

Changing the narrative

CAFOD's contributions to gender justice



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CAFOD is committed to the achievement of gender justice. Our faith lens inspires us to uphold the intrinsic dignity of every human being and to stand in solidarity with those who are experiencing injustice, discrimination and exclusion.

If you are a woman or girl today, you are less likely to have a voice in decisions that affect you, have fair educational and economic opportunities, or access to critical healthcare. You stand to be disproportionately affected by climate change, conflict, sexual violence and poverty. If you are a woman who is black, indigenous, or living with a disability for example, the negative impact on your life is even greater. Multiply this again if you are living in some of the poorest or war-torn countries of the world.

CAFOD's organisational strategy articulates the centrality of gender justice within our "transformative inclusion" goal. We aim for a world where the distinctive contributions of women and girls are valued, where they live free from violence, fear and discrimination and ultimately, where they experience just power relationships with men and boys and have equal opportunities to participate, influence, and lead in all aspects of life.

Front cover: Mironi (right) stands shoulder-to-shoulder with her daughter, Mukta (left); together, they're involved in activism to help the Garo indigenous group protect their land rights in Bangladesh.

We join the many agencies, networks, alliances, community groups, and individuals worldwide who wish to see positive gains on gender justice. We believe that we have unique contributions to add to the global efforts at CAFOD. This practice paper provides you with an overview of how and where we think we can best affect change, with examples of our contributions and impact that, together with our partners who work on a range of gender transformative programmes worldwide, we have been able to advance. The four areas of contribution which we evidence are closely connected to our goals within our organisational strategy, *Our Common Home*. These are:

- 1. Reach and influence through and within Church networks**
- 2. Local agency, leadership and voice**
- 3. Programme quality foundations**
- 4. Integrated programming**

CONTRIBUTION ONE

Women's influence through and within Church networks

CAFOD is part of the global Church network with a presence in 165 countries. The local Church is a constant and trusted presence within the communities in which we work. It therefore has a huge reach both in terms of scale and impact, providing direction in the lives of many. In the case of gender inequality and injustice, we know that underlying negative beliefs, attitudes and social norms underpin and justify harmful practices and behaviours. These are often long-standing, culturally entrenched, and difficult to shift.

Whilst it is true that the Church itself at times perpetuates patriarchal norms, it also has many faith leaders and laypersons within it who desire to see an end to discrimination of women, girls and other excluded groups. We come alongside these influential changemakers and partner with them as they work within their communities to enable positive shifts around masculine identity and gender roles as well as relationships within the family, the community, the Church, and society at large. We also believe we are well placed, as part of that global network, to promote change towards greater gender justice from within, and work alongside Church partners in this journey.

We join forces with our sister agencies within the Caritas Network to share resources, advocate for change, champion good practice, learning and impact. In places where the Catholic Church is limited, our presence as a faith actor often opens doors to engage in influential faith platforms that would otherwise be inaccessible.

EXAMPLES

Strengthening women's voices in the African and Latin American Church

Synodality group for religious women and bishops in East Africa



The regional Church is a significant voice against injustices in Africa and Latin America. CAFOD's Africa Church Advocacy Programme (ACAP) aims to support the Church to realise its full potential as an advocacy actor in climate change, governance and peacebuilding. Women are critical players in these contributions and yet, exclusionary structures and practices in the Church have meant that they are often left out of significant social, civic and political decision-making processes.

The ACAP aims to ensure that the voices of women are amplified in regional and continental advocacy initiatives. This includes increasing women's agency through inputs in knowledge, skills and resources, and engaging proactively with Church leaders to shift exclusionary attitudes, norms and behaviours towards women and youth. The ACAP has recently supported the establishment of a platform for religious women to collaborate with bishops in East Africa who traditionally have held primary authority. The space offers opportunity for mutual listening and shared discernment on topics ranging from social justice to pastoral care, bringing diverse viewpoints to the forefront. This is leading to a richer understanding of topical issues as well as more comprehensive solutions.

The process has also placed a spotlight on gender equality, inclusivity, and the role of women in leadership within the Church. The platform now meets on a quarterly basis, which is fostering a more unified approach to addressing issues facing the Church and society in East Africa.

CAFOD also supports the Latin American Bishops Conference (CELAM) and its working group, the "Animating Commission of Women in the Church and Society". The Commission aims to promote a greater role for women's leadership in the Church and in society and foster their development and their contributions; raise awareness of the various forms of exclusion of women in the Church and take steps towards more equitable relationships between men and women; develop strategies to prevent, respond to and denounce all forms of violence against women and girls in society; and evidence and promote the process that the Latin American Church has gone through to achieve greater gender justice.

Since 2021, sub-regional meetings take place to share realities, knowledge and experiences of women working at different levels and spaces in the Church. These have been captured in publication entitled "Disruptive Women" which is soon to be circulated as a means to strengthen women's participation, inclusion and identity within the Church and beyond.

Promoting expertise of Guatemalan partner on intersectional gender justice in faith networks

Mayan women participate in a workshop led by Pastoral Social on wellbeing and togetherness



CAFOD has a longstanding partnership with its women-led Church partner in Guatemala, Pastoral Social – Caritas, Diocese of Verapaz (PSCV). PSCV has been working since 1987 to address social inequality and human rights abuses in its local context, particularly with indigenous communities of Mayan descent.

Gender-based violence is a serious issue in Guatemala, with one of the highest rates of femicide in the world.

PSCV has built up expertise over the years on implementing their women and gender equity programme, which entails work on prevention of violence against women (including programmes on positive masculinities with men), holistic care, livelihoods and advocacy.

CAFOD is currently coming alongside PSCV to systematise and document their approach in order that they can reflect, learn, promote and share good practice at local, regional and global levels, including by sharing their lessons learned and approaches with other Church actors and organisations. CAFOD is also supporting with the production of communication materials, translations and dissemination of learnings across the extensive Catholic channels in Guatemala, Latin America and globally.



CONTRIBUTION TWO

Local women-led agency, leadership and voice

CAFOD champions local women-led and women's rights organisations where possible and appropriate because we believe that they have unique and valuable contributions to make both in responding to the needs of their communities and in the development sector at large. We look to the expertise of women-led partners to deliver much of our gender justice work such as preventing or responding to gender-based violence or empowering women economically and politically. We also support and encourage women's leadership and representation within our wider partnership portfolio, recognising that in many contexts, partners would benefit from a more balanced gender ratio in leadership and senior management positions.

For too long, women's expertise and voice has been overlooked, leading to a patriarchal system that fails to uphold the rights and dignity of women, girls and other excluded groups in humanitarian and development work. CAFOD is well placed to address this problem as our comprehensive partnership model puts local actors at the heart of our approach. This includes providing sustainable funding, strengthening organisational and programme capacity, facilitating opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and exchange, and supporting advocacy efforts to raise local voice at local, national and global level. We know that gender justice is not a short-term endeavour. Our partnership model is one that supports effectiveness and sustainability, putting women's leadership at the centre of the agenda.

EXAMPLES

Supporting women's organisations in the Middle East to lead coordination, collaboration and networking

Exchange between women-led organisations and policy members in Brussels, 2024.



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These networks directly influence our work, acting as a driving force to achieve equality and improve the lives of women and girls.”

CAFOD has been working with women-led NGO, Women Now for Development (WND), in the Middle East since 2016 to protect, support and empower Syrian and host community women affected by conflict in the region by enhancing their political, social and economic participation.

This includes providing women with vocational and leadership training to engage in civil and political life as well as influence public discourse, decision making and international advocacy efforts.

CAFOD and WND have recently been working together on an exciting initiative to establish a Women Leaders Consortium consisting of both women-led civil society organisations and informal women-led initiatives. The aim has been to facilitate collaboration, networking and coordination efforts, which are collectively owned and steered by local women.

Micro-grants have been used by the women leaders to address priorities for women and girls that arose in community dialogues. Three policy briefs have also been drawn up to capture learning and influence other actors in the sector.

One of the women participants notes the value of the collaboration: “These networks directly influence our work, acting as a driving force to achieve equality and improve the lives of women and girls.” The initiative has already impacted regional response coordination processes (such as in the United Nations) to be more inclusive, and a major donor has since launched a multi-donor fund for grassroots women’s groups.



Championing South Sudanese women's rights organisation to lead in humanitarian coordination

Anna Tazita Samuel,
CEO of Women
for Change.



We need to take this space and change the narrative.”

CAFOD supports Women for Change in South Sudan, a women-led partner, working on women's and children's rights in the areas of protection, education, health and livelihoods as well as peace building and advocacy. Alongside funding gender transformative programmes, CAFOD is also committed alongside its sister agency, Trocaire, to strengthening the organisational capacity and leadership capability of WFC to ensure its long-term sustainability, influence and impact.

CAFOD has recently been part of an initiative to equip the partner to take on a prominent co-chair role within the United Nations (UN) humanitarian coordination system (on Gender Based Violence). This is an important pilot exercise to demonstrate a shift, as co-chair coordination roles are almost exclusively held by UN or International NGO representatives.

WFC has received technical support and accompaniment through mentoring and training to step into this key function as the first ever women-led local actor in the post. Taking on the position has not only provided WFC with wider opportunities to network, collaborate and access new funds, it has also increased visibility and confidence to speak up as women in the sector, allowing others to do the same.

“Taking the coordination role has been one of the most interesting projects that WFC has ever implemented” says Anna Tazita Samuel, WFC director. Noting the poor current status of women in her home country, she adds, “we need to take this space and change the narrative.”



CONTRIBUTION THREE

Gender sensitive programme quality foundations

CAFOD underpins all its programming with a bespoke and robust programme quality framework addressing Safety, Accessibility, Dignity and Inclusion (SADI). We maintain that gender transformative agendas are at best piecemeal if the fundamentals on quality are not in place. We require a minimum level of gender sensitivity in projects. This includes undertaking gender and risk analysis, collecting and applying sex, age and disability data, and ensuring women and girls participate as active agents throughout design, implementation and evaluation activities. All programme staff and partners are comprehensively trained in this approach and accompanied with ongoing capacity strengthening.

We take our organisational goal of “transformative inclusion” seriously. We therefore apply an intersectional lens within our gender work, ensuring we identify, understand and respond to the impact of other identity markers, such as race, disability, sexuality or age, on the rights and inclusion of women and girls.

EXAMPLES

Applying an intersectional lens to women’s representation in Nigeria

Participants within the inclusive governance project in Nigeria



We are creating more equitable spaces for all women and girls to thrive”

The Centre for Women’s Studies and Intervention (CWSI) in Nigeria is a women-led, Catholic organisation that is committed to the holistic empowerment of women and girls through advocacy on governance, economic, political and socio-cultural rights. Recently, impressive gains were made in a CAFOD-funded women’s political participation project which saw a 24 per cent increase in women’s representation in governance structures. For the first time in the targeted State of Kogi, a woman was elected to serve in parliament and 45 into local government legislative councils.

CWSI is now embarking on a pilot project with CAFOD and Christian Blind Mission to apply an intersectional lens to its programming and processes. The SADI Framework is being used as a tool to help identify and address gaps and opportunities related to disability inclusion with the ambition to reach and

include women with disabilities across their existing activities. In the first few months of the project, CWSI alongside CAFOD, have recognised the importance and value of working with the local disability movement and ensuring accessibility, communication aids and budgeting for active engagement of people with disabilities. Learnings from this project are now being applied in other ongoing projects within CWSI and more widely with CAFOD Nigeria.

Sister Ngozi Uti, director of CWSI, notes that the partnership “has empowered us to deepen our commitment to gender justice by ensuring women and girls with disabilities are no longer left behind...we are creating more equitable spaces for all women and girls to thrive”.



Strengthening quality of financial inclusion programming for women and girls in Sierra Leone

Adult literacy class participant in Kambia, Sierra Leone



CAFOD is supporting its partners in Sierra Leone, KADDRO and Caritas Kenema, to implement the women and girls FIRST (financial inclusion and resilience strengthening) project. It targets excluded women and girls in rural communities through increasing their financial literacy, improving access to formal and informal financial services, and providing training and practical support to establish and scale up small businesses.

Through regular adult learning lessons, over 5,000 rural village savings and loan association (VSLA) members and women entrepreneurs have been supported with life-changing foundational numeracy and literacy skills. Participants have been able to manage their money more effectively, and record

transactions related to their saving and loans and small businesses. Several female participants have since taken up local leadership roles since the start of the project, which were traditionally held by men. This project has also been working to influence financial service providers, including the central bank of Sierra Leone, to provide more inclusive banking services. It has also worked with other private sector partners to support VSLA members to provide mobile money services in their communities.

CAFOD has also been supporting its partners to strengthen wider programme quality. Partners received SADI training and completed action plans and a safeguarding profile. Ongoing support is being provided to improve the effectiveness of their feedback and complaints mechanisms which includes monitoring the data on submissions, providing input on diverse means to provide feedback, and increasing its visibility for wider uptake and use in targeted communities. Effective project complaints handling processes have also helped boost the confidence of women involved in the project to hold service providers to account.



CONTRIBUTION FOUR

Integrated programming with a gender justice lens

CAFOD's international programmes are firmly rooted in the principles of integral ecology. This model promotes an interconnected way of understanding political, economic, social, and environmental issues, through an awareness of global power dynamics. It applies a relational lens across everything we do. In order for individuals to flourish, they need to live in harmony with themselves, with others, and with their environment.

Our integrated model informs both the approach and content of our gender focused work through our partnerships, as well as the way in which we understand and address the linkages between gender injustice and other forms of injustices and needs. Firstly, it provides us with flexibility to work in a multi-layered way across individual, family, community and societal levels to affect gendered change which is holistic, systemic and sustainable. Secondly, it enables us to facilitate linkages and learning across different interventions within and amongst a range of partnerships and other traditionally known areas of work.

CAFOD has recently defined its integrated programming work through this Integral Ecology approach, in which it prioritises lenses such as environmental justice, resilient livelihoods, peacebuilding, governance and accountability, local leadership agency and voice, emergency preparedness and response, and gender justice.

EXAMPLES

Providing holistic support to improve life for Bangladeshi women migrants

Shakirul Islam,
OKUP's
Chairman
at COP28



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I've decided not to let others dictate my life. I'm ready to start anew.”

CAFOD is applying an integrated approach to address the needs and strengthen the capacities of women migrants in Bangladesh through its partner OKUP, a grassroots migrant-led organisation. Research conducted by OKUP and CAFOD found that 60 per cent of Bangladeshi women migrants faced abuse, torture and exploitation while overseas.

CAFOD's support through OKUP and Caritas Bangladesh, has helped to provide hundreds of these women with a holistic package including psychosocial support, family reunification, access to a shelter home, medical referrals, livelihood support and legal aid which has resulted in an increase in income, improved quality of life, a reduced likelihood of migrating in the future and a greater voice in household decision making.

Migrant fora have been established to provide peer support and solidarity for women who share similar experiences. Lipi Akter, a migrant returnee notes, “Coming here and meeting many other returnee women...has shifted my perspective. I don't feel lonely and powerless anymore. I've decided not to let others dictate my life. I'm ready to start anew.”

The work with returnee migrants focuses at individual, family and community level but also seeks to influence change within the justice system to ensure that those who have been exploited receive compensation and the justice they deserve as well as appropriate government-led services. CAFOD-funded research has also aimed to evidence the link between migration, modern slavery and climate change. This has included international advocacy efforts to raise awareness and find solutions in global fora such as COP28 and the Nepal World Social Forum.



Securing safe housing in Brazil through gender transformative, social and environmental justice lenses

Residents with keys to enter their new home in the repurposed Elza Soares Building, São Paulo



CAFOD works with its Brazilian partner, Semeando, to advocate for solutions that address environmental and social problems (mainly homelessness, gender, social and racial exclusion) in tandem in São Paulo. In Brazilian cities, the poorest, particularly black, mixed-race, indigenous, women and LGBTIQ+ people experience exclusion through structural discrimination, public policy and institutional failings.

Often, the only option is unaffordable rental of unsafe housing in informal settlements which lack access to basic services and expose tenants to security, environmental and climate risks, or homelessness. The former “Hotel Lord” was one of the many buildings which lie empty in central Sao Paulo. It has now been repurposed into safe, dignified and affordable housing for 176 homeless and vulnerably housed families following Semeando’s grassroots campaigning, lobbying and community organising.

Our partner built the leadership of black and mixed-race women, most of whom were or had been in precarious housing situations themselves, to strengthen their knowledge of housing rights, campaigning and organisational skills. This has resulted in thousands of women and their families having access to safe, legal and dignified housing. It also led to a significant win which held public authorities to account and challenged judicial decisions.

The new residence, named after the famous black samba singer, Elza Soares, now prioritises women headed households and those living with disability, including residents who are black women. This example demonstrates the value of applying an integral ecology lens that addresses both the person and their environment simultaneously.

Not only are the socially excluded thriving in safe housing, but construction and transport costs have been avoided as families are now in proximity to services and opportunities in a central building that has been refurbished rather than rebuilt. Women and other inhabitants also have various composting, recycling and ecological practices within their buildings.



Recognising women as key players in agroecological practices in Bolivia

Eva Colque, Director of our Partner Fundacion Nuna, showing the seeds produced by indigenous women in Bolivia



CAFOD supports Fundación Nuna in Bolivia, to assist low-income indigenous farming communities living in very arid land and where assistance from other institutions is almost non-existent. Fundación Nuna promotes agroecological practices, mostly led by women, to improve families' food security and nutrition. There is also a focus on the protection and conservation of native seeds as well as access to water thus strengthening people's resilience amid climate change, families' access to a healthy and varied diet, and in some cases, women's income and economic empowerment.

Led by Eva Colque, an influential agronomist and indigenous women's rights activist, Fundación Nuna successfully weaves together social and environmental dimensions which lie at the heart of integral ecology. In a context where cultural norms hinder women's rights to participate in equal conditions with men, Fundación Nuna champions women's participation in decision making and access to resources. The partner's zero tolerance to violence against women has led the team to raise awareness on the importance of women's rights and non-violent communication within families. The role of women as seed guardians has been revalued in exchange and learning spaces, where women have gathered to share their knowledge on the conservation and protection of native seeds.



AUTHOR: Claire Grant, September 2024

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Thanks to the following CAFOD colleagues for their contributions as well as their teams and partners for the delivery of the gender justice work detailed within: Mwila Mulumbi, Montserrat Fernandez, Hombeline Dulière, Howard Mollett, Kade Betty Kenyi, Chukwuedozie Abuzie, Kitty Chevallier, Janet Crossley, Richard Sloman, Kezia Lavan and Maria Crespo. Special thanks to Diana Trimino for her detailed review and content.



Photos: Amit Rudro, Sister Helen Kasaka, Pastoral Social-Cáritas, Diócesis de la Verapaz, Women Now for Development, Women for Change, CWSI, OKUP, Fatmata Bangalie Turay (KADDRO), CAFOD

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