

## "Common Ground: Safeguarding Freedom of Religion or Belief and Gender Equality"

Tuesday 3 March 2020, 13.30 – 15.00

*Mona Rishmawi, Chief, Rule of Law, Equality and Non-Discrimination Branch, OHCHR*

Thank you for the opportunity to be here with you today. I am particularly pleased to speak following the presentation of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of religion or belief of his report on gender based violence and discrimination in the name of religion or belief (A/HRC/43/48), which has received significant attention.

This important report acknowledges the mile-stone of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It provides a comprehensive blueprint for women's rights and gender equality, which is as relevant today as it was a quarter of a century ago. Last week, at the Human Rights Council, we celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. At that time, all States recognized the importance of religion, spirituality and belief in the lives of women and men, and our pursuit of our aspirations (see para 24 of BPFA). It reaffirmed that all women have a right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion as part of their inalienable human rights. The consensus achieved at Beijing simultaneously insisted that "it is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms," most notably the human rights of women and girls.

I raise this because those who were at Beijing realized that achieving gender equality is not at odds with protecting freedom of religion – though the two are often presented as "in tension" with each other or as a "zero-sum" game. Human rights are not a game, let alone a zero-sum game. Everyone gains, when there is greater fulfilment of human dignity.

Indeed, there is a need to counter the false dichotomy between gender equality and freedom of religion or belief. It is absurd to ask individuals to choose between them. The findings of the Special Rapporteur point to specific areas where progress needs to be made. These include addressing a host of discriminatory laws and gender based violence by private actors, including religious leaders.

The Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments on "Faith for Rights" embrace this holistic approach. Let me point to its fifth commitment, which contains a concrete pledge to revisit those religious understandings and interpretations that appear to perpetuate gender inequality and harmful stereotypes or even condone gender-based violence. This commitment is drawn from specific references to the holy texts of a wide diversity of religions.

I think we can agree that the tension is not between religion and gender inequality – any related tensions rather lie in human interpretations of religion which perpetuate gender inequality. In this context, the #Faith4Rights toolkit, which was launched online last month, stresses that "Women and girls have always suffered from patriarchal interpretations of almost all religions. This is not limited to any particular religion or region."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Press/faith4rights-toolkit.pdf> (module 5)

One of the greatest challenges we see today is the way in which appeals to religious belief are used as a pretext to justify denial of human rights for certain groups. In the recent past, we have seen a well-organized pushback on human rights generally, and on the rights of women and gender equality specifically, especially with regard to sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as the rights of LGBTI persons. We need to recognize that these attacks may be made in the name of religion, but there are often made to respond to wider political considerations. They are frequently accompanied by sentiments for the assertion of uniformity, anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies specifically designed to exclude difference and certain groups. In its manifestations, there is a link between discrimination, xenophobia and religious intolerance and policies which restrict women's expression of their religious belief such as bans on certain clothing.

The Special Rapporteur's recommendations for States to review laws, to withdraw reservations to treaties such as CEDAW, to combat all forms of violence and coercion perpetrated on gender grounds, to tackle hate speech, and to ensure the legal protections for individuals to manifest their religion or belief, such as in healthcare settings, are extremely relevant. States and non-state actors are implicated in these actions with significant recommendations addressing faith leaders and civil society organizations, particularly encouraging them to speak up for human rights and gender equality.

Speaking up is one of the most effective strategies for challenging the misuse of religion to deny gender equality is to build solidarity across movements. This means upholding the gender equality agenda in its entirety and not sacrificing those aspects deemed more "sensitive" when politically expedient. But beyond this we need to more explicitly linking with movements for racial justice, migrant rights, religious freedom, the environment, youth rights, and so on.

We need to show up for one another, be bold, build an intersectional movement with a long term vision – to eliminate all forms for discrimination and stigma, and create societies of inclusion and respect for human rights for all. A constructive engagement to search for common ground on faith, human rights and gender equality should continue.<sup>2</sup> Faith actors have an important role to play and the rights of women and girls have much to gain in this regard.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Press/faith4rights-toolkit.pdf> (module 5)