



FAITH MOVEMENT FOR GENDER JUSTICE

## **Introduction to the international Side by Side movement for gender justice**

**Side by Side launch during CSW61,  
16 March 2017**

The Side by Side movement for gender justice is a movement for transformation. It's a movement of faith leaders, faith-based organisations and individuals - for all people of faith who share Side by Side's understanding of gender justice; which is to see a world where everybody, women and men, boy and girls are

- valued equally
- able to share equitably in the distribution of power, knowledge and resources
- free from cultural and interpersonal systems of privilege and oppression
- free from violence and repression, based on gender.

We know that so long as women and girls don't have equal access to economic, social and political opportunities; so long as, early marriage and unsafe childbirth, and dropping out of secondary education remain a reality for so many girls, and so long as gender-based violence prevails and is tolerated, then women are robbed of agency and are going to be in a negative starting point when it comes to developing themselves and their families, and lifting their communities – and their nations, out of poverty.

So there is a very clear development imperative for gender justice. We had MDG 3 and now have SDG 5 and gender targets in others of the SDGs. We have the Beijing Platform for Action, CEDAW, and a string of Agreed Conclusions from annual sessions of the CSW. So many times since arriving here a few days ago, I have heard the question asked, 'What about implementation?' There has been progress but why have so many aspects of discrimination against women and girls just not changed. To find out why we have to look at what's going on at local level, at grassroots.

There is also a clear faith imperative, a moral and theological imperative for gender justice. No amount of cherry-picking of verses from sacred texts can overwhelm the deep, broad brushstrokes that lift up human flourishing, and just relationships between everybody, women and men, girls and boys, as something that is intrinsically caught up with walking humbly with God.

The empowerment of women and the empowerment of men to live and work in just relationship requires a transformation of individuals and a transformation of harmful cultural norms, and a transformation of communities - and this is where faith leaders and faith groups – at least where they are adequately sensitised and equipped - have huge potential.

So the international Side by Side faith movement for gender justice was born a couple of years ago, emerging from an international multi-actor symposium convened by Christian Aid. We realised that there is already a lot of faith-based work going on but that it would benefit significantly from being more coordinated. The movement has grown quickly. We have 40 international and national member organisations, and national 'chapters' of the movement have emerged following regional

workshops in Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Brazil, Scotland, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia – and our attention is now turning to the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Middle East, South Asia and West Africa. The Side by Side movement isn't however limited to these areas and we would love to know how you might get involved.

For the Side by Side movement to be effective at grassroots, the journey towards gender justice must be locally owned and locally led. Where national chapters of Side by Side have emerged, it's because local faith leaders and local structures such as national Councils of Churches and other ecumenical networks have been energised by the faith-based principles and values of the Side by Side movement, and the aims and objectives that we have worked on together.

Side by Side's objectives are confidently ambitious! Our strategic plan for the next few years has been worked out in consultation. It's on our website and sets out the rationale for the Side by Side movement, our theory of change, the key barriers preventing faith actors from making an impact on gender justice, our strategic objectives and the sorts of interventions and activities that our members organisations will seek to do together wherever that is possible.

Our five strategic objectives are to ensure that:

1. more faith leaders, faith institutions and FBOs are promoting and modelling gender equitable social norms and condemning gender inequality and the disempowerment of women and girls.
2. More faith leaders, faith institutions and FBOs are providing practical guidance and support to communities on how to prevent and respond to gender injustice issues
3. More women of faith groups, and more groups of women and men of faith are active and influential in achieving SDG targets.
4. More faith leaders are advocating for the development and implementation of laws, policies and services that recognise, prevent and respond to gender equality
5. Governments and development actors are increasingly recognising and supporting faith institutions as key actors in achieving gender justice outcomes. Being represented at the launch of the UN Women-convened launch of the Gender & Religion platform the other morning was an important moment.

Faith groups are a permanent presence in every community. And people still listen to faith leaders! And actually governments listen to faith leaders! So faith leaders are in a very strong position to be challenging harmful cultural norms and practices. As Loretta said, we have already seen how they can make a difference in dismantling stigma around HIV/AIDS. They also helped families to let go of centuries-old cultural practices that were adding to the spread of the ebola virus. They have also done a huge amount to remove the stigma and discrimination faced by people who have recovered from ebola. Their potential influence in making enabling environments for women and girls and for gender justice is enormous.

It is intended that the Side by Side movement will be structure-light – it's a movement, not an organisation, but we do need some minimal structure to keep things moving and growing. We hope that, at some stage, the inception group for the movement will be able to hand over to a secretariat for the movement, provided we can find the funding.

As a movement, Side by Side has made remarkable progress. Working together for gender justice in the field, in communities, sharing experience, tools and resources, and encouraging and inspiring one another just makes sense. There is no need for anyone to feel alone in this work. We hope you will be as enthusiastic as we are to see this movement grow and transform the lives of women and men, girls and boys.

Terrie Robinson, co-chair, Side by Side inception group