

G20 Interfaith Forum - European Regional Online Consultation

Working Group 1, “Empowering People; Fostering Gender Equality”

Submitted 30 July 2020

Introduction

Acknowledgement: As a society, we are facing unprecedented challenges, including a worldwide pandemic and consequent economic impact. Known structural inequalities were exacerbated by the prevailing situation. These emerging challenges call for action on the part of our leaders towards the empowerment of people and the closing of gaps between different sectors of society, aiming to erase structural inequalities.

European context: Europe is committed to fostering gender equality through several [conventions, strategies](#) and policies. However, studies have shown that domestic violence has been rising since the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown.¹ Refugees, migrants, asylum seekers and victims of human trafficking, found their vulnerable position hardened by the fight against COVID-19. Several countries stopped their reception and hosting in dignified conditions, resulting in overcrowded refugee camps or even informal settlements, with no physical distancing or sanitary measures that prevent outbreaks of COVID-19.²

Rationale for interfaith cooperation: There is increasing evidence that multi-faith cooperation can provide very specific benefits as a part of a holistic integration strategy.³ With the tensions and conflicts that we face in the present-day, and their potential to deteriorate, the role of religious leaders⁴ and communities in peacebuilding, conflict prevention and mediation is essential. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that unexpected pressures and crises can serve to worsen existing divisions and tensions within societies. Interreligious initiatives and networks have helped to reinforce resilience within communities overcoming conflicts around religious and ethnic identities. There is a need to reinforce these dialogues and cooperation, as their failure leaves societies vulnerable to religious intolerance, discrimination and conflict. Religion has also played a positive role in supporting the integration of migrants into societies and communities, through religious institutions but also through Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs).

¹<https://fra.europa.eu/en/news/2020/eu-rights-and-equality-agency-heads-lets-step-our-efforts-end-domestic-violence>

² <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/world/20200402STO76413/meps-call-for-measures-to-prevent-covid19-crisis-in-refugee-camps>

³ Lyck-Bowen, Majbritt & Owen, Mark, (2018) “A Multi-Religious Response to the Migrant Crisis in Europe: An Initial Examination of Potential Benefits of Multi-Religious Cooperation on the Integration of Migrants”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1437344>

Lyck-Bowen, Majbritt, (2019), “A Multireligious Approach to the Integration of Migrants in Europe: An Examination of Migrants’ Views on and Experiences of Taking Part in Multireligious Integration Projects”, *Border Crossing*, 9, 79-96.

⁴ The expression “religious leaders” in this document includes those leaders formally or informally recognised as such by their own communities.

Recommendations

1. Education on religious and cultural diversity

The role of education in facing these challenges is crucial. We understand that education has a prominent role in society. It embodies moral commitment and contributes to the future. It is through the sharing of knowledge, dialogue and encounter that we are better equipped to understand the Other.

Knowing, and being able to reasonably understand and critically observe, one's own cultural and religious tradition as well as other cultures, faiths and beliefs and to have an attitude of openness to others, is crucial for peaceful coexistence. The contribution of religion to this educational process has, historically, played an important role in developing educational institutions and pedagogy in many cultures and countries. These efforts are shown to help normalise diversity within society and contribute to social integration and cohesion whilst helping the prevention of social misrepresentations and radicalisation.

Therefore, we ask that:

- 1a.** Government and religious leaders highlight the need to recognise and accept the inherent dignity of every human being everywhere, as the [2018 Punta del Este Declaration on Human Dignity](#) underlines.
- 1b.** Government and religious leaders work together and put an end to racism, xenophobia, intolerance and discrimination.
- 1c.** Governments, in collaboration with the relevant religious leaders and communities, promote openness to religious traditions in school curricula and incentivise the curiosity of students to expand their understanding of other cultures and religious traditions. Students should learn about, and from, different religions so that they can be enriched by their teachings. In this context, parental rights to educate their children by their religious or non-religious beliefs should also be respected. These efforts should also be aimed at preventing radicalisation, especially in scenarios that can reach youth and give students the tools to critique and challenge content that exploits religion for violent or hateful means.
- 1d.** Governments, religious actors and civil society are encouraged to create the necessary conditions for the free engagement of religious actors in interfaith and intra-religious dialogue, and in civic dialogue.
- 1e.** Governments actively create opportunities and conditions for open and constructive dialogue between politicians, religious leaders and civil society. Especially about issues related to social cohesion and the well-being of all, to identify problems and create concerted solutions.

2. Structural inequality and gender inequality

Structural inequalities that already existed have intensified during these times of emergency and made themselves self-evident. We need to take action to promote equality and dignity for all. During the COVID-19 quarantine, women, especially single mothers, were dealing with unbalanced responsibilities between work and family life and there was an increase in domestic violence. At the same time, the present economic crisis has led to measures being introduced to empower the most vulnerable communities.

Therefore, we ask that:

- 2a.** Governments implement policies to abolish discrimination against working mothers and fathers regarding access to work, including abolishing the gender pay gap after the first child.
- 2b.** Governments implement policies to improve the balance between work and private and family life, especially for single parents.
- 2c.** Governments work with religious leaders and communities and civil society in addressing gender misrepresentations, discrimination and violence.
- 2d.** Governments encourage religious leaders to interpret their religion in such a way that it does not pave the way for a possible justification of any violence against women and girls (including inhuman or degrading treatment; the so-called “forced marriage” that entails forced conversion; and other crimes such as abduction, rape and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM); or the use of any type of sexual violence as a method of war).
- 2e.** Governments are encouraged to work closely with religious leaders and communities in advocating for health workers and other essential workers’ fair salaries and working conditions.
- 2f.** Religious institutions and FBOs are encouraged to implement gender equality strategies, while respecting the principle of autonomy of religious institutions and FBOs, and their ethos.
- 2g.** Governments promote and implement policies that enable companies to employ young people, people with disabilities, people of different ethnic or national origins, and people over 50, who might struggle to find work in a post-pandemic economic recession.

3. Refugees, migrants and trafficking

Migrants and minorities, who are frequently on the fringe of society, were in an even more vulnerable situation during this pandemic. Many of them were carrying out essential activities for society, with little social acknowledgement and lack of fair working conditions. In parallel, people in vulnerable situations were targeted by increasing online hate. Modern-day slavery and human trafficking are serious problems that have been deepened by this sanitary crisis. We must not let the invisible be forgotten.

The collaboration between governments and faith-based institutions and organizations should be incentivised, and religious actors ought to be recognised as legitimate actors in the integration processes.

Therefore, we ask that:

- 3a.** Governments continue their efforts to uphold the access to international protection, including asylum, taking into special account the vulnerable situation of unaccompanied minors, women and girls and victims of human trafficking and modern-day slavery.
- 3b.** Governments continue their efforts to respect the fundamental rights of migrants and families, including family unity.
- 3c.** Religious leaders and religious communities continue their work around the integration of migrants and on the prevention of radicalisation and extremism.
- 3d.** Governments, religious leaders and religious communities work together to create mechanisms aiming to abolish the practice of so-called “forced marriage”, to combat human trafficking and modern-day slavery.
- 3e.** Governments intensify the fight against sexual exploitation online, in particular of children. Specifically, through preventative measures addressed to families, parents and their children, and school communities. And to provide them with the skills to manage themselves properly in the digital environment.

4. The role of religion in peacebuilding, conflict prevention and mediation

Religious institutions and FBOs have been essential in peacebuilding, conflict prevention and mediation. Evidence continues to grow that when religious actors are valued and engaged in a considered way, informed by effective analysis, they can be particularly effective partners for government and peacebuilding institutions and actors.⁵

Therefore, we ask that:

- 4a.** Governments, religious leaders and civil society work together to create the conditions for respectful and fruitful dialogue that engages all communities and addresses the real challenges facing our societies.
- 4b.** Government and religious leaders build bridges among communities, and emphasise, in their processes, and by their example, the importance of peace and reconciliation,

⁵ King, Anna S., & Owen, Mark, (2020), “The Promise and Challenge of Multireligious Peacebuilding in the 21st Century: A Myanmar Case Study”, *Religions*, 11(3), 121, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11030121>
 Owen, M. & King, A. S., (2019), “Enhancing the Efficacy of Religious Peacebuilding Practice: An Evidence-based Framework for Assessing Dominant Risks in Religious Peacebuilding”, *Religions*, 10, 641, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10120641>
 Frazer, O. & Owen, M., (2018), “Religion in Conflict and Peacebuilding: An Analysis Guide”, *United States Institute of Peace*.

including committing to this as a way of life for religious communities and not just a response to current challenges.

- 4c.** Government and religious leaders acknowledge the importance of human rights and the need to teach them in the formal educational system and to promote a social knowledge and acceptance of human rights rooted in human dignity.
- 4d.** Religious leaders continue to foster capacity building in spiritual resilience, showing and promoting openness, respect, compassion and active engagement in dialogue, whilst holding on firmly to the core of human values promoted by religious traditions.
- 4e.** Governments and multinational institutions put more effort and resources into developing training for staff in engaging religious actors in peacebuilding and reconciliation processes, considering the complex role of religious actors in the peacebuilding and conflict prevention processes.

Contributors:

José Luis Bazán, Legal Advisor for Migration and Asylum and Religious Freedom at the Commission of the Bishop's Conferences of the European Union (COMECE) - *Key Expert*

Sofia Caseiro, Human Rights Specialist and Lecturer - *Key Expert*

Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Professor at the School of International Service at American University and Senior Adviser at KAICIID

Patrice Brodeur, Professor at the Institute of Religious Studies at the University of Montreal and Senior Adviser at KAICIID

Katrin Hatzinger, Director of the Brussels Office of the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD)

Olivera Jovanovic, Orthodox Christian theologian and expert in interreligious dialogue

Roger Kiska, Legal Counsel for the Christian Legal Centre

Ewelina U. Ochab, Co-founder of the Coalition for Genocide Response

Mark Owen, PhD, Director of the Centre of Religion, Reconciliation and Peace at the University of Winchester; Secretary General of the European Council of Religious Leaders, Religions for Peace

Imam Yahya Pallavicini, President of COREIS, the Islamic Religious Community of Italy

Jeff Simon, Policy Officer at the Bahá'í International Community (BIC), Brussels Office

Canon Andrew Smith, PhD, Director of Interfaith Relations for the Bishop of Birmingham and Chair of the KAICIID Advisory Forum

Marcela Szymanski, Editor-in-Chief, *Religious Freedom in the World* report by Aid to the Church in Need

Disclaimer: the content of this document does not necessarily represent the views of any contributing individual or the institutions with which they are affiliated, nor does it necessarily reflect the contribution which any individual participant made as part of the European Regional Online Consultation.