

**THE INTERSECTIONALITY BETWEEN CULTURE, FAITH AND RIGHTS:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF THE UNITED NATIONS “FAITH FOR RIGHTS” INITIATIVE**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Gender-based discrimination remains a major global issue, profoundly affecting women's rights in many countries. Women continue to face persistent inequalities, whether in access to education, participation in economic and political life, or protection against violence. The intersectionality of gender, culture, and religion renders certain women even more vulnerable to multiple forms of discrimination. In this context, it is crucial that the United Nations and its treaty bodies play a central role in monitoring and promoting human rights. UN initiatives help States combat various forms of discrimination and promote respect for universal human rights. The “Faith for Rights” initiative, launched by the United Nations in 2017, provides an opportunity to explore the intersectional dimensions connecting gender, culture, and religion.

1.1. Presentation of Our Project

The research team is composed of six law students from the Licentiate in Civil Law (LL.L.) program at the University of Ottawa, along with various collaborators. Each member of the [Observatory on Human Rights at the United Nations of the University of Ottawa](#) contributes to a unique blend of perspectives stemming from different cultures, religions, genders, socio-economic backgrounds, levels of education, and political affiliations.

Our research project is part of the ongoing efforts of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). We believe that this project will be beneficial not only to CEDAW in the implementation of its initiatives but also to all United Nations treaty bodies in their collective mission to uphold human rights. “The Intersectionality between Culture, Faith, and Rights: An Analysis of the Impact of the United Nations ‘Faith for Rights’ Initiative” is a research project that explores the complex interactions between women’s rights, religion, and culture. The analysis focuses particularly on the impact and implementation of the “Faith for Rights” initiative, launched in 2017 with the Beirut Declaration.

To democratize knowledge, we will produce a comprehensive report aimed at assessing the effectiveness of the “Faith for Rights” initiative in combating gender-based discrimination within religious contexts, by identifying various opportunities where the implementation of the initiative’s 18 commitments have been either successfully realized or missed.

1.2. Methodology

Our project is based on a “horizontal mapping” approach designed to analyze the evolution of jurisprudence related to women’s rights within religious and cultural contexts. By integrating specific “keywords” derived from the 18 commitments of the Beirut Declaration, our research focuses on key themes to enable a more targeted analysis. The main objective is to compile and compare international jurisprudence produced since 2017 in order to identify opportunities where the “Faith for Rights” initiative could have been applied.

Our approach aims to shed light on these omissions, which may create gaps in how treaty bodies address women’s rights within religious frameworks, while remaining grounded in the Beirut Declaration. This approach is structured around the following five steps:

1. **COMPILED LIST OF SOURCES:** Conduct an analysis of jurisprudence relevant to the intersection of gender, religion, and culture, produced by human rights treaty bodies, UN regional entities, as well as related resolutions and reports.
2. **COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE IDENTIFIED REPORTS:** Carry out a comparative study of documents published after the launch of the Beirut Declaration in order to identify trends and developments in the UN's approaches to women's rights within religious contexts. As the research is primarily focused on women's rights, most of the analyzed documents will have been published by CEDAW.

The essence of each commitment can be summarized as follows¹:

- I. **Freedom of Choice:** Protect the right of every individual to freely choose their religion or beliefs.
- II. **Common Standard:** Establish a minimum standard for all believers, strengthening human dignity.
- III. **Constructive Interpretation:** Encourage a critical and constructive understanding of religious texts.
- IV. **Religious Equality:** Promote equal treatment in all religious manifestations, without discrimination.
- V. **Gender Non-Discrimination:** Ensure gender equality and combat gender-based violence.
- VI. **Protection of Minorities:** Defend the rights of minorities and their freedom of belief.
- VII. **Condemnation of Hatred:** Publicly denounce incitement to hatred and violence.
- VIII. **Monitoring of Discourses:** Develop policies to monitor religious interpretations inconsistent with human rights.
- IX. **Respect for Beliefs:** Refrain from condemning the beliefs of others in ways that expose them to violence.
- X. **Rejection of Religious Exclusion:** Reject interpretations that promote exclusion.
- XI. **Dissenting Voices:** Do not suppress dissenting opinions and abolish blasphemy laws.
- XII. **Respectful Education:** Revise school curricula to prevent incitement to violence.

¹ The Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments on Faith rights, report and outlook, United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner (2017) p.14, online:
<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/press/Faith4Rights.pdf>

XIII. Support for Youth: Assist young people vulnerable to religiously motivated violence.

XIV. Humanitarian Assistance: Uphold humanitarian principles without religious discrimination.

XV. Freedom of Conversion: Respect freedom of conversion without coercion or exploitation.

XVI. Preventive Strategies: Leverage faith and spiritual values to strengthen human rights.

XVII. Academic Partnerships: Establish partnerships to promote research on faith and human rights.

XVIII. Technology for Cohesion: Use technology to disseminate messages on faith and rights, fostering social cohesion.

3. STUDY OF SPECIFIC CASES: Identify examples illustrating several missed opportunities—instances where a treaty body could have referred to one or more of the commitments of the “Faith for Rights” initiative. To do so, we first developed a series of “keywords” derived from the 18 commitments of the Beirut Declaration, in order to define the scope of the research and identify the various ways this tool designed for religious leaders has been or could have been applied.

Keywords Used to Identify Missed Opportunities:

Commitment #1: Free choice, freedom of conscience, and freedom of religion

Commitment #2: Common minimum standard, interaction, and non-religious actors

Commitment #3: Promotion, understanding, and critical thinking

Commitment #4: Discriminatory practices, state religion

Commitment #5: Gender equality, religious interpretations

Commitment #6: Protection of minorities, freedom of religion

Commitment #7: Beliefs and hatred

Commitment #8: Faith and law

Commitment #9: Partnership and action

Commitment #10: Exclusion/inclusion, religion, political gains

Commitment #11: Blasphemy, apostasy, freedom of thought, freedom of conscience

Commitment #12: Religious diversity, freedom of expression/academic freedom, free thinking

Commitment #13: Rabat Plan of Action, violence, “Faith for Rights”

4. **ANALYSIS OF MISSED OPPORTUNITIES:** Identify both the seized and missed opportunities within the general recommendations and concluding observations of CEDAW. Each missed opportunity identified is linked to one or more of the 18 commitments that could have been applied. Moreover, to move beyond a siloed approach, we took the initiative to analyze reports containing concluding observations from other Committees, including the Committee against Torture (CAT), the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (CMW), and the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). This collaborative and interdisciplinary approach helps overcome certain compartmentalized limitations that can exist among different treaty bodies. Finally, we examine the consequences resulting from these missed opportunities and the potential impact they might have had if they had been effectively seized.

4. **ISSUING RECOMMENDATIONS:** Formulate recommendations addressed to all relevant stakeholders for the inclusion of the “Faith for Rights” initiative in the exercise of their functions, with the aim of contributing to the respect, protection, and promotion of women’s rights within religious contexts.

1.3. Presentation of “Faith for Rights”

Following a series of meetings organized by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), a group of actors from civil society and organizations concerned with faith and human rights expressed in Beirut in March 2017 their profound conviction that their respective religions and beliefs share a common commitment to the protection of human dignity.² Faith and rights are intrinsically linked domains that must mutually reinforce one another. Considering that religion and belief are essential foundations for the protection and defense of human rights, the participants emphasized that their convictions play a decisive role in safeguarding human dignity and ensuring freedom for all, without discrimination.³ Furthermore, the group affirmed that freedom of religion or belief cannot be separated from freedom of thought and conscience⁴. It was in Beirut that the group officially launched its peaceful movement and presented the “Faith for Rights” Declaration, addressed to people of all religions and beliefs around

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid* at p. 15.

the world.⁵ The declaration aims to promote solidary, peaceful, and respectful societies⁶ by creating a joint platform dedicated to action and supported by the relevant stakeholders. The declaration, along with the foundational *Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence*⁷ were both developed under the auspices and with the support of the United Nations, representing all peoples of the world.⁸ Despite the numerous initiatives implemented over the years to establish a mutually beneficial link between faith and rights, none had fully achieved their objectives.⁹ The group believes it is imperative to empower religious actors, at both the national and international levels, by providing them with the means to assume their responsibilities in protecting humanity. This includes combating hate speech, addressing actors who profit from the destabilization of societies, and countering those who exploit fear to undermine human dignity that is inalienable and equal for all.¹⁰ With this declaration, the group seeks to build on previous attempts to connect faith and rights by emphasizing their shared foundations. Their intention is also to identify ways in which faith can more effectively protect rights so that both may mutually enrich one another.¹¹ In pursuit of these objectives, the group commits to upholding a set of fundamental principles.¹²

1.4. The Visionaries

Even before the Beirut Declaration was adopted and the 18 commitments of the “Faith for Rights” initiative were developed, several reports and documents were already pointing in the same direction. Indeed, the themes and issues addressed within the UN, namely the respect for human rights, particularly women’s rights, through the pillars of religion and cultural traditions—have long represented shared global concerns. This explains why they had already been raised in various studies and initiatives prior to the launch of the “Faith for Rights” initiative.

This also demonstrates the necessity and usefulness of such a project, as well as the importance of implementing it when circumstances allow (a point that will be discussed later in this report). However, before reaching the implementation phase of the “Faith for Rights” initiative, it is worth highlighting a few individuals who had already articulated the core ideas of this initiative even before its creation in 2017. Those we refer to as the visionaries. For the purposes of our research, we have chosen to limit our observations to documents produced in the twenty-first century.

The Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments under the “Faith for Rights” initiative appear to build upon existing legal instruments and prior work, while further developing the role of religious

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² *Ibid* at p.16.

leaders. Indeed, several sources had already emphasized the responsibilities, obligations, and influence of religious actors and leaders.

Some sources focus on the negative obligations of religious leaders such as refraining from spreading messages of intolerance or participating in hate speech. This is particularly evident in the Rabat Plan of Action, which lists certain positive obligations, though these are often framed as extensions of the negative ones. For example, the obligation to denounce incitement to hatred through a positive duty is closely linked to the prohibition against participating in such discourse.

Other sources, however, highlight stronger positive responsibilities for religious leaders. This is notably the case in the Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes, which outlines several proactive duties and identifies religious leaders as key actors in combating hate speech.

The Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments seem to adopt this more proactive approach. They emphasize the responsibility not only to avoid harmful discourse but also to engage in concrete actions that promote human rights. The “Faith for Rights” initiative distinguishes itself from its predecessors by pairing its recommendations with practical tools, notably through the “#Faith4Rights Toolkit”, that facilitate the implementation of these obligations and responsibilities.

1.5. Seized Opportunities by Various Treaty Bodies

In several United Nations documents, the “Faith for Rights” initiative has been explicitly referenced. Although some do not specifically cite any of the 18 commitments, they nonetheless represent occasions that demonstrate the use of the initiative and lay the groundwork for future seized opportunities. Below are some emblematic examples of such references:

- **Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of Thailand – 10 July 2025¹³**

“Amend article 1448 of the Compilation of Civil and Commercial Code and remove any exceptions to the age of marriage of 18 years for both women and men; apply the prohibition of polygamy, enshrined in article 1452 of the Code, throughout the State Party; and strengthen measures to eliminate child, forced and polygamous marriage, including through adequate penalties and by entering into a dialogue on faith and rights under the Faith for Rights framework with the Central Islamic Council of Thailand and religious and customary leaders” [...]” (para. 50b)

¹³ CEDAW. “Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of Thailand” (10 July 2025), online: <https://documents.un.org/CEDAW/C/THA/CO/8>. See also other examples of related discussions by CEDAW that refer to “Faith for Rights”: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/religion/CEDAW_Excerpts.pdf

- **General recommendation No. 40 (2024) on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems¹⁴**

“Engage religious leaders and faith-based actors in the process of addressing areas of possible tensions between some interpretations of religious traditions and human rights, such as through the Faith for Rights framework of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights;” (*para. 31c*)

- **General comment No. 37 (2020) on the right of peaceful assembly (article 21)¹⁵**

“Participation in assemblies whose dominant message falls within the scope of article 20 must be addressed in conformity with the requirements for restrictions set out in articles 19 and 21. [Footnote: General comment No. 34, paras. 50–52; International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, art. 4; and Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, general recommendation No. 35 (2013) on combating racist hate speech. See also the Rabat Plan of Action, para. 29, and the Beirut Declaration on Faith for Rights (A/HRC/40/58, annexes I and II).]” (*para. 50 and footnote 60*)

In these three excerpts, several concepts are referenced that also appear across the thirty reports analyzed in this study. To highlight opportunities seized by States or by various UN committees, it is important to acknowledge and emphasize these instances.

First, the inclusion of religious actors and leaders in these recommendations demonstrates a clear recognition of their influence and capacity for action within the religious organizations represented in these reports. This acknowledgment reflects the very foundation of the Faith for Rights initiative, which seeks to recognize and emphasize the significant global influence of religious actors. This trend can be observed particularly in the reports analyzed for Singapore, Montenegro, Kuwait, Pakistan, and Belarus. In these cases, when a treaty body recommends reforming or repealing blasphemy laws, promoting dialogue or healthy debate between religious and state leaders, protecting women human rights defenders, or ensuring open conversation on cultural and religious norms, it has implicitly seized an opportunity linked to Commitments IV and VI of the Faith for Rights initiative, those concerning the promotion of religious freedom and the protection of minorities. Finally, it is important to recognize Commitments V and XVI, which call for the elimination of discriminatory stereotypes regarding women’s roles and responsibilities within the family and society, through the development and implementation of a comprehensive strategy aimed at community and religious leaders.

Secondly, when a UN committee highlights the development of initiatives or projects addressing gender equality in these reports, it reflects reasoning aligned with the foundation of Commitment V, which focuses on combating gender-based discrimination including that which is rooted in

¹⁴ CEDAW. « General recommendation No. 40 (2024) on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems » (25 October 2024), online: <https://undocs.org/CEDAW/C/GC/40>.

¹⁵ CEDAW. “General comment No. 37 (2020) on the right of peaceful assembly (article 21)” (17 September 2020), online: <https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/GC/37>.

religious grounds. Across the thirty reports analyzed, several examples illustrate this connection. For instance, in Brazil, the establishment of ministries or institutions dedicated to women's rights and gender equality contributes to the creation of public policies sensitive to gender issues and sociocultural, including religious, norms. Meanwhile, in Chile, Morocco, Turkey, and Greece, the emphasis is placed on the need to train and raise awareness among religious and public authorities, such as clergy, law enforcement officials, and judges. As previously mentioned, these examples can be linked not only to Commitment V, which focuses on gender equality and the elimination of gender-based discrimination, but also to Commitment XII, which concerns the fight against stereotypes through education and awareness-raising efforts.

Thirdly, in its recommendations to the State of Thailand, the CEDAW Committee references and applies the core principles of the Faith for Rights initiative in order to integrate religious and customary leaders into dialogue surrounding discriminatory practices related to marriage and marital relations. This mention highlights the importance of including such actors in efforts to combat and prevent harmful practices. Although the Committee does not explicitly specify which of the 18 commitments could apply in this particular case, the context and the issues addressed in the report suggest the potential relevance of Commitments IV and V, which concern, respectively, the prohibition of discriminatory practices and the fight against gender-based discrimination. Through this recommendation, the CEDAW Committee seized an opportunity to promote the Faith for Rights initiative within the framework of a state procedure, namely the prohibition of child marriage (under 18 years of age) and polygamy. This approach demonstrates a tangible example of how the initiative's principles can be integrated into concrete state-level reforms aimed at protecting women's rights.

2. MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

2.1. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

2.1.1. General Recommendations

*N. B. It is important to recognize that since these two reports were published in July and November 2017, their drafting may have preceded the publication of the 18 Beirut Commitments in March 2017, meaning that the recommendations issued by CEDAW may have been formulated before these commitments became available. Nevertheless, these examples remain valuable in illustrating **missed opportunities** for the application of the Faith for Rights framework within CEDAW's general recommendations.*

General recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No. 19 – 26 July 2017¹⁶

Summary and Context

In this document, the Committee updates General Recommendation No. 19, which had recognized the prohibition of violence against women as a principle of customary international law. Within this updated recommendation, several positive elements are noted, including the significant impact of the efforts made by civil society actors in addressing this issue. However, the Committee emphasizes that gender-based violence against women remains pervasive worldwide. It is on this observation that the Committee bases the core of its recommendations.

Missed Opportunities

First, in its recommendations, the Committee emphasizes the importance of prevention in the fight to eliminate violence against women. Among the preventive measures proposed, the Committee highlights the need to develop awareness-raising programmes addressing various aspects of this issue, including the harmful nature of violence and the stigmatization of victims. The actors identified as targets of these programmes are traditional and religious leaders. However, identifying such actors merely as targets rather than as active participants in the fight against violence toward women constitutes a missed opportunity to apply the commitments of the Beirut Declaration. More specifically, it would have been relevant to apply Commitment V (relating to equality and the fight against gender-based violence) to leverage the significant influence that religious leaders hold within their communities. By engaging these leaders not only as recipients of awareness-raising initiatives but also as partners and agents of change, the Committee could have strengthened its preventive approach and fostered broader social transformation aligned with the principles of the Faith for Rights framework.

Secondly, the Committee strongly recommends that States implement measures of international cooperation in this area. States are encouraged to seek internal support when necessary and to pursue objectives related to sustainable development through enhanced international collaboration. To achieve this, the Committee notably recommends the meaningful involvement of civil society, which includes religious actors. However, this represents a missed opportunity to explicitly draw upon Commitment XVII of the Faith for Rights framework, which emphasizes cooperation among actors, mutual support, and the exchange of best practices. Applying this commitment could have significantly strengthened efforts to combat violence against women by highlighting the value of interreligious collaboration. Indeed, Commitment XVII explicitly refers to the development of sustainable partnerships with academic institutions to promote interdisciplinary research a crucial avenue for deepening understanding of how faith-based perspectives can support gender equality and prevent violence. Integrating this approach would have allowed the Committee to situate its recommendation within a broader, more dynamic framework of cooperation between religious, academic, and civil society actors.

¹⁶ CEDAW. “General recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No. 19” (26 July 2017), online: <https://undocs.org/CEDAW/C/GC/35>.

General recommendation No. 36 (2017) on the right of girls and women to education– 27 November 2017¹⁷

Summary and Context

This document emphasizes education for girls and women as a key element of their empowerment and a fundamental human right essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Despite notable progress, the Committee expresses concern about the gap between the legal recognition of the right to education and its practical realization. In this regard, the Committee formulates a series of recommendations structured around three main pillars: The right of access to education, education as a space for rights, and education as a vehicle for rights. These three dimensions highlight education not only as a social and economic necessity but also as a transformative space where equality, dignity, and human rights can be realized in practice.

Missed Opportunities

First, in Section VI of the document, the Committee distinguishes between two dimensions of discrimination faced by girls and women: the ideological and the structural aspects. To counter these two forms, States are urged to adopt initiatives aimed at transforming societal perceptions of women. The educational system appears particularly well suited to this purpose, as it serves as a key driver of cultural change with the potential to influence other spheres of society. In the effort to eliminate sexist stereotypes in education, the Committee recommends the development of programmes and policies on gender equality applicable at all levels of schooling and across society as a whole. It also calls for the creation of non-stereotypical textbooks and educational materials to dismantle traditional sexist representations. However, these recommendations directly align with Commitment XII of the Faith for Rights initiative, which advocates for respectful curricula free from incitement to discrimination. Explicitly referencing or integrating this commitment would have been highly relevant, as it provides a solid normative and ethical foundation to support the Committee's recommendation. Doing so could have strengthened the link between education, faith, and human rights, framing schools not only as spaces for knowledge transmission but also as platforms for fostering respect, inclusion, and equality.

Secondly, in the “Cultural Barriers” section of the document, the Committee highlights the persistence of patriarchal systems, cultural norms, and traditional gender roles assigned to girls and women, which continue to obstruct the full realization of their right to education. It underscores that certain discriminatory practices of religious or cultural origin, such as child and/or forced marriage and female genital mutilation, have harmful repercussions on the right to education. These practices often disrupt or even permanently terminate girls’ schooling. To mitigate these effects, the Committee recommends ensuring that access to education for girls and women is not hindered by such practices. It also acknowledges the role of religious and traditional leaders, suggesting their inclusion in dialogues addressing these issues. However, these recommendations could have been significantly strengthened by being explicitly framed within the Faith for Rights framework, particularly through Commitment XVI, which emphasizes the

¹⁷ CEDAW. “General recommendation No. 36 (2017) on the right of girls and women to education” (27 November 2017), online: <https://docs.un.org/CEDAW/C/GC/36>.

leverage of faith's moral authority to reinforce the protection of human rights. The Faith for Rights initiative proposes a globally adaptable model for mobilizing religious actors in addressing human rights violations. Designed to respond to local cultural and religious contexts, it provides a structured and context-sensitive tool to bridge the gap between human rights culture and faith-based communities. Integrating this framework would have allowed the Committee to ground its recommendations in an established mechanism that encourages collaborative dialogue, mutual understanding, and the transformation of harmful cultural and religious norms into sources of empowerment and equality.

2.1.2. Concluding Observations

Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Saudi Arabia– 30 October 2024¹⁸

Summary and Context

The concluding observations acknowledge certain recent legal reforms that the Committee commends. However, it also expresses serious concern about the persistence of systemic discrimination. Deeply entrenched gender stereotypes continue to shape social and institutional structures, and women human rights defenders face repression. In this regard, the Committee calls for the alignment of national laws with the CEDAW Convention and the strengthening of protection mechanisms, while emphasizing the importance of increasing women's participation in public life as a key step toward achieving genuine equality and ensuring the protection of women's rights in Saudi Arabia.

Missed Opportunities

Within the report, several of the 18 commitments of the Faith for Rights initiative could have been explicitly integrated to further strengthen the Committee's recommendations. First, Commitments IV and V could have been invoked to reinforce the Committee's call for the reinterpretation of discriminatory cultural norms. These commitments address, respectively, the prohibition of discriminatory practices and the promotion of gender equality and the fight against gender-based violence principles that directly align with the Committee's concerns regarding entrenched gender roles and systemic inequality. Furthermore, Commitments VII and VIII would have been particularly relevant in discussions surrounding the guardianship system, which restricts women's autonomy and limits victims' access to justice in cases of domestic violence. A mention of the responsibilities and moral influence of religious leaders in this context could have provided a valuable framework for challenging and transforming such restrictive systems through faith-based dialogue and advocacy. Finally, Commitments XII and XV could have been applied in addressing the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). These commitments focused on education free from discrimination and the freedom of conversion and choice could have strengthened the Committee's recommendations for

¹⁸ CEDAW. "Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Saudi Arabia" (30 October 2024), online: <https://docs.un.org/CEDAW/C/SAU/CO/5>.

educational reform aimed at dismantling gender stereotypes. By explicitly incorporating these commitments, the report would have linked its legal and policy recommendations to a broader interfaith and human-rights framework, encouraging collaboration between religious, governmental, and educational institutions to advance gender equality in both law and practice.

Concluding Observations on the Combined Eighth and Ninth Periodic Reports of Brazil – 6 April 2024¹⁹

Summary and Context

While Brazil has adopted certain policies aimed at combating gender-based violence, the Committee expresses serious concerns regarding an alarming increase in femicides, the persistence of deeply rooted gender stereotypes, and restrictions on women's reproductive health rights. In its recommendations, the Committee urges the State to strengthen human rights education and to ensure the protection of women human rights defenders and LGBTQIA+ individuals. These measures are presented as essential steps toward addressing the systemic causes of discrimination and ensuring the effective implementation of equality and justice for all women and marginalized groups in Brazil.

Missed Opportunities

Within the report, several of the Faith for Rights commitments could have been integrated to reinforce and expand the Committee's recommendations. First, Commitments I and II could have been referenced to strengthen recommendations concerning the protection of the rights of women and religious minorities. These commitments, which focus on freedom of choice, conscience, and religion, as well as the establishment of a common standard of dignity for all believers, would have provided a robust framework for promoting inclusive protection mechanisms respectful of both faith and rights. Commitment III could have served as a foundation for an invitation to critical reflection and dialogue on religious texts, encouraging interpretations that align with human dignity and gender equality. Similarly, Commitment V could have been invoked to urge a more explicit revision of discriminatory religious interpretations and a firm condemnation of harmful practices such as child marriage both deeply connected to gender-based violence and systemic inequality. Regarding Commitments VI and VII, a clear denunciation of religious discrimination would have reinforced the principle that the State must not privilege any religion at the expense of individual rights. A further reference to Commitment VII which condemns incitement to hatred and violence would have been valuable to call for concrete measures against gender-based violence and hate speech, particularly when justified on religious grounds. Commitments XI and XII could have supported a strong recommendation for the revision of school curricula to prevent the perpetuation of sexist stereotypes, promote religious diversity, and safeguard academic freedom. Integrating these commitments would have linked education reform directly to the promotion of tolerance and equality across generations. Finally, Commitment XIV would have been particularly relevant to reaffirm that humanitarian assistance must remain neutral and unconditional, ensuring equal protection and access to aid for all women, regardless of their religious affiliation.

¹⁹ CEDAW. "Concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of Brazil" (6 June 2024), online: <https://docs.un.org/en/CEDAW/C/BRA/CO/8-9>

Incorporating these various commitments would have allowed the report to more deeply align its recommendations with a comprehensive and intersectional human rights framework, recognizing the crucial interplay between faith, culture, and gender in advancing equality and justice.

Concluding Observations on the Eighth Periodic Report of Chile – 31 October 2024²⁰

Summary and Context

The concluding observations highlight that human trafficking remains a matter of concern and that gender stereotypes continue to be deeply entrenched in Chilean society. Women are still affected by traditionalist views that confine them to domestic and caregiving roles, while the rate of sexual violence, particularly rape, has increased by 48% since 2018. Despite some progress, including efforts to improve the situation of marginalized women in the areas of employment and access to sexual and reproductive health care, significant challenges persist. The Committee therefore emphasizes the need to adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation and to incorporate the principles of the Convention into domestic law, ensuring that women's rights are effectively protected in both law and practice.

Missed Opportunities

The report highlights the persistence of gender stereotypes within Chilean society, particularly the influence of traditional values on the roles of women and men within the family sphere. However, the Committee's recommendations in this regard could have been further developed by drawing on Commitment V of the Faith for Rights initiative. Given the significant influence that religious beliefs and interpretations can have on societal conceptions of women's roles, it would have been relevant to mobilize religious actors as key partners in the fight against such stereotypes. Engaging faith leaders in this dialogue could have provided a culturally sensitive and community-based approach to challenging discriminatory gender norms while promoting equality from within religious and cultural frameworks. Furthermore, the Committee stresses the need to strictly enforce the Law on Violence against Women, including strengthening the capacities of judges and law enforcement officers. Here again, the Faith for Rights framework could have served as a powerful foundation. Its guiding principles encourage the active involvement of religious actors in awareness-raising and public education, fostering collaboration between faith communities, civil society, and state institutions. By explicitly referring to the Faith for Rights initiative, the Committee could have expanded its recommendations beyond legal enforcement to include preventive and educational dimensions, helping to democratize knowledge, transform harmful social attitudes, and create stronger synergies between religious ethics and human rights principles.

²⁰ CEDAW. "Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of Chile" (31 October 2024), online: <https://docs.un.org/en/CEDAW/C/CHL/CO/8>

Concluding Observations on the Seventh Periodic Report of Estonia – 6 June 2024²¹

Summary and Context

Since its previous report in 2016, Estonia has made significant progress, notably through the adoption of various legislative measures aimed at promoting gender equality and protecting women's rights. However, the Committee remains concerned about several ongoing issues, particularly regarding legislative frameworks, access to justice, complaint mechanisms, and women's participation in employment and decision-making spheres. Additionally, the Committee draws attention to the gendered impacts of climate change, emphasizing the need for an inclusive and rights-based approach.

Missed Opportunities

In its concluding observations, the Committee highlights several shortcomings, including a lack of public awareness regarding the rights guaranteed under CEDAW and the limited funding of civil society organizations working to defend women's rights. However, religious actors are not explicitly mentioned, despite their significant social influence. Establishing partnerships of this kind could have been highly beneficial, as it aligns directly with Commitment XVII of the Faith for Rights initiative, which emphasizes collaboration, mutual support, and the sharing of best practices among different actors including faith-based communities and academic institutions. Furthermore, the Committee expresses concern regarding the limited scope of legal equality protections. Currently, equality of treatment is safeguarded only within the professional context, with no corresponding measures preventing direct or indirect discrimination in other areas of daily life, including religion. Here, Commitment V which enshrines the obligation to guarantee non-discrimination based on gender could have served as a useful foundation for broadening the Committee's recommendations. By integrating these commitments, the Committee could have encouraged intersectoral cooperation between civil society, faith-based organizations, and state institutions to strengthen gender equality frameworks. Moreover, referencing Faith for Rights would have underscored the importance of inclusive community engagement and the shared responsibility of both secular and religious actors in promoting women's rights across all spheres of life.

Concluding Observations on the Ninth Periodic Report of France – 27 October 2023²²

Summary and Context

The Committee commends France for its significant legislative reforms promoting gender equality, including the adoption of laws targeting sexual and gender-based violence and the implementation of the national plan “Toutes et tous égaux” (“All Equal”). It also welcomes the Interministerial Convention (2019–2024), which promotes a culture of equality through education

²¹ CEDAW. “Concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of Estonia” (6 June 2024), online: <https://docs.un.org/en/CEDAW/C/EST/CO/7>

²² CEDAW. “Concluding observations on the ninth periodic report of France” (27 October 2023), online: <https://docs.un.org/en/CEDAW/C/FRA/CO/9>

and supports the prevention of harassment in schools and workplaces. Finally, the Committee encourages the establishment of an effective monitoring mechanism to ensure the sustainability and impact of these initiatives, and it reaffirms the importance of guaranteeing gender equality both in law and in practice, in accordance with the CEDAW Convention and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

Missed Opportunities

The Committee expresses concern over the persistence of discriminatory stereotypes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and men within the family and in society, particularly affecting women belonging to religious, racial, or ethnic minorities. In this regard, the Committee recommends strengthening France's strategy to eliminate such stereotypes. However, it would have been highly relevant to explicitly include religious actors in this recommendation, drawing on Commitment VI of the Faith for Rights initiative, which focuses on the protection of individuals belonging to minority groups. The Committee also raises concern about the prevalence of child and forced marriages, often taking the form of religious or customary unions. While the Committee rightly urges the State to implement mechanisms to eliminate such practices, the recommendations could have gone further by emphasizing the crucial role of religious actors in prevention, awareness-raising, and community dialogue. This aligns closely with Commitment V, which promotes gender equality and the elimination of gender-based discrimination and violence. Mobilizing faith leaders could enhance local legitimacy and effectiveness in addressing these deeply rooted social and cultural issues.

Furthermore, in a communication dated 27 October 2023²³, a group of UN Special Rapporteurs requested cooperation from the French government to clarify the situation concerning the ban on wearing the *abaya* in public schools and the prohibition of the *hijab* in sports. Acting under their mandates of the UN Human Rights Council, the Special Rapporteurs sought explanations and assurances that these bans respect the best interests of the child and the fundamental right to education. They also requested guarantees that such prohibitions do not violate the freedom of religion or belief of Muslim individuals and do not contribute to their social marginalization.²⁴ When the French Government did not provide satisfactory responses to these questions, the Special Rapporteurs sent a second communication on 22 October 2024, reiterating concerns about the discriminatory effects of these bans and explicitly referring to Commitment IV in this context.²⁵

This complex situation could have represented a significant opportunity also for CEDAW in its concluding observations to mobilize the Faith for Rights framework, particularly Commitment VI, which underscores the respect and protection of the rights of all persons belonging to minorities. Applying this framework would have allowed the Committee and the State to facilitate

²³ Mandats de la Rapporteuse spéciale dans le domaine des droits culturels; de la Rapporteuse spéciale sur le droit à l'éducation; du Rapporteur spécial sur les questions relatives aux minorités; du Rapporteur spécial sur la liberté de religion ou de conviction; de la Rapporteuse spéciale sur la violence contre les femmes et les filles, ses causes et ses conséquences et du Groupe de travail sur la discrimination à l'égard des femmes et des filles, 27 octobre 2023, online: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownLoadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28534>

²⁴ *Ibid.* p.5

²⁵ Mandats de la Rapporteuse spéciale dans le domaine des droits culturels; du Rapporteur spécial sur les questions relatives aux minorités; du Rapporteur spécial sur la liberté de religion ou de conviction et du Groupe de travail sur la discrimination à l'égard des femmes et des filles, 22 octobre 2024, pp. 15-16, online: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownLoadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=29435>

constructive dialogue between government, civil society, and religious communities, thereby balancing state secularism with human rights obligations and promoting social inclusion through mutual understanding and respect for religious diversity.

Concluding Observations on the Combined Eighth and Ninth Periodic Reports of Greece – 20 February 2024²⁶

Summary and Context

The concluding observations outline Greece's progress in promoting gender equality and combating gender-based violence. The Committee acknowledges significant advancements, including the adoption of national action plans on gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, human trafficking, and the protection of children from sexual exploitation. However, the Committee also notes persistent concerns, such as the underrepresentation of women in political life, gender pay gaps, illiteracy rates among girls, sexual harassment, and other forms of gender-based violence. These issues highlight the need for Greece to intensify its efforts to ensure substantive equality between women and men and to address both structural and cultural barriers that continue to hinder women's full participation in public and private life.

Missed Opportunities

Although the importance of religious leaders is acknowledged in the concluding observations, the Committee identifies several gaps in this regard. While the State has adopted a legislative and policy framework to protect women's rights and promote gender equality, the effectiveness of these laws remains limited. With respect to gender-based violence, the Committee expresses concern over the absence of a legal definition of femicide and domestic violence, the low prosecution rate for rape cases, and the lack of information regarding protection orders. To address these challenges, the Committee recommends measures such as ensuring the effective enforcement of protection mechanisms. However, this constitutes a missed opportunity to apply Commitment VI of the Faith for Rights initiative, which seeks to ensure that all individuals, including minorities, enjoy equal rights and access to social, cultural, economic, and public life. Building upon the Faith for Rights framework could have enhanced the impact of the recommended measures. Mobilizing religious actors in awareness-raising initiatives targeting women could have had a major effect by leveraging their moral and social influence on challenge stereotypes and overcome cultural barriers that perpetuate discrimination and violence. Moreover, the Committee regrets that the principle of intersectionality is not sufficiently applied to address the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by women belonging to minority groups. Yet, it does not specify concrete steps for integrating this approach into the training of leaders or influential figures, nor does it outline methods for educating the broader population on this issue. This omission represents another missed opportunity to reference Commitment V of Faith for Rights, which emphasizes the importance of strengthening the role of traditional and religious leaders in raising awareness of

²⁶ CEDAW. "Concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of Greece" (20 February 2024), online: <https://docs.un.org/en/CEDAW/C/GRC/CO/8-9>

discrimination. Drawing on the Beirut Commitments in this context could have provided a practical and adaptable framework for implementing intersectional strategies and for ensuring that education, leadership training, and public discourse actively promote equality, inclusion, and cultural transformation.

Concluding Observations on the Sixth Periodic Report of Kuwait – 6 June 2024²⁷

Summary and Context

The concluding observations highlight several notable improvements in Kuwait, including the adoption of laws prohibiting employment discrimination in the private sector and sexual harassment in the workplace. Access to mental health care for women and girls has also been strengthened, as well as efforts to combat domestic violence. The State party further emphasizes the crucial role of women in sustainable development and in the formulation of national policies and strategies, marking a positive step toward gender-inclusive governance. However, the Committee expresses serious concern over the repeated dissolution of the National Assembly, which could undermine political stability and hinder the implementation of reforms, including those related to women's rights and gender equality.

Missed Opportunity

The provisions on non-discrimination in Kuwait apply exclusively to national citizens, excluding non-citizens and migrant populations. Despite the establishment of a committee tasked with reviewing existing legislation, discriminatory provisions remain embedded in several laws, and their retention is frequently justified through references to Sharia. Women continue to face significant barriers in accessing justice, including discriminatory laws and inappropriate procedural requirements for instance, the need for two male witnesses to report domestic violence. Furthermore, the Domestic Violence Law fails to adequately protect women, particularly migrant domestic workers, and does not criminalize all forms of gender-based violence. This represents a missed opportunity to apply Commitment V of the Faith for Rights initiative, which focuses on non-discrimination and gender equality. This commitment explicitly calls for re-examining religious interpretations and understandings that perpetuate gender inequalities and harmful stereotypes. The lack of accessible training on the content of the Convention, the absence of public awareness campaigns, and the use of religious justifications for maintaining discriminatory practices illustrate that religious leadership is not seen as a transformative force. However, religious leaders could play a crucial role in raising public awareness about the human rights implications of such practices and in promoting equality through faith-based discourse consistent with the values of dignity and justice central to both religion and international human rights law. By drawing on the Faith for Rights framework, particularly Commitment V, the Committee and the State could foster constructive engagement with religious authorities, encouraging

²⁷ CEDAW. "Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Kuwait" (6 June 2024), online: <https://docs.un.org/en/CEDAW/C/KWT/CO/6>

reinterpretation of texts in line with gender equality and facilitating the alignment of national laws with international standards.

Concluding Observations on the Sixth Periodic Report of Malaysia – 6 June 2024²⁸

Summary and Context

The Committee's concerns focus primarily on the absence of comprehensive legislative measures, particularly in the areas of health care, justice, and immigration. While acknowledging Malaysia's recent judicial reforms and certain positive developments, the Committee reiterates its concern regarding the reservations maintained by the State to specific provisions of the Convention, which continue to limit its full implementation. These reservations, coupled with gaps in legal protection and enforcement, reflect the ongoing challenges in ensuring substantive equality for women and girls in Malaysia, especially in contexts where religious and customary norms influence the interpretation and application of women's rights.

Missed Opportunities

When the Committee recommended that the Malaysian State should “[...] take into consideration the best practices of other States that are members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and have similar cultural and religious backgrounds and legal systems that have successfully harmonized their national legislation with their international human rights obligations [...]”, it articulated a recommendation aligned with the principles underpinning Commitment III of the Faith for Rights initiative.²⁹ This commitment encourages constructive and critical engagement with religious texts and traditions to promote interpretations consistent with human dignity and universal human rights values. In the section on the applicability of the Convention, the Committee expresses concern about potential conflicts between the civil law system and Sharia law. To reinforce this point, the Committee could have drawn upon Commitment II, which promotes interaction and mutual understanding among different actors, including religious and secular institutions. Referencing this commitment could have underscored the importance of fostering dialogue between civil and religious legal systems to ensure that interpretations of Sharia align with international human rights obligations, particularly those enshrined in CEDAW. In the section on harmful practices, the Committee draws attention to the alarming prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM), affecting more than 95% of young Muslim girls in Malaysia, a practice often justified on religious grounds. The Committee clearly states that “[...] that female genital mutilation cannot be justified on religious grounds and constitutes a harmful practice to exert control over the bodies and sexuality of women and girls is in violation of the Convention.”³⁰ To reinforce this stance, Commitment V would have been particularly relevant, as it explicitly addresses the prohibition of harmful practices based on religious justifications against women. By referencing this commitment, the Committee could have encouraged collaboration with Muslim religious leaders to promote theological interpretations that reject FGM and support the eradication

²⁸ CEDAW. “Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Malaysia” (6 June 2024), online: <https://docs.un.org/en/CEDAW/C/MYS/CO/6>

²⁹ *Ibid* par.9

³⁰ *Ibid* par. 25

of gender-based violence rooted in religious or cultural norms. In the section on health, the Committee expresses concern that access to abortion and post-abortion care remains limited, largely because Muslim women face social and legal stigma, as such practices are associated with extramarital sexual relations, which are criminalized under religious law. The Committee recommends legalizing abortion and consensual extramarital relations, yet it does not propose engagement with religious leaders on this matter. Given that Muslim women are directly affected by this issue, involving religious leaders could help foster broader societal acceptance and mitigate resistance. In this respect, Commitment VI, which focuses on the protection of the rights of minorities, would have been relevant. Engaging religious authorities could contribute to reframing reproductive rights as consistent with the principles of compassion, dignity, and justice present within faith traditions. Finally, in the section on marriage and family relations, the Committee notes the lack of legislative progress in reforming various discriminatory practices in Muslim marital contexts. Faced with these challenges, the Committee issued the following recommendation:

“Harmonize national legislation and Sharia law with the Convention, ensuring that any conflict of law with regard to women’s equal rights in marriage and family relations, divorce and to inheritance is resolved in full compliance with the Convention. In that regard, it recommends that the State party engage in discussions with leaders of religious communities, religious scholars and women’s rights groups, taking into consideration best practices in the region and in other member States of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation”³¹

Moreover, the harmonization between Malaysian national legislation and Sharia law (represented by religious leaders) will require a degree of mutual understanding and cooperation between both parties. To reinforce its position, the Committee could have referred to Commitment III of the Faith for Rights initiative, which emphasizes understanding, critical engagement, and debate on religious issues. Such a reference would have provided a framework encouraging constructive theological dialogue and context-sensitive legal interpretation, fostering collaboration between religious authorities and state institutions. This approach could help ensure that harmonization efforts are grounded in both respect for faith traditions and adherence to universal human rights principles, thereby facilitating sustainable progress toward gender equality in Malaysia.

Concluding Observations on the Combined Fifth and Sixth Periodic Reports of Morocco – 12 July 2022³²

Summary and Context

The concluding observations assess the status of women’s rights in Morocco. Although the State party report was submitted six years late, the concluding observations highlight notable progress in improving women’s conditions, particularly in areas such as political participation, education, and legislative reform. However, significant inequalities persist across multiple sectors, including

³¹ *Ibid* au par. 55a)

³² CEDAW. “Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Morocco” (12 July 2022), online: <https://docs.un.org/en/CEDAW/C/MAR/CO/5-6>

domestic violence, access to education, and the protection of women migrants and women engaged in prostitution. The Committee expresses continuing concern over the insufficient protection measures for victims of human trafficking and the lack of information on the identification and registration of migrant victims, particularly women and girls. While acknowledging the Moroccan government's efforts toward gender equality, the Committee underlines the need for more comprehensive implementation of protective frameworks, greater institutional coordination, and inclusive dialogue with civil society and community leaders, to ensure the effective realization of women's rights in all spheres of life.

Missed Opportunities

The Committee expresses concern over reports indicating that, in cases of gender-based violence, the burden of proof often falls on the victims, which undermines their access to justice. This represents a missed opportunity to invoke Commitment VI of the Faith for Rights initiative, which promotes the protection of minority rights and the defense of freedom of religion or belief. The contradictions between certain legislative provisions continue to obstruct the effective implementation of the principle of equality and perpetuate systemic discrimination. For instance, Article 490 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes sexual relations outside of marriage, may deter women from filing complaints of sexual violence, as they risk prosecution themselves. Additionally, Article 489, which criminalizes homosexuality, exposes lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex women to criminal sanctions, thereby heightening their vulnerability to violence and social exclusion. Although the State has made efforts to promote a positive image of women, the Committee notes the persistence of gender stereotypes, particularly in the media, as well as the underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions. While it recommends combating these stereotypes and educating the media about women's rights, the report does not explicitly consider the influence of religion and culture on women's rights, an omission that underscores the relevance of Commitment V of Faith for Rights. This commitment advocates for gender equality and the re-examination of religious and cultural interpretations that sustain discriminatory practices. Encouraging religious and community leaders to engage in open dialogue on gender equality could have provided a culturally grounded approach to challenging harmful norms. Furthermore, promoting such dialogue and diverse forms of communication and dissemination would also align with Commitment XVIII, which emphasizes the use of technology and communication tools to spread messages on faith, rights, and social cohesion. Integrating these commitments would not only strengthen the Committee's recommendations but also bridge the gap between human rights discourse and religious practice, fostering a more inclusive, community-based movement for gender equality in Morocco.

Concluding Observations on the Third Periodic Report of Montenegro – 6 June 2024³³

Summary and Context

The Committee welcomes the progress achieved by Montenegro since its previous report in 2017, particularly in advancing gender equality and aligning national efforts with the Sustainable

³³ CEDAW. "Concluding observations on the third periodic report of Montenegro" (6 June 2024), online: <https://docs.un.org/en/CEDAW/C/MNE/CO/3>

Development Goals (SDGs). It encourages the State to acknowledge the strengths and contributions of women within society and to adopt further measures that promote their full participation in all areas of public life. However, the Committee expresses concern that the Convention has not yet been directly invoked in domestic courts or administrative procedures, which limits its practical enforcement. It also identifies gaps in access to justice, insufficient public awareness of women's rights, and the absence of temporary special measures in public administration. Additionally, persistent patriarchal stereotypes continue to shape gender roles and responsibilities, impeding substantive equality between women and men. The Committee also highlights ongoing issues of human trafficking, particularly affecting women and girls, and calls for stronger preventive and protective measures to address these systemic challenges.

Missed Opportunities

In the section addressing stereotypes, the Committee recommends that the State strengthen the existing national gender equality strategy by implementing additional measures aimed at education and awareness-raising on gender equality. These efforts are to involve a variety of public and private actors, including religious figures. The Committee further suggests that similar measures be applied within the national media strategy to promote awareness and understanding of gender equality issues. While these recommendations are constructive, they could have been reinforced by explicitly referring to Commitment V of the Faith for Rights initiative, which focuses on combating gender-based stereotypes and promoting equality between women and men. Integrating this commitment would have provided a valuable framework for encouraging collaboration between religious leaders, educators, and media actors, emphasizing their shared responsibility in dismantling harmful social norms and advancing equality narratives within both secular and faith-based settings. In the education section, the Committee issues recommendations concerning the prevention of the instrumentalization of religion in educational contexts and the need to raise awareness among religious educators about gender equality and the rights of women enshrined in the Convention. To support these recommendations, the Committee could have referred to Commitment X of Faith for Rights, which explicitly condemns the manipulation or instrumentalization of religion for political or electoral purposes. By drawing on these two commitments V and X the Committee's recommendations could have been situated within a broader, value-based approach linking religious ethics, social inclusion, and human rights education. This would have strengthened the call for a more integrated national strategy, capable of addressing both structural and cultural obstacles to gender equality in Montenegro through collaboration across state, religious, and media institutions.

Concluding Observations on the Combined Seventh to Tenth Periodic Reports of Nicaragua – 14 February 2024³⁴

Summary and Context

Overall, the concluding observations paint a concerning picture of the state of women's rights in Nicaragua. The Committee expresses serious concern over the lack of cooperation from the

³⁴ CEDAW. "Concluding observations on the combined seventh to tenth periodic reports of Nicaragua" (14 February 2024), online: <https://docs.un.org/en/CEDAW/C/NIC/CO/7-10>

Nicaraguan government at the international level, particularly with several UN bodies such as the Committee against Torture, as well as its progressive withdrawal from regional and international human rights mechanisms. The very title of the report, combining four periodic reviews, reflects these concerns, as it underscores the country's nine-year delay in submitting a comprehensive update about women's rights. This delay not only limits international oversight but also suggests institutional stagnation and a lack of transparency in addressing ongoing discrimination, gender-based violence, and restrictions on civil liberties affecting women and girls across the country.

Missed Opportunity

The concluding observations make several references to the influence of religion in Nicaragua, identifying it as a central force within the State, shaping not only the values and beliefs of the population but also the country's institutions and policy frameworks. Traditional religious values are repeatedly cited as being among the root causes of gender inequality, contributing to harmful stereotypes that perpetuate gender-based discrimination, high school dropout rates among girls, and barriers to women's participation in the workforce. While the Committee acknowledges these challenges and highlights the implementation of strategies to eliminate stereotypes and awareness-raising campaigns, it does not directly address the underlying origins of these beliefs and social norms. This omission represents a missed opportunity to apply Commitment III of the Faith for Rights initiative, which encourages critical thinking and open dialogue on religious matters as a necessary step toward enlightened interpretation and reform. Rather than limiting its recommendations to the surface-level manifestations of discrimination, the Committee could have advocated for collaboration with religious leaders and faith-based institutions to engage in constructive theological reflection and to revisit religious interpretations that undermine women's rights. Such an approach, grounded in Faith for Rights, would allow for a context-sensitive strategy that respects Nicaragua's religious fabric while promoting gender equality and human rights from within its cultural and spiritual traditions. By fostering interfaith dialogue and reinterpretation, the State could not only address the symptoms of gender-based discrimination but also begin transforming its cultural and institutional foundations, thereby ensuring more sustainable progress toward women's empowerment.

Concluding Observations on the Ninth Periodic Report of the Philippines – 14 November 2023³⁵

Summary and Context

The Committee welcomes the progress achieved by the Philippines in the area of legislative reform, particularly the adoption of the Law Prohibiting the Practice of Child Marriage, which establishes penalties for violations. The Committee also commends the State's strategic approach to reducing discrimination against women and promoting gender equality through public policy and institutional reform. However, the Committee expresses concern over a wide range of persistent challenges, including deeply rooted gender stereotypes within civil society, gender-based violence against women, the normalization of human trafficking, and the limited

³⁵ CEDAW. "Concluding observations on the ninth periodic report of the Philippines" (14 November 2023), online: <https://docs.un.org/CEDAW/C/PHL/CO/9>

participation of women in political and public life. It also highlights educational disparities affecting girls and women, as well as concerns related to marriage and family relations in certain regions, where traditional or religious customs continue to perpetuate discriminatory practices. Overall, while acknowledging the Philippines' efforts and progress, the Committee underscores the need for stronger implementation mechanisms, greater community engagement, and intersectional strategies to ensure that gender equality reforms translate into tangible and lasting social change.

Missed Opportunities

Throughout the concluding observations, the Committee repeatedly emphasizes the importance of prevention and awareness-raising regarding the challenges faced by women, the discrimination they endure, and the violation of their rights. In this context, some of the Committee's recommendations identify traditional and religious leaders as key groups to be sensitized. However, at no point does the Committee suggest that these leaders should be actively included in the awareness initiatives themselves. Given the influence and moral authority these leaders hold within their communities, it would have been highly relevant to actively involve them in the design and implementation of strategies promoting women's rights. The Faith for Rights framework explicitly advocates for the participation of religious and cultural leaders in human rights promotion, as a means to foster reconciliation between legal principles and religious or cultural traditions. By moving beyond the passive role often assigned to religious leaders merely as recipients of awareness campaigns and recognizing them as agents of change, the Committee could have encouraged faith-based advocacy rooted in local realities. Such engagement would strengthen community ownership of gender equality reforms and promote grassroots transformation aligned with both human rights norms and cultural legitimacy. Furthermore, in the section on marriage and family relations, the Committee criticizes the discrepancy between international women's rights standards and certain practices in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. It highlights the persistence of polygamy, permitted under the Muslim Code of Personal Laws, as well as the non-enforcement of the repeal clause of the Law Prohibiting Child Marriage, given that child marriage remains recognized under customary and Sharia systems. The Committee recommends strengthening enforcement mechanisms and amending discriminatory provisions such as the Muslim Code. However, these issues reflect a deeper conflict between religious interpretations and universal human rights standards, a tension directly addressed in Commitment VIII of Faith for Rights. While it is essential to identify such contradictions, the Committee could have gone further by integrating the collaborative approach promoted in Commitment III, which encourages dialogue, mutual understanding, and critical reflection among religious, legal, and social actors. By combining Commitments III and VIII, the Committee could have proposed a context-sensitive model of reform that embraces collaboration rather than confrontation between faith-based authorities and state institutions. This approach would empower religious leaders to participate in reinterpreting laws and customs considering human rights principles, thereby strengthening the legitimacy, acceptance, and sustainability of reforms aimed at eliminating harmful practices and advancing women's rights in the Philippines.

Concluding Observations on the Sixth Periodic Report of Singapore – 6 June 2024³⁶

Summary and Context

The Committee expresses satisfaction with the initiatives implemented by Singapore following its previous review in 2017. The Singaporean Parliament has demonstrated a commitment to integrating gender equality and women's rights into its executive and legislative actions, signaling an increased institutional awareness of gender issues. Nonetheless, the Committee raises several major concerns, particularly regarding the rights of women living in poverty or social marginalization, as well as the intersectional discrimination experienced by certain minority groups, including women human rights defenders and women participating in political or public life. Additionally, the Committee highlights ongoing issues such as the continued practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) and the exploitation of women through prostitution, noting that these practices remain deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions. The Committee urges the State to adopt comprehensive legal, educational, and community-based measures to eradicate such practices and to promote the full protection and empowerment of all women and girls in Singapore.

Missed Opportunities

In the section addressing reservations and the Optional Protocol to the Convention, the Committee recommends that Singapore “[...] ensure that religious leaders, community leaders, and members of civil society organizations, in particular women's organizations, genuinely participate in this process.”³⁷ The term process here refers to the need to draw inspiration from practices implemented by other States with similar cultural and religious contexts to advance women's rights. To reinforce this recommendation, the Committee could have explicitly referenced Commitment II of the Faith for Rights initiative, which promotes the interaction and cooperation between religious and secular actors. By grounding its recommendation in this commitment, the Committee could have provided a structured framework and a practical resource to help Singapore meaningfully include religious leaders and communities in advancing the rights of women and minorities, particularly in societies where religion plays a central social role. In the section on discriminatory stereotypes, the Committee identifies persistent harmful stereotypes that continue to permeate society, noting that national media and educational materials contribute to their transmission. It thus recommends developing strategies involving religious leaders to combat these stereotypes and later specifies the need to promote positive representations of women through awareness campaigns. Here, the Committee could have drawn upon Commitment III of Faith for Rights, which emphasizes constructive engagement and critical understanding of religious texts. Referring to this commitment would have encouraged Singapore to foster dialogue and reflection among faith leaders, educators, and policymakers to reinterpret cultural and religious narratives in ways that promote equality and challenge traditional biases. In the section addressing female genital mutilation (FGM), the Committee expresses concern about the continued risk of this practice, particularly among Muslim women and girls, and reiterates that such acts cannot be justified on religious grounds. This position could have been reinforced by referencing Commitment V, which specifically calls for the prohibition of harmful practices rooted in religious

³⁶ CEDAW. “Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Singapore” (6 June 2024), online: <https://docs.un.org/en/CEDAW/C/SGP/CO/6>

³⁷ *Idem.*

justifications and perpetuated against women. Integrating this reference would have strengthened the Committee's appeal for religious collaboration in eradicating FGM through community-led education and reinterpretation of theological arguments. In the section on employment, the Committee recommends adopting legislation on workplace equity to address intersectional discrimination and to recognize domestic work as legitimate labor. It provides examples of minorities particularly Muslim women who would benefit from such measures. Given the influence of Muslim religious leaders within their communities, it would have been valuable to involve them in advocacy and awareness campaigns promoting women's participation and equal treatment in the workforce. Lastly, throughout the report, the Committee notes the presence of misogynistic attitudes and hate speech targeting women in Singaporean society. This is a clear area where Commitment VII, which focuses on denouncing all incitement to hatred and discrimination, could have been invoked. Referring to this commitment would have provided an actionable model for collaboration between religious leaders and state institutions to address gender-based hatred both within and outside religious contexts. Altogether, by integrating these various commitments II, III, V, and VII, the Committee's recommendations could have achieved a more holistic and culturally grounded approach. This would have encouraged Singapore to build alliances between faith communities, policymakers, and civil society, transforming religious influence into a positive and participatory force for the advancement of women's rights and the promotion of social harmony.

2.2. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD)

Concluding Observations on the Combined Twenty-Fourth to Twenty-Sixth Periodic Reports of Pakistan – 24 September 2024³⁸

Summary and Context

In its concluding observations, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) highlights both positive developments and areas of concern regarding the situation in Pakistan. The Committee expresses satisfaction with several of the State's actions, including its accession to and ratification of key international human rights instruments and the adoption of a National Human Rights Action Plan, which represents a step toward strengthening the protection of fundamental rights. However, the Committee also identifies numerous concerns spanning multiple dimensions of discrimination, some of which relate directly to the rights of women. It draws attention to the intersectional nature of discrimination in Pakistan, where gender, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status intersect to create multiple layers of marginalization. Specific issues raised include discriminatory laws and practices affecting ethnic and religious minorities, barriers to women's access to justice, and systemic inequalities in education and employment. The Committee also expresses concern about the lack of accountability for violence committed against minority women and girls, urging the State to take concrete measures to ensure equal protection and participation for all individuals, regardless of ethnicity, faith, or gender.

³⁸ CERD. "Concluding observations on the combined twenty-fourth to twenty-sixth periodic reports of Pakistan" (24 September 2024), online: <https://docs.un.org/en/CERD/C/PAK/CO/24-26>

Missed Opportunities

First, the Committee raises serious concerns regarding limited access to healthcare for women from minority groups, particularly concerning maternal health services. The report highlights higher maternal mortality rates among ethnic minority populations, primarily due to the lack of adequate resources and the prevalence of postpartum hemorrhage. In response, the Committee recommends addressing the socioeconomic determinants that hinder healthcare access, such as low levels of education, and calls for greater investment in healthcare infrastructure in minority communities. However, this section overlooks an important dimension: the influence of religion and religious leadership, which stands at the heart of the Faith for Rights initiative. Since the right to health and the right to life are both fundamental and universal rights, this issue could have been strengthened by invoking Commitment XVI, which encourages the mobilization of the moral and spiritual weight of religion in the protection of universal human rights. Given the moral authority and persuasive power of religious leaders, they could play a crucial role in raising awareness about maternal health and access to medical care for women. By leveraging their influence, they could help shift cultural perceptions surrounding pregnancy, medical intervention, and women's bodily autonomy, encouraging greater community engagement and trust in healthcare systems. In this regard, Commitments V and VI are also directly relevant. Commitment V emphasizes the responsibility of religious actors to advance gender equality and challenge discriminatory norms, while Commitment VI underscores the protection of minority rights and their freedom of belief. Because minority women experience discrimination at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and religion, applying these commitments would have offered a holistic approach, bridging gender justice, cultural inclusion, and faith-based advocacy, to better safeguard their fundamental rights.

In a second instance, the Committee expresses grave concern regarding forced marriages, forced religious conversions, and sexual violence targeting Hindu, Dalit, and Christian women and girls. The recommendations primarily focus on the effective enforcement of existing legal frameworks, including training on evidentiary standards and ensuring access to justice for victims and their families. While these measures are essential, the Committee missed an opportunity to explicitly emphasize the protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief. Here, Commitment XV of Faith for Rights would have been particularly relevant, as it pledges to refrain from forcing anyone or exploiting vulnerable persons to convert to another religion or belief, while also committing to fully respect each person's freedom to practice, adopt, or change their religion or belief. Moreover, given the interreligious nature of this issue affecting Hindu, Dalit, and Christian minorities, the application of Commitment XVII would also have been appropriate. This commitment promotes interfaith cooperation and dialogue, encouraging exchange of good practices and mutual support among religious leaders and communities. Incorporating these commitments would have provided a more comprehensive framework for addressing religiously motivated gender-based violence linking legal accountability with faith-based engagement and community reconciliation. Such an approach could foster collective responsibility among religious institutions, strengthen preventive mechanisms, and promote a culture of mutual respect and coexistence across Pakistan's diverse religious landscape.

3. IMPACT OF MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Building upon our analysis, several recurring impacts emerge from the missed opportunities to apply the Faith for Rights framework in UN treaty body recommendations.

3.1. Excluding Religious Actors: The Impact on the Effectiveness of Recommendations

Our findings reveal that, in many cases, religious actors are not engaged as active partners within the recommendations issued by CEDAW and other treaty bodies. Rather, they are treated as subjects or targets of reform efforts often mentioned as groups that must be sensitized or reached, rather than as collaborative agents of change. This omission has a significant effect on the overall effectiveness and sustainability of the recommendations concerning women's rights. Religious leaders often wield substantial influence over community beliefs, social norms, and perceptions of gender roles. They are recognized figures of moral and intellectual authority, frequently serving as custodians of knowledge and tradition. By excluding religious leaders from the design and implementation of measures aimed at combating gender discrimination, UN treaty bodies risk limiting the reach and legitimacy of their recommendations. In many societies, progress on gender equality cannot be fully achieved without religious endorsement or at least engagement. Thus, when treaty bodies fail to engage religious actors proactively, the persistence of stereotypes and discriminatory practices is more likely. In contrast, an approach aligned with Faith for Rights which promotes collaborative dialogue between faith-based and human rights actors could enhance the cultural legitimacy, community acceptance, and long-term effectiveness of these measures. Including religious leaders as allies, rather than passive recipients, transforms them into multipliers of rights-based values, capable of bridging theological teachings and universal human rights principles within their communities. In short, omitting their inclusion narrows the transformative potential of human rights mechanisms and reduces the resonance of equality initiatives within the very cultural frameworks that shape everyday life.

3.2. Overlooking Religious and Cultural Dimensions: A Partial Understanding of the Issues

According to our analysis, numerous forms of discrimination against women particularly those rooted in stereotypes reinforcing gender inequality are addressed by the UN Committees without sufficiently considering their religious and cultural dimensions. While treaty bodies often emphasize the importance of combating such stereotypes, they rarely identify their underlying origins, which are frequently embedded in religious interpretations, customary norms, or traditional belief systems. As a result, many of the recommendations issued by these treaty bodies fail to engage religious or cultural authorities as stakeholders in the transformative process. Unlike prejudices stemming from misinformation or lack of education, stereotypes grounded in cultural or religious traditions are often deeply rooted in history and collective identity, making them more resistant to change. Without acknowledging these foundations, efforts to combat discrimination risk remaining superficial and disconnected from community realities. The absence of an intersectional lens that integrates gender, culture, and faith weakens the overall understanding of the mechanisms that perpetuate inequality. It is therefore essential that the religious and cultural

dimensions of gender discrimination be explicitly recognized and incorporated into the design and implementation of recommendations. Doing so would allow for the creation of context-sensitive and culturally attuned strategies, ensuring that proposed measures not only respect local values but also challenge them constructively where they infringe upon universal human rights. By adopting this approach, UN Committees could promote inclusive and sustainable progress, aligning legal and policy reforms with the cultural narratives and moral frameworks that shape people's everyday lives, thus addressing both the symptoms and the roots of gender-based discrimination.

3.3. Failing to Explicitly Reference the Faith for Rights Framework: A Missed Opportunity

As previously noted in our section on seized opportunities, the core principles and spirit of the Faith for Rights commitments are often reflected implicitly in the recommendations issued by treaty bodies. However, explicit references to the Faith for Rights framework since its adoption remain rare. This omission represents a missed opportunity that can significantly limit the normative and practical impact of the Committees' recommendations. Explicitly citing this international framework, and the 18 Commitments on Faith for Rights would strengthen the authority, coherence, and reach of these recommendations. By anchoring them in a recognized UN standard that bridges faith-based and human rights values, treaty bodies could not only reinforce their normative legitimacy but also foster broader acceptance among diverse cultural and religious communities. Moreover, explicit integration of Faith for Rights would serve to standardize interpretive criteria across contexts, ensuring that principles of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination are applied equitably, regardless of religious belief or tradition. This alignment between spiritual ethics and human rights norms could also help reduce resistance among actors who perceive these spheres as oppositional, thereby encouraging constructive dialogue and mutual understanding. In practical terms, such acknowledgment would promote interreligious cooperation and international collaboration among States, UN bodies, and civil society organizations. It would encourage stakeholders to view Faith for Rights not as an abstract declaration, but as a living, operational tool, one capable of guiding the implementation of women's rights in religiously and culturally diverse societies. Ultimately, systematically integrating and explicitly referencing Faith for Rights would elevate it from a moral compass to a strategic framework for transforming the intersection between faith, gender, and human rights, strengthening both the credibility and the transformative potential of UN treaty body recommendations.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Systematically Apply the Faith for Rights Framework When Religious Factors Are Involved

It is imperative that whenever religious factors or actors influence a human rights issue, experts make use of the *Faith for Rights* framework. This framework speaks more directly to religious actors than traditional human rights discourse generally does. To fully benefit from its usefulness, the *Faith for Rights* initiative should be systematically employed as a complementary tool whenever religious factors or actors are involved in situations concerning human rights.

2. Strengthen Local Initiatives to Engage Religious Leaders Meaningfully

Greater efforts must be made to emphasize and support local initiatives that genuinely involve

religious leaders and promote a balanced dynamic between them and the United Nations. While the Beirut Declaration and its 18 Commitments define duties and responsibilities, priority should be given to initiatives that originate from local actors. The 18 Commitments were conceived to foster reconciliation between faith, human rights, and religious actors. Religious leaders and faith-based communities should be encouraged to implement them in ways they deem appropriate for their own communities, provided that they remain consistent with this framework. They have a unique understanding of the subtleties and realities of their environments that external actors cannot possess. Consequently, they are best placed to mobilize the Beirut Declaration and its 18 Commitments in a meaningful and sustainable way.

3. Facilitate Dialogue Between Religious Leaders and State Governments

Organizing meetings to promote dialogue between religious leaders and State governments is crucial. Such encounters would foster mutual understanding and help build a relationship conducive to collaboration. Creating a bridge between universal human rights norms and religious values can be achieved through direct exchanges among the main stakeholders. Moreover, these meetings would also promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue, one of the key objectives of the *Faith for Rights* initiative.

4. Establish Mediation Mechanisms to Reconcile International and Religious or Cultural Norms

It is advisable to establish mediation mechanisms to address disagreements regarding the harmonization of international standards with religious or cultural norms. Such mechanisms could be particularly useful in States whose legal systems are partially or primarily based on religious law. Their implementation would facilitate the search for common ground, especially since early mediation could also help prevent conflicts or tensions between the United Nations and certain States. When necessary, special advisers on religion and culture could be appointed to oversee these processes.

5. Ensure Regular Updates and Continuous Monitoring of the Faith for Rights Initiative

This study represents a continuous process of reflection and observation that must be updated regularly, at least once every two years. Its need is ongoing, as new opportunities — both seized and missed — will inevitably arise. Monitoring the development of the *Faith for Rights* framework is essential to ensure its continued usefulness. For this reason, the present study should be considered a living document.

6. Prevent the Misuse of the Beirut Declaration and Its 18 Commitments by States

It is essential to ensure that the Beirut Declaration and its 18 Commitments are not misused by State parties for undue limitations. There is reasonable concern that some States might instrumentalize them to undermine legitimate expressions of freedom of religion or belief. It is therefore necessary to respond promptly to abuses when they occur. Nothing in this framework may be interpreted as justifying violations of human rights.

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The 18 commitments on "Faith for Rights"

التعهدات الثمانية عشر حول "الإيمان من أجل الحقوق"

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
18	<p>We commit...</p> <p>Faith for Rights</p>						9
	<p>...عزمنا الإيمان من أجل الحقوق</p>						
17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10