this year (2024). Some parts of the UN system are responding in a structural way to the wisdom of young voices, we see new accountability systems, new positions being created, etc. How do we meaningfully get young voices centered in decision-making? Systems of inequality have been designed, and if we want to change the system, we need to design it anew with an equity framework. All of us are designers, and the best equipped to design an equitable solution are the voices closest to the problem we’re trying to solve. There needs to be a fundamental re-understanding of what qualifies as expertise: lived experience has an incredible value in addressing the enormous challenges we face. The message I show up with is that young people are rightful designers of solutions to gender inequity, to climate change, to insecurity, and to war and genocide. Any conversation without us will not meet the challenges.

Surprising stories of persistence in the midst of struggle

One thing that surprises and inspires me every day is the incredible dedication of leaders from marginalized groups who show up day after day even when the structure often does not recognize their human dignity. They have the persistence, the courage to say, “I’m going to keep showing up, I’m going to keep giving of my wisdom and energy in hope that one day these systems will be different, equitable.” This isn’t to gloss over how hard it is. These are people who have every right to walk away, and many in their shoes would have done so long ago. In days when the system runs me down, I’m reminded of these surprising stories of persistence in the midst of struggle.

Building access to education and leadership is key

In the context of the work I do, building access to education and leadership, our team has seen success in understanding that any interventions must be responsive to the human reality. For example, my team stewards complex systems, and a large part of our role is the work of administering grants, monitoring systems, managing complex budgets, etc. But we always strive to add the relational element to the equation. Together with our program stakeholders, we build opportunities for mutual relationship and connect our community into a wide web of support. We want to be more than the money on the bank account. Building access through removing financial barriers is important and central to our part in the work of gender justice, but it’s not the full picture. We are most effective as a community when we can support one another, engage in mutual learning, and show up to one another as whole human beings. People in our communities have complex lived realities, in particular young women scholars who carry heavy burdens of family and community care, and it’s important to have systems in place that honor their whole life experience and recognize that expertise comes in many forms. That’s one successful strategy.

I’ve also seen the power of intercultural exchange and learning as central to making progress on the Beijing commitments. We have a great example of this in our lived experience as the LWF. Through the LWF, we get to imagine ourselves as part of the global community where we exist together to share our differences, our stories, our strategies. This incredible opportunity for truly global exchange is unique among actors working toward the SDGs and the Beijing commitments. We as the LWF have something important to add when we show up at the CSW as a unified but also infinitely complex voice. We represent almost eighty million people from the Lutheran tradition around the globe, and this global relationality is part of our power, particularly on the gender justice conversation. And as we bring this nuanced and beautifully complex voice to advocate at the UN, in the process we learn from each other, and this impacts the work we do when we go back home. We share best practices and

acknowledge that our contexts are very different. It gives us a grounded and authentic understanding of our part in the bigger conversation, and it allows us to contribute something unique and critical to the rest of civil society.

Center young people as experts as a matter of necessity, not quotas.

I believe that in many contexts, communities of faith – and specifically young people of faith – are closest to the most pressing problems the world faces today. Whether it's equitable access to education, healthcare, freedom to make decisions on reproductive health, mitigating climate change, economic stability, ending genocide, etc.: these are all issues that impact young people – and often young women – disproportionately. We know what it feels like to be given solutions by someone who hasn't lived the problem; we know what it feels like for these solutions not to work. In 1995 the Beijing Platform for Action brought together the designers of the time to craft solutions for inequities that unfortunately continue to be relevant today. The good news is that the expertise we need to address today's gender inequities already exists – the challenge now is to hear those expert voices. I call upon the signatories to center young people as experts and to understand deeply that it's a matter of necessity, not quotas. We are equipped, we are ready, we are demanding to be part of the conversation. The solutions exist now. Our task is to create systems that do not exclude the voices that have those solutions.



TAMAR HADDAD

From words to action

Tamar Haddad is a young Palestinian woman currently acting as regional coordinator for the LWF Gender Justice Network based in Jerusalem. She has previously worked as the Gender Justice Project Manager at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL), supported by the LWF. A graduate of California Lutheran University, Haddad is the author of the book *The Future of Palestine: How Discrimination Hinders Change*.

A passionate advocate for gender justice, Haddad has represented her home country Palestine and the ELCJHL in international conventions and conferences for the purpose of making change through public policy and international development. She has participated in the Commission on the Status of Women several times, including CSW65 where together with other Lutheran gender justice advocates she called on churches to step up action to empower women and girls: “I don’t want to only talk; I want to see tangible changes.”

The following interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Fond memories of Christmas in Bethlehem and Jerusalem

I was born into a Christian Lutheran family. My father used to work with LWF in Jerusalem where he was responsible for the education program. I have fond memories of when we used to go to the church in Bethlehem for Christmas and other celebrations in Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Later, I received a full scholarship from the ELCA's International Women Leaders Program to study at the California Lutheran University. We would meet at the ELCA headquarters in Chicago with the other women leaders, and it was there that I would hear about the CSW and that I started my work with women's rights. I attended the CSW as a delegate several times and in 2020 I was a panelist in one of the LWF sessions after publishing my book and then again in 2021.

Traumatic event strengthened my resolve to work for gender justice

I have been inspired by many different things to join the struggle for gender justice, but one traumatic event stands out for me. This event also inspired me to write my book, *The Future of Palestine: How Discrimination Hinders Change*.

This book was inspired by the honor killing of a friend and classmate, Israa, in 2019. We went to Bethlehem University together: Israa was very smart, and empowered. She came from a conservative family where strict social rules guide courtship between young women and men. She had already suffered from psychological and physical abuse by members of her family, and when she went out with her fiancé, on a chaperoned date in broad daylight, they killed her soon after. Israa's death is one of the main reasons why I do gender justice work. Another twenty-three women died from gender-related violence that year in Palestine alone, and these are only the ones we know about. Many others continue to suffer from GBV, both in Muslim and Christian communities. Now, because of the war on Gaza, we don't get to hear about it, because there's a bigger force killing the women.

I started working for women in Gaza with the Young Women's Christian Association through the ELCJHL and already there were many challenges regarding pregnancies and access to safe deliveries, menstruation needs and access to sanitary pads, and addressing the general situation of poverty and lack of the most basic rights including the right to shelter, water, medicines, and food. The Middle East conflict has not made the situation any easier for women. The gendered impacts of the war were only made worse after the 7 October 2023. Women are trying so hard to survive, so hard; they are not leaving, as part of their resistance. They focus on the communal aspect, their family and neighbors; if the Israeli army bombed their home, they will go to the house that's still standing, and gather there. Living in such a context compels me to continue advocating for the protection of women's human rights locally as well as globally. This is more important now than ever before.



We don't want only to talk, but to see tangible change

At CSW, I get inspired by the gender justice work that many organizations and people do around the world. In fact, at my first CWS, I got connected with the Palestinian judge who developed the Gender Justice Policy in Jerusalem. Later and while working at the ELCJHL, we worked together on further developing the policy.

While the CSW has given us a platform to contribute to global policy and dialogue on issues affecting women, I am conscious of the need to move beyond words to action, as difficult as that may be. In every CSW, we say, with the other LWF colleagues, that we don't want only to talk, but to see tangible change. Sadly in my context, change is slow. And if anything, I am only seeing things getting worse in certain areas. This is the same across the globe where there is an increase in violent war and conflict, and women and girls continue to suffer the adverse impacts. I want to see action, for example in the war on Gaza: What are we doing to protect women and girls? As the international community, we are providing short-term humanitarian access, but we are not addressing the root issues of violence. We should be able to take a stance and issue powerful statements against the war. The situation has also adversely affected cancer patients from Gaza that we used to get out on special permits to access treatment at the Augusta Victoria Hospital run by LWF Jerusalem. The hospital covers a gap in the Palestinian healthcare system and enables Palestinians from the West Bank and previously from Gaza to access health services otherwise not available to them where they live.

Marginal gains thirty years after Beijing

Thirty years after the Beijing conference, I have seen women advancing in education, as well as occupying leadership roles including active participation in the mainstream economy in Palestine. However, violence against women is as prominent as it was thirty years ago and remains one of the most widespread violations of women and girls' rights. This is the same for many countries in the world: not a single country has achieved gender equality. The United Nations tracking has also revealed massive gaps in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 5 on gender equality. We need to push harder both at the institutional and wider societal level if we are to realize the targets set out back in 1995.

Churches play a significant role in protecting women

When I first started working at the ELCJHL office I was happy to hear about the LWF Gender Justice Policy, which was available in Arabic and in English, as it meant that survivors of violence against women could go to the church and get protection, and more generally the policy would support and empower women. The Catholic Church in Jerusalem followed suit, and started implementing its own gender policy. That was a very positive institutional development with real life impact for women. I was surprised that the community didn't shun but actually supported the policy. This showed how much it was needed. As I have said on previous occasions, my country is very religious, so churches play a very, very important role in ending oppression and suffering for women.

Increasing women's agency is a pathway toward equality

Apart from the implementation of a solid gender policy, as mentioned before, I believe that economic empowerment workshops are a great strategy to teach women skills so they can go beyond doing household chores. As long as women are not empowered and are absent from public life it will be hard for them to make decisions about issues that affect their lives. Considering the high unemployment rates in Palestine, enhancing women's agency is very essential.

Take a stand against conflict-induced violence

As we celebrate this thirty-year milestone, conflict-induced violence remains a concern. As someone from a war zone, I urge the international community to give attention to places where women are suffering from oppressive forces, and take a stand.



REV OFELIA DAVILA

Advancement of gender equity needs to start in Sunday schools

Rev. Ofelia Davila is a Lutheran Pastor who has served as the Pastoral President of the Lutheran Church of Peru since 2023. She also works in coordination with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) communion office to accompany churches on advancing gender justice and women's rights. In 2024 Ophelia participated in the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York.

Speaking about the experience, she says, "We saw how, at the global level, women have advanced, but [also] how much further there is to go. Patriarchy is still very present within the laws and policies of today. As a pastor, I had the responsibility to raise my voice for the people who weren't physically present at the CSW."

Rev. Ofelia says that, whilst Beijing was a wake-up call and there have been advancements, there is still a long way to go and there are other factors that continue to move the work backward such as fundamentalist messages. Ironically, Rev. Ofelia was a theology student when this landmark document was formulated.

The following interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Early beginnings

I have been a pastor for twenty-four years. My leadership in the church began when I was 16 years old. Growing up, I was very engaged in the Catholic Church. My parents were Catholic. At 6 years old I was introduced to the Lutheran Church in Sunday school. Together with my three siblings, we participated in Sunday school where we discussed liberation theology with our pastor. These discussions also focused on the equal rights of everyone.

Growing up in a household with six women, the female voice/influence was strong. I had the benefit of seeing a model of equal sharing of domestic chores from an early age. My father was very much involved in cooking and doing laundry, something that always surprised my friends as most men in my community did not do this.

But despite these positive examples in my home, I couldn't help but notice that boys were given a larger allowance than girls with the explanation that boys might pay for or invite someone when eating out. I started to notice these differences in my adolescence. By the time I went to seminary and university, I was more of an activist, especially when living in a patriarchal society with a lot of machismo, with this way of "protecting" women in laws but not actually doing so in practice.



The Beijing Platform for Action affirms our value as women

In 1995, I started studying Theology. During my studies I would read about the Beijing Platform for Action, and I thought "how wonderful." As a theology student, it had me reflect on how many women have fought for their rights within the church and in society. And the BPfA focuses on this exact thing: reaffirming that we as women are still here. I think this was a triumph for the BPfA. But beyond that, in Peru's case, various laws and ministries have been created. For example, the Ministry of Women and the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations have been created. Since Beijing I think we have advanced a lot.

God wants us to be free of violence

I have done a lot of work around violence against women, especially in Cusco. Of the families I accompanied during the seven years, 80 percent suffered domestic violence. Many women would say they didn't receive a formal education and that they didn't have a profession. They'd say they couldn't expose their partner because he would leave them without livelihood. They'd say they'd just have to have patience. I'd tell them they couldn't have patience in a situation of abuse. I accompanied many women as they denounced the violence. I also had to talk with both individuals – the abused and the abuser – so that the situation wouldn't happen again, because that violence can be passed down. Children living in those situations also have a higher chance of being abused or abusing a partner in the future. God wants us to be free of violence.

Made in the image of God

It's important that one's faith and their identity are connected. I am made in the image of God. My neighbor is made in the image of God. What is happening when the person in front of me, made in the image of God, is being violated. You can't remain oblivious to the situation when you see people's rights and identity being threatened. Instead, you ask, "How can I help? What can I do?" If you enter into a space where there are many needs that aren't being met, you shouldn't feel comfortable. Whatever space you enter into, whether school or work, if something is unjust or incorrect, you need at least to raise your voice and say that something isn't right. We are all important in the eyes of God, and this importance and care should be given to absolutely everyone.

An inter-generational mandate

We have made a lot of progress in both church and society with more awareness on gender justice and women's rights. However, one of the key challenges facing us is the commitment of youth to gender equality. How can we motivate the youth to accompany us in this work? In my country, many don't want to join together because we are from different generations. When so much of our world is focused on the internet and artificial intelligence, how can we integrate the younger generations in our work? How will we motivate them to participate in conversations and reflections where we can discuss together in our country context? We need the young people to join and lead in this struggle for equality.

Experience at CSW

After all my advocacy at the local level, it was very exciting for me to engage at the global level and to meet a government minister from Peru. I was able to make the minister aware of the challenges we are facing on the ground and alert them of the fact that their efforts weren't reaching the people. In Peru's case for example, access to the internet in rural communities remains very low. Yet government officials will say, "this information is available at this website. They can use this link to access the information. Or they can dial 100 to ask for help."

Even owning a phone is not a given. The government needs to be more attentive to the contexts of their populations. In order to really help, they have to recognize the realities in which these individuals are living. Otherwise, the laws won't change anything.

The process is slow at the global level but there are signs of progress here and there. However, we need to think about how we are going to continue to move forward the agenda of gender justice. And we need to think about how, from now to 2030, we are going to work to ensure that the agenda is sustainable.

As church we have to do our part

We don't live in a bubble but we form part of a society. I am proud of the progress we have made in Peru. We have tried doing this in our congregations, in community conversations, and communication. In 2014–2015, my church's board of directors reworked all of the statutes and guidelines. Leadership needed to consist of 50% men, 50% women, and within this 20% needed to be youth and laypeople. This has been our format for the decade. This work mentioned in Beijing is being implemented within the church itself.

One of the challenges we've been facing is the rise of Christian fundamentalism, which surged during the pandemic. The advancement on gender equality needs to happen in Sunday schools, Bible studies, men's and women's reflection groups, and in the pulpit. The work is constant. We have to maintain the work that has been done and continue to disperse the message and work. People might be physically at church for a few hours, which is the way the message can be shared every day. But how can we empower the women in our community to continue sharing this message at home? There is a lot of imbalance in terms of power when it comes to women – in the economy, in healthcare, and in education. The fight is constant.

Ecumenically, we form part of the Table for Gender Justice and Human Rights in Lima. We've had to do a lot of deconstruction and relearning of the cultural norms related to women. Men do not get the final say in a relationship. There is a conversation to be had because we are equals.

Looking ahead

The international community has to take a holistic look at gender issues. There are multiple and interesting forms of inequality at play. Poverty is another obstacle and as long as women operate at the margins of the economy, we cannot achieve our goals. So, financing for gender equality is a critical area as well as addressing structural barriers that hinder women's full participation in public life. When something happens at home, women and girls are usually the ones responsible for accompanying family members, for example if someone is sick, which affects their education and economic opportunities.



EVA-MARITA RINNE-KOISTINEN

Safeguarding normative frameworks is critical.

Eva Marita Rinne-Koistinen, a seasoned gender and women's rights advocate serves as a Team Lead and Senior Advisor at Finn Church Aid, an organization she has been with since 2007. Finn Church Aid (FCA) is one of the Lutheran World Federation's long-standing partners with the two organizations collaborating on women's human rights and gender justice advocacy at both global and country levels.

Eva-Marita represented Finn Church Aid in the LWF's gender justice policy brainstorming sessions as the organization worked to develop its gender justice policy, a first by a faith-based organization. Eva-Marita has closely followed the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and other gender justice and women's rights mechanisms, including participation in the annual UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

When asked about the state of the world thirty years after Beijing, Eva-Marita says "The recent dynamics in global politics and shrinking of civil society space in general, in particular on gender equality, are really alarming; the way women's and girls' rights are being threatened is really concerning. These create serious risks to the progress that has been reached as well as for future work with broader allies on gender equality.

The following interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

A typical Christian background

I have had quite a typical Christian background, which is common in the Finnish society, with mostly engagements in the church and religious groups in connection with religious celebrations and family occasions.

My university studies introduced me to the gender space

I became interested in gender justice during my university studies and then later as a part of my PhD thesis, followed by different job responsibilities in my employment career. Then, when I joined FCA, I got to know and learn more about working together with ecumenical partners on human rights and gender justice. It has really been an enriching path to learn and collaborate with gender advocates representing different faith-oriented backgrounds.



Contributing to a great cause

Nothing gives me more joy than to know that I am contributing to strengthening the capacity of our partners and also supporting them in their quest for gender equality. My role at FCA has afforded me that opportunity. I remember my early days when I was part of the LWF consultations as they developed their gender justice policy. LWF and FCA have continued to collaborate, utilizing the

rights-based approach to gender as well as the faith perspective. This holistic approach is very essential to our work as faith actors as the two approaches are complementary. We have also done many shadow reports together for the Universal Periodic Review mechanism, some also to the Committee on the Convention of Eliminating Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and also to some other United Nations human rights instruments highlighting aspects of gender justice and women's rights. This work has raised issues affecting communities and also amplified the voices of local-level human rights and gender justice advocates.

The CSW is an enriching space

I have participated in many sessions of the UN Commission on the Status of Women and it is always enriching for me as I have met many wonderful people coming from very different backgrounds and perspectives. It is really a great platform to connect and learn from one another. I am particularly pleased that faith actors have been very engaged in the space, offering strong recommendations to strengthen accountability in the global community but also within the faith and gender sector.

With the increase in political tensions, the CSW is a vital space to take stock and reflect on commitments that were made thirty years ago. In order for this to happen, we need to strategize as faith actors on key issues that concern us and be able to speak with one voice. Whilst our approaches may be different, we have to show up as a solid, united front and amplify the voices from our communities. I have always enjoyed the open discussions with us all, bringing different perspectives but with the common goal of making a difference in the lives of women and girls.

We have to safeguard the normative frameworks

It goes without saying that safeguarding the normative frameworks is very urgent and critical. We have seen an increase in violent war and conflict with women and girls suffering the most. We have to fight for the people who are from these conflict areas. Despite our best efforts, we have not made progress on women in power and decision-making. We need to bring out the voices of women and identify opportunities where they can raise their voices and

spaces they can influence. Violence against women and discrimination based on different forms that are directly attacking women and girls are on the rise both online and offline. There has been great progress in many of the twelve critical areas of the BPfA and, for example, attention to women's education and training and to women's economic empowerment and agency, including political and decision-making, has led to substantial progress. But serious challenges remain: today, for example, language and the narrowing of women's role and terminology are signals of a shrinking space for gender justice.

Local actors are essential for the success of our work

I think over the years our learning experience suggests that we need to be really sharp in our advocacy messages and define them together with the communities and local partners so that they are most informative and influential and can deliver the concerns on the ground. It is important to continue discussing and working together with the local actors, for example after an advocacy event or report is finalized, to continue collaboration in following up the issue and, at some stage, to evaluate together how successful it was to raise these particular concerns, what else can be done together, and whether there would be others to engage with, such as other faith partners.

Then we need to protect the space for a faith-based perspective; faith-based actors have their voice and it has to be heard. But we also need to protect human rights-based approaches and actors and to work in a way that they do not become controversial, but complement each other and are appreciated by all engaged parties.

Inspiring to work with faith actors

It came to me as a pleasant but not big surprise that it has been really inspiring to work with different faith-oriented actors, learn from them, and share the different perspectives on promoting gender justice and protecting women's and girls' rights.

Commitments made in Beijing critical for our times

The commitments of BPfA continue to be critical in our times and the whole platform requires increased attention and commitment from all areas of society. We must be open to include into the BPfA new critical areas and visions for the future.