

# Faith in Human Rights and Gender Equality - Danmission's policy

*This policy describes Danmission's position on human rights and gender equality. The purpose of the policy is to describe the interconnectedness of faith, human rights, and gender equality; to emphasize the importance of human rights and gender equality as cross-cutting principles and standards which underlie all our work; and to give examples of concrete ways in which these can be integrated into programmes and projects.*

## **FAITH, HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY**

Danmission's foundation is faith as a source of hope and a motivation for action. **We understand our faith and human rights to be deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing.** As a faith-based organization, we believe in the inherent worth of every individual as created in the image of God, and we see this reflected in the universal human rights principles of dignity, equality, and non-discrimination. We oppose all forms of injustice that threaten the inherent dignity and worth of human beings, and we are committed to not only alleviate the immediate suffering of those in need, but also to address the root causes of suffering, thus contributing to lasting change and justice for all. In this work, human rights provide important legal and practical guidance.

**Gender equality is at the heart of human rights, and it is at the heart of our Christian faith.** In Danmission, we respect the sanctity and freedom of all human beings and see everybody as equal, regardless of their sex or gender. We are committed to promoting and protecting gender equality for all, contributing to a world in which all human beings are free to live their life, develop their abilities, and make choices without the limitations set by gender roles, stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination or violence.

## **DANMISSION'S HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH: OUR KEY PRINCIPLES**

We work with human rights in different ways. Sometimes, the promotion of a specific human right is an important part of a project's objectives. This is, for instance, the case in our projects on the right to freedom of religion or belief (more about this below). But human rights are also part of projects that do not focus on specific rights. Taking **a human rights-based approach to development**, we integrate human rights standards, norms, and principles into all areas and phases of Danmission's work. Attention to gender is an indispensable and integrated part of this approach.

At its most fundamental level, our rights-based approach means that we do not see people as passive objects of charity, but as **rights-holders who are entitled to dignity,**

**equality, and non-discrimination.** We believe that our work is most meaningful and effective if it takes a starting point in the interests and needs of rights-holders. In our work we seek to support and empower rights-holders to know, claim and exercise their rights, e.g. through capacity-building and training. A concrete example of this is our partnership with the Indigenous Kuy community in the Prey Lang forest in Cambodia. Vast deforestation means that they are losing access to important holy places. Through our project, we have contributed to strengthening rights-holders' capacity to claim their right to practice their beliefs and maintain access to holy places in the forest.

By acknowledging that individuals have legitimate claims to rights, we also acknowledge that **there are actors in society who have an obligation to fulfill these rights – the duty-bearers.** The state has the principal legal obligation, but there are other powerful actors who can be said to have a moral responsibility, including e.g. religious leaders, institutions, and other religious authorities. All duty-bearers should be encouraged to fulfil their human rights obligations towards rights-holders and they should be held accountable for failures to fulfill these obligations. A concrete example of how we work with duty-bearers is our project on gender discriminatory family laws in Lebanon. With our partners, we work with both the judicial system and religious leaders, raising awareness on gender equality and advocating for the formulation of non-discriminatory family laws.

We understand all human rights to be **universal.** This means that all rights belong to everybody, and we are all equally entitled to our human rights, regardless of our sex, gender, religion or belief, nationality, origin, colour, language or any other status. We work to prevent and eliminate all forms of **discrimination and inequality** that hinder the universal enjoyment of rights. In our programmes and projects, we contribute eliminating prejudice, intolerance, and hatred, and to ensuring equal access to resources, opportunities, and justice for all. We **focus on those rights-holders who face the biggest barriers to realizing their rights**, especially women and girls, indigenous peoples, and different religious minorities.

**Participation and inclusion** are key elements in our human rights-based approach. We believe that people should be involved in decisions that affect their lives. It is impossible to make change that is just and relevant without the participation of rights-holders. In practice, this means that we seek to ensure participation of rights-holders across the different phases of our projects and programmes, such as design, decision-making, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. In this, we are especially attentive to ensuring **equal representation of women and girls.** This is particularly important when working in religious communities and with religious institutions where patriarchal structures, values and practices can be pervasive, limiting female agency and opportunities.

## **IN FOCUS: THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF**

In some of our projects, we work to promote and protect specific human rights. We have a particular focus on the right to **freedom of religion or belief** (or FoRB) – a core human right and a central pillar in any democratic, pluralistic society. FoRB protects the right of every individual to have, adopt, or change a religion or belief; to manifest and practice this religion or belief; and to be free from coercion and discrimination on the grounds of this religion or belief. FoRB also protects the right to leave a religion or belief, and the right not to have or practice a religion or belief.

Working to ensure FoRB for all, we **raise awareness** about FoRB, and we seek to **empower** rights-holders, particularly within indigenous and religious minority groups, to assert their right to FoRB and other human rights. We also facilitate **interfaith dialogue** as a way of fostering mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation whether it is with religious leaders or lay persons.

We understand all human rights to be indivisible and interdependent. This means that the right to **FoRB is closely intertwined with other rights**, and to enjoy FoRB fully, other rights must also be protected. FoRB is also related to other rights in the sense that discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief rarely concerns only restrictions of religious practices and manifestations, but also entails violations of many other rights.<sup>1</sup> In practice, this means that we always anchor the promotion and protection of FoRB within broader efforts to strengthen human rights more broadly.

We pay particular attention to the relationship between **FoRB and women's rights**. FoRB protects women's right to interpret and practice their religion the way they believe is true, even when this goes against the orthodoxy of their religious community. As such, FoRB can contribute to empowering women in their struggles for gender equality. FoRB can also be an important argument against religiously justified gender discrimination and harmful practices. FoRB does not protect religious practices that violate the rights and freedoms of others. As such, FoRB can never be used to justify e.g. female genital mutilation, honour killings, or gender-based violence. Such practices – and the laws that protect them – are just as much a violation of FoRB as they are a violation of women's rights.<sup>2</sup>

#### **OPERATIONALISING OUR HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH:**

Our human rights-based approach should inform and shape all areas and phases of our work. Here are some key points to consider when engaging in project design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation:

<sup>1</sup> Marie Juul Petersen and Katherine Marshall, *The International Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief. Sketching the Contours of a Common Framework*, Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2019

<sup>2</sup> Marie Juul Petersen, *Women's Rights and Freedom of Religion or Belief*, blog post December 11, Universal Rights Group, 2019

### **Rights-holders and duty-bearers**

- Identify relevant rights-holders, their interests, and needs, as well as relevant duty-bearers and their responsibilities, implementation gaps, and accountability failures.
- Make sure that project objectives, activities and indicators respond to and reflect rights-holders' interests and needs.
- Consider how the project can contribute to reinforcing duty-bearers' accountability and implementation to respect, promote and realise human rights and to abstain from human rights violations.

### **Universality, non-discrimination, and equality**

- Identify manifestations of discrimination and inequality in law and practice, and analyze their causes and effects. If possible, collect data disaggregated by gender, religion or belief, ethnicity, age, disability and/or other relevant parameters to better understand disparities.
- Make sure that project objectives, activities and indicators are oriented towards the elimination of discrimination and inequality. Consider including objectives focusing specifically on gender equality.
- Be aware of own biases and prejudices.

### **Participation and inclusion**

- Establish mechanisms for meaningful and inclusive participation of rights-holders in all phases of the project.
- Ensure diversity among participants, in terms of e.g. gender, religion, age and other relevant parameters.
- Pay attention to power dynamics within the groups that you work with. Make sure that people in vulnerable and marginalized positions are also included.

## **IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO KNOW MORE**

If you would like to know more about faith-based approaches to human rights, we recommend these resources:

Christian Aid: [\*Putting God to rights: a theological reflection on human rights\*](#) (2016)

Middle East Concern: [\*Theological Approaches to Human Rights\*](#) (2014)

Rights and Development Group: [\*Rights-based development from a faith-based perspective. Joint Position Paper\*](#) (2008)

The World Council of Churches et al.: [\*Strengthening Christian Commitment to Human Dignity and Human Rights | World Council of Churches\*](#) (2022)

If you would like to know more about the right to freedom of religion or belief, you can find many resources on [FORB for all | FORB Learning Platform](#)

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