



## Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa

### **Give to Gain: Building Alliances Across Faiths to Advance Women's Rights Report**

*Online session: Hosted by the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa*

#### **Executive Summary**

On 7 April, the [Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa](#) (SDI) conducted an online dialogue under the theme “*Give to Gain: Building Alliances Across Faiths to Advance Women's Rights*”.

Bringing together voices from across the MENA region and Europe, the discussion examined how meaningful engagement with religious leaders and faith-based actors can advance women's rights in context-sensitive, inclusive, and sustainable ways. The online session convened religious scholars; members of SDI's Women, Peace and Security informal network; practitioners; representatives of civil society organizations and initiatives; international organizations; women's rights advocates; and gender experts.

The dialogue featured insightful contributions from Dr. Amer Al Hafi (Academic Advisor for The Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies), Dr. Linda Vikdahl Gunséus, (Associate Professor, Senior Lecturer, and Head of School at Södertörn University), Fr. Rifaat Bader (General Director of the Catholic Center for Studies and Media), Asma Kftaro (General Manager of Kftaro EST) and Anthony Keedi (Masculinities Technical Advisor at Abaad).

Participants reflected on key challenges and opportunities, including misinterpretations of religious text, discriminatory social norms and traditions, legal gaps, and persistent forms of men's violence against women. At the same time, the discussion highlighted promising entry points for positive change, particularly through dialogue, collaboration, and the identification of common ground across faiths and sectors.

The discussion also highlighted promising initiatives, including engagement with religious leaders to support campaigns to end violence against women, as well as advocacy for legal reforms related to inheritance, custody, and family rights. The dialogue further underscored the role religious institutions can play in peacebuilding, including in contexts such as Syria and their potential to strengthen women's political participation in peace processes.

This dialogue was initially planned to take place on the International Women's Day on March 8, in-person, in Amman, during the month of Ramadan and the Christian Lent. But due to the conflict in the region, it had to be postponed and moved online. Despite the unpredictable and turbulent situation, participants concluded that dialogues like this one remain relevant to trust building and partnerships across faiths in the two regions.



## **Women's Status and Gender Equality in Religion: Challenges and Opportunities**

A central theme of the dialogue was that all religions share core values such as peace, love, and human dignity. As highlighted by [Anthony Keedi](#) and [Asma Kaftaro](#), these shared principles provide a strong foundation for advancing women's rights across faiths.

The discussion also emphasized that women play a vital role in both religious and social life, often seen as symbols of giving, hope, and continuity. There was broad agreement among [Fr. Rifaat Bader](#) and [Dr. Linda Vikdahl Gunséus](#) on the equal human dignity of women, as well as recognition of their contributions in areas such as education, healthcare, spiritual leadership, and peacebuilding.

However, despite this recognition, significant challenges remain. Structural inequalities continue to limit women's access to leadership roles, legal rights, and equal participation in society. These challenges are shaped not only by theological debates but also by institutional resistance and deeply rooted social norms and traditions.

A key point raised by [Dr. Amer Al Hafi](#) was that religion itself is not inherently restrictive. Rather, barriers often arise from the misinterpretation or misuse of religious teachings and mindsets. While sacred texts emphasize justice and equality, these values are sometimes undermined by patriarchal interpretations and cultural practices. Distinguishing between religion and its interpretation was therefore identified as a critical step toward reform.

The discussion also highlighted the diversity within religious traditions. Different institutions and communities adopt varying approaches to gender equality. While some have made progress in expanding women's roles, others continue to face resistance. This underscores the importance of context-sensitive and faith-informed approaches.

### **Key Issues Raised**

#### **Violence Against Women**

As emphasized by [Dr. Linda Vikdahl Gunséus](#), violence against women remains a widespread issue across societies and is not justified by any religion. Religious leaders were identified as key actors in addressing this issue through awareness-raising, advocacy, and influencing social norms. However, participants noted that there is still reluctance in some contexts to address the issue openly.



## **Role of Men and Masculinities**

[Anthony Keedi](#) highlighted the importance of engaging men as partners in advancing gender equality. Promoting positive models of masculinity based on respect, compassion, and justice was identified as essential. Faith communities were seen as well-positioned to influence these norms and behaviors.

## **Legal and Structural Challenges**

Legal frameworks, particularly personal status laws related to family and inheritance, were discussed as key areas requiring reform. [Fr. Rifaat Bader](#) shared an example of ongoing efforts to reform Christian Inheritance Laws in Jordan to ensure greater equality between men and women, including provisions related to inheritance, custody, and the will of the deceased. While such reforms are promising, participants emphasized that legal change must be accompanied by shifts in societal attitudes.

## **Education**

The importance of education was strongly emphasized by [Asma Kaftaro](#). Investing in education was identified as one of the most effective ways to promote long-term positive change. Participants also stressed the need to review curricula, encourage critical thinking, and promote inclusive interpretations of religious teachings. Educational institutions, including religious ones, play a crucial role in shaping future generations especially in context like Syria and the peacebuilding processes.

## **Interfaith Dialogue**

Interfaith dialogue was highlighted as a powerful tool for fostering cooperation and mutual understanding across religious and social divides. By focusing on shared values such as justice, dignity, and peace, interfaith engagement enables collaboration even where theological or doctrinal differences remain. Participants noted that visible cooperation among religious leaders can help reduce polarization, strengthen trust, and positively influence community attitudes.

One illustrative example was shared by [Anthony Keedi](#), who showed a [short advocacy video](#) describing an initiative that engages leaders from four different religious sects in Lebanon in a joint social media campaign addressing violence against women, with a specific focus on psychological and physical abuse. This collaboration demonstrated how collective religious leadership can contribute to shifting harmful norms and advancing protection and accountability.



## **Context of Conflict and Instability**

In a context marked by conflict and uncertainty, dialogue remains essential. It provides a platform for building trust, identifying shared values, and enabling collective action. Strengthening cooperation across faiths and sectors is therefore key to advancing women's rights and fostering more inclusive and equitable societies.

The Q&A session reflected a thoughtful and in-depth discussion on how women's rights, particularly property and inheritance rights, are shaped by the intersection of religion, law, and conflict-affected contexts in the MENA region. Participants discussed opportunities to further engage religious institutions and universities in addressing violence against women, highlighting the potential of sermons, educational platforms, and community spaces to contribute to positive social change, especially amid rising violence and divorce rates across both Muslim and Christian communities.

Building on this, discussions at the legal level focused on the interaction between personal status matters and national legal and legislative processes, highlighting the complexity of advancing reforms related to inheritance and property rights. Emphasis was placed on promoting rights-based interpretations in ways that are gradual, inclusive, and respectful of existing frameworks.

The discussion further underscored that progress depends on stronger collaboration between civil society, governments, and faith-based actors, alongside expanded awareness efforts, including digital advocacy and community engagement. It also pointed to the importance of connecting with regional initiatives working on rights-based interpretations of religious texts, as well as sustaining dialogue and partnerships beyond the session.

## **Key Recommendations**

Based on the discussion, several key recommendations were identified:

- Promote inclusive and rights-based interpretations of religious teachings
- Expand interfaith collaboration around shared values and joint initiatives
- Engage men and boys as active partners in advancing gender equality
- Rally clear and unified support on preventing violence against women within faith-based groups, including strong engagement and accountability from religious leadership, recognizing this as a shared moral principle across all regions
- Support legal and policy reforms alongside efforts to shift social norms
- Invest in education and strengthen curricula to promote equality
- Maintain dialogue and cooperation, particularly in contexts of conflict, while focusing on common ground and respecting religious diversity