

## Report on the ACRL-RP Webinar 2: Embracing Positive Masculinity - How Faith Communities Can Combat Discrimination and Violence Against Women and Girls in Africa

September 26, 2024

### 1.0 Overview

On 26th September 2024, the African Council of Religious Leaders – *Religions for Peace* (ACRL-RP) hosted a webinar focused on gender equality and positive masculinity within faith communities. The virtual event convened 49 participants including religious leaders, women of faith networks, and youth from across Africa. It explored how faith communities can challenge harmful social norms and empower women and girls by promoting gender equality. The discussions highlighted the intersections of faith, gender, and masculinity, aiming to dismantle misconceptions about gender roles in religious contexts.

The webinar featured welcome remarks from Dr. Francis Kuria, Secretary General, ACRL-RP, and a key address from Mary Njeri, EAWG analyst at UN Women. Fr. Dr. Dominic F. Tomuseni, Hekima University, Prof. Mahfouz A. Adedimeji, Ahman Pategi University Kwara, Rev. Dr. Lydia Mwaniki and Vusi Cebekhulu, Sonke Gender Justice dissected various topics in a panel discussion moderated by Dr. Rozilla Adhiambo, ACRL-RP. The theologians clarified misconceptions about the roles of men and women, especially within Islam and Christianity. It was clarified that both faiths, like many other religions, advocate for the equality of men and women. They debunked myths such as polygamy and emphasized the equality of both genders as created by God. It was argued that cultural norms often misrepresent religious teachings, reinforcing negative stereotypes and practices.

A post-webinar survey was disseminated to gauge participants' involvement in promoting gender equality and to explore opportunities for potential collaborative actions on similar events in the future. This feedback is essential for the African Council of Religious Leaders – *Religions for Peace* and Faith Partners (ACRL-RP) as it will enable the refinement of strategies and the planning of future events that are more impactful and aligned with the needs and interests of the participants. The insights gathered will help ensure that subsequent efforts are more effective in fostering gender equality within faith communities.

### 2.0 Methodology

This webinar, organized by the ACRL-RP was the second in a series of 3 webinars in the collaboration with *Religions for Peace* International, aimed to foster interfaith dialogue on issues affecting children, families and communities. A concept was developed detailing the webinar objectives, targets and outcomes. An e-poster with meeting details was designed and disseminated by email and in the ACRL-RP social media accounts. A total of 110 people were mobilized and registered for the webinar. 50 attending, 22Male and 28Female with more than 50 percent from the Western and Southern Africa hubs. These comprised faith leaders, women and

youth from across the regional hubs. The keynote address was presented by a representative from UN Women. 4 panelists were identified and invited to share of given topical issues aligning with the webinar discussion.

The selection criteria included theologian scholars well versed in faith and gender issues, and 1 individual from civil society with knowledge of gender equality and men's engagement. The webinar was held virtually and also live-streamed on the organization's YouTube channel attracting 80 views and 10 reactions. A moderated open plenary session ensured engagement with the participants through questions and reflections on the discussions. A survey was issued at the end of the webinar purposively to learn more about participants' work on gender equality efforts. 15 participants responded and their feedback analyzed.

## **2.0 Key Discussions**

### **Leveraging Scriptural Provisions in promoting gender equality**

The speakers emphasized that religious teachings can be powerful tools to combat gender-based violence and promote gender equality. Religious scriptures hold significant influence over the behaviors and beliefs of faith communities. During the webinar, it was discussed that religious leaders should actively utilize scriptural provisions that promote gender equality and positive masculinity. This can include reinterpreting religious texts to highlight values such as respect, equality, and protection rather than dominance and subjugation. This means deconstructing harmful interpretations of religious texts that have justified violence, discrimination, and inequality. By providing correct interpretations, faith leaders can challenge harmful social norms and promote peace, respect, and cooperation between genders.

Many faiths have elements in their texts that encourage fair treatment of all genders, but these are often overshadowed by cultural norms or misinterpretations. By returning to the core teachings and promoting these values in sermons, faith leaders can help shift societal attitudes toward more equitable gender roles. The call to leverage scripture is about reframing narratives in ways that align with the inherent dignity and worth of every individual, regardless of gender.

### **The Importance of Education and Dialogue**

Education was identified as a critical tool in shifting mindsets towards gender equality. Ongoing conversations were considered essential for building mutual understanding and promoting gender justice. One of the most important highlights from the webinar was the need for increased interfaith dialogues and educational programs focusing on gender equality and positive masculinity. Interfaith dialogues allow various religious groups to learn from each other's experiences and work together toward a common goal of equality. They provide a platform for cross-cultural and cross-religious sharing of strategies to challenge harmful gender norms. These dialogues also help dismantle stereotypes and misconceptions about gender roles in different faiths. Expanding these programs across different regions in Africa would foster an environment where religious leaders are better equipped to address gender-based violence, promote mutual respect, and help create cohesive strategies for societal change.

These, coupled with intergenerational dialogues can bridge the gap between traditional and modern perspectives on gender. Older generations may have been raised with more rigid gender norms, while younger generations often advocate for more fluid and equitable roles. Bringing

both groups together for dialogue allows them to share experiences and knowledge, and come to a mutual understanding of how gender roles can evolve to benefit everyone. Such conversations help dismantle harmful practices that have been passed down through generations while promoting positive masculinity and equality. It also fosters respect between age groups and ensures that the transformation of gender roles is inclusive and comprehensive.

### **Advocacy Against Harmful Practices**

Harmful cultural practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage are deeply entrenched in some communities and are often justified using religious or cultural arguments. The webinar called for religious leaders to take an active stance in advocating for the elimination of such harmful practices. Faith leaders can be pivotal in this advocacy because they often hold moral authority in communities where these practices persist. By using their platforms to condemn FGM and child marriage, and by educating communities on the dangers and injustices of these practices, religious leaders can drive meaningful change. They are urged to work with governments, NGOs, and health organizations to raise awareness and provide alternative rites of passage that do not harm women and girls.

### **Leadership and Mentorship for Women and Girls and inclusion of Men and Boys**

The webinar stressed the importance of designing leadership and mentorship programs for women and girls within faith communities. These programs would enable women to take up leadership positions both in religious institutions and broader societal roles. Mentorship is particularly important because it provides young women with role models who can guide them through their personal and professional development. Faith-based leadership programs can focus on nurturing women's confidence, skills, and spiritual grounding, preparing them to take active community roles. Encouraging women to step into leadership roles within religious settings challenges the patriarchal structures that often dominate these institutions, creating a more inclusive environment.

Engaging men as allies in the fight for gender equality is a critical step forward. Men's participation is essential because they often hold the power in patriarchal structures. By inviting men to become champions of gender equality, religious leaders can ensure that efforts to dismantle toxic masculinity and harmful gender norms are more widely accepted. Men need to be active participants in challenging traditional stereotypes that dictate their roles as aggressive or emotionally detached. Male faith leaders and male members of faith communities can mentor other men, demonstrating positive forms of masculinity that embrace equality, care, and partnership with women.

### **Reconstructing Gender Norms**

The need to reconstruct toxic masculinity and femininity into positive forms was a significant theme. The current understanding of gender roles in many cultures perpetuates inequality by associating masculinity with dominance and femininity with submission. The webinar recommended a reevaluation of these roles to promote gender partnerships rather than hierarchies. Positive masculinity would involve nurturing, protection, and responsibility rather than control and aggression. Similarly, positive femininity would reject passivity and embrace leadership, agency, and strength. Faith communities can lead this cultural shift by promoting new narratives of gender roles that celebrate the unique qualities of both men and women in

ways that are complementary, not oppositional. Reconstructing masculinity within a positive framework could contribute to healthier family and community dynamics.

### **Economic Empowerment of Women and Girls**

Economic empowerment emerged as a key recommendation during the webinar. Faith institutions were encouraged to incorporate programs that support women's economic independence. Empowering women economically can help reduce their vulnerability to gender-based violence and enable them to assert their rights within both family and societal contexts. Religious institutions can offer training programs on financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and access to resources. They can also advocate for fair employment practices and equal pay. Economic empowerment ensures that women have the financial capacity to make autonomous decisions, a fundamental aspect of achieving gender equality.

### **Faith Leaders as Role Models**

Faith leaders have significant influence within their communities, and their actions often set the tone for community behaviors. The webinar highlighted the importance of religious leaders modeling positive masculinity, which means rejecting toxic behaviors like aggression and dominance while promoting respect, responsibility, and equality. By embodying these principles, faith leaders can lead by example, inspiring men in their communities to adopt similar values. This role modeling extends to promoting fair treatment of women in the home, community, and religious spaces. Faith leaders who visibly advocate for gender justice can help normalize the idea that both men and women have equal roles in leadership, family life, and societal contributions.

## **3.0 Conclusion**

The discussions outlined a clear path forward for continuous efforts to combat discrimination and violence against women and girls. The webinar underscored the critical need for collective action across multiple sectors and partners. Through leadership by example, educational initiatives, and active participation in advocacy, faith leaders and their communities can be instrumental in promoting gender equality and positive masculinity. The ongoing commitment to these efforts will be critical in transforming cultural norms and creating safer, more inclusive communities for both men and women.

The feedback emanating from the webinar expressed great involvement of faith leaders both at a personal and community level in initiatives to combat violence against women and support for their empowerment and development. Interfaith approaches were applauded and recommended that engagements targeting grassroot communities including the traditional elders and women will be crucial in addressing practices such as FGM, Child Marriage and other forms of physical violations.

*Link to YouTube Live Stream:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jMc0wHKhHk> with 75 views.

#### 4.0 Summary of the Webinar post survey

15 participants responded to the survey with 73.3% completion rate. 67% of respondents indicated they are involved in initiatives or programs geared to realizing gender equality in their communities. Among the initiatives/programs mentioned by respondents were interfaith dialogues promoting unity and understanding of gender roles; offering guidance and counseling to victims of violence at the church level; faith-based outreaches; use of faith-based media organizations and evangelism; periodic religious conventions and discussions on harmony and tolerance; and at family level engagements enlightening members on the need to treat women and girls equally.

When asked about the impact of their efforts, there is notable increase of confidence among women and improved participation in various activities. Besides, there is a shift in societal attitudes towards gender equality among community members in areas such as girls education and increased male participation in household chores and childcare.

The respondents commended the interfaith approach to gender equality and recommended more collaborative efforts on gender awareness programs or discussions and especially reaching such messages to the grassroot levels. With ACRL-R/P resourceful theologians, it was also suggested to develop a document with inclusive scriptural provisions and messages on the subject for dissemination among community members, youth groups and in places of worship. In terms of programming, developing men's engagement programs, Women's leadership development and addressing intersectionality

## 5.0 Highlight of Speakers' Addresses

**Ms. Mary Njeri, *EVAWG analyst at UN Women*.** Ms. Mary key note address discussed the need for capacity enhancement for both genders to achieve gender equality in Africa. She stressed the significance of gender equality in various aspects of life, including health, education, social accountability, political stability, and innovation. Mary also discussed the importance of regional and national legislation in addressing global issues and the need to assess the 12 critical areas of concern from the Beijing platform of action on protection and promotion of human rights.



**Fr. Dr. Dominic F. Tomuseni, *Senior Lecturer, Hekima University College*.** Fr. Tomuseni presented on living gender in justice and joy, and how religion defines gender norms and challenges gender injustice. He discussed the role of religion, culture, and tradition in promoting justice and joy in gender issues, emphasizing the importance of understanding masculinity as providing protection, guidance, and wisdom. Fr. Tomuseni highlighted the need to respect gender differences and the evolving division of labor in traditional cultures while noting the need for a shift in understanding gender roles.



**Prof. Mahfouz A. Adedimeji** an interdisciplinary scholar in Islamic and interfaith work discussed the concept of faith and gender equality in Islam. He clarified misconceptions about polygamy and the position of women in Islam, emphasizing that men and women are created equal and should be addressed modestly due to their inherent differences. Prof. Mahfouz also addressed misconceptions about Islam and its role in promoting positive values such as mutual respect, cooperation, righteousness, self-discipline, trustworthiness, and truthfulness. He concluded by expressing his

hope for unity and oneness among people of faith.



**Rev. Dr. Lydia Mwaniki (PhD), *Priest in the Anglican Church of Kenya-Nairobi Diocese*.** Lydia emphasized the importance of affirming dignity, security, and integrity for women and girls, and the need for practical interventions by faith communities to empower women. She highlighted disparities in achieving gender equality, the need to strengthen women's agency, and her role in developing the African Union Strategy on Gender Equality. Lydia suggested interventions such as leading by example, promoting religious texts affirming women's agency, engaging women and girls separately, providing economic empowerment and safe spaces, and engaging parents for gender-transformative parenting. She also highlighted the role of male champions in facilitating round table dialogues and the need to also reconstruct toxic femininity to positive femininity.






**Vusi Cebekhulu, *Regional Coordinator for Sonke Gender Justice*.** Vusi discussed the cultural and religious expectations placed on men as providers and protectors in their families, highlighting the negative impact these expectations can have on men's self-esteem and relationships. He suggested that these messages need to be reinterpreted to include a broader understanding of provision, encompassing emotional and physical support. Vusi emphasized the importance of men taking on a more active role in supporting their families and communities, and the role of faith and traditional leaders in promoting gender equality. He concluded by stressing the need for ongoing conversations and dialogues to promote peace and harmony between

men and women.

### Participants List

	Name (original name)	Country	Email
1	Issa TRAORE	Mali	issanaby@gmail.com
2	Afi Ireine ADJOKOU	Nigeria	ireneadjokou@gmail.com
3	Belusochukwu Enwere	Nigeria	ebelusochukwu@gmail.com
4	Jehoaddan Johnson	Nigeria	jehoaddanjohnson@gmail.com
5	MARK GYAMFI	Ghana	gyamfi.mark@sum.edu
6	Dominic Tomuseni	Zimbabwe	dominic.tomuseni@hekima.ac.ke
7	Xiaohan Ma	South Asia	xma@unicef.org
8	Hassan Balarabe Binanchi		hassanbinanchinsambo@gmail.com
9	Kathleen McGarvey		kitmcgarvey@gmail.com
10	Ibrahim Nanakhadeejat		ibrahimkhadeejatuthman@gmail.com
11	Obioma Opara	Nigeria	obioma.opara@fcfmt.edu.ng
12	Perthias Manda	Cameroon	pethiasmanda548@gmail.com
13	Francis Kuria	ACRL-RFP SG	fkuria@acrl-rfp.org
14	Mihrael Assefa		mihraelassefademissie@gmail.com
15	Halimat Jibril	Nigeria	hassygreenhome@gmail.com
16	Justina Mike Ngwobia	Nigeria	justinangwobia@gmail.com
17	Fatima Njoku	Zambia	tayonjoku@gmail.com
18	Bonaventure MASHATA	Zambia	ecumenism@sacbc.org.za
19	Rozilla Adhiambo	ACRL-RFP	radhiambo@acrl-rfp.org
20	Hawa Muhammed-Awwal	South Africa	hawwal2000@gmail.com
21	Ela Gandhi	South Africa	egandhi@gdt.org.za
22	Sophia Nthenda	Malawi	snthenda2001@yahoo.com
23	Muhammad Munir	Nigeria	morhbeem@gmail.com
24	Mariama Condé	Guinea	conderiame@gmail.com
25	Hajj Muhammad Kpakpo Addo	Ghana	kpakpoaddo@yahoo.com
26	Khadidiatou Mbaye	Senegal	khadidiatou2092@gmail.com
27	Veronica Onyeansi	Nigeria	nkolikanwa2001@gmail.com

28	Christine Mwasiti	Sierra Leone	cmwasiti@gmail.com
29	Jibril Akpanim	Nigeria	jibrilakpanim@gmail.com
30	Rev. Lydia Addison	Ghana	addisonlydia7@gmail.com
31	Sarah Mokaya	ACRL-RfP	secretariat@acrl-rfp.org
32	Jimmy Obuya	Religions for Peace	jobuya@rfp.org
33	Lovincer Katana		lovincerkatana@gmail.com
34	Vusi Cebekhulu	South Africa	vusi@genderjustice.org.za
35	Martin Migwi	ACRL-RfP	mnjane@acrl-rfp.org
36	Benaiah Addison	Ghana	bensilva578@gmail.com
37	Themban Dyule	South Africa	thembani@mosaic.org.za
38	Suwaibatu Yakubu	Ghana	suwaibat@gmail.com
39	Mahfouz Adedimeji	Nigeria	mahfouzad2@gmail.com
40	Mary Njeri	UN Women	mary.wanjiru@unwomen.org
41	Bertha Malla	Cameroon	mallabetty@yahoo.fr
42	Lombe Mwanza	Malawi	lombemwanza03@gmail.com
43	Innocent Ononugbo		innooke1@gmail.com
44	Ishara Maharaj	Mali	maharaji@ukzn.ac.za
45	Lydia Mwaniki	Kenya	lydiamuthonimwaniki@gmail.com
46	Prince Obioma	Nigeria	obiomanwaeke@gmail.com
47	Juliana Uzoka	Mali	julianauzoka@gmail.com
48	Shindano Patrice	Kenya	shindanop1983@gmail.com
49	Olakotan Fafiolu	Nigeria	faffykot@yahoo.com
50	Christianna Sutton	Sierra Leone	revchristianasutton@gmail.com




**FAITH, POSITIVE MASCULINITY AND GENDER EQUALITY**










*Embracing Positive Masculinity*

How Faith communities can combat discrimination and violence against women and girls in Africa.



20th September 2024  
9am – 11am GMT  
(12noon EAT)



SCAN TO REGISTER

English & French Interpretation available

End/

Report Date: 30/10/2024