

# SMC's Gender Equality Policy

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## 1. Background

The policy was adopted by the board of the Swedish Mission Council (SMC) on March 10, 2016, with adjustment April 29, 2019, and is in effect until further notice. It is a revision of the SMC's gender policy from 17 March, 2011, and has been developed in cooperation between SMC's secretariat and a number of member organisations that responded to a request in SMC's newsletter *Medlemsnytt*. The policy is, among other things, based on the lessons learned from our study of religion and gender equality (see the section on Further Reading) in which we conducted case studies in several countries. SMC's leadership team is responsible for the policy being followed and evaluated.

## 2. Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to describe SMC's perspective on gender equality and approaches to gender equality. The policy governs the assessment of development interventions and provides support to member- and partner organisations in working for gender equality and mainstreaming gender into planning and implementation of development initiatives. It also guides the internal gender equality plan for SMC's secretariat.

## 3. SMC's view of gender equality

SMC's view of gender equality has as its basis in that each individual is created in the image of God, and that human dignity is given by God and is inviolable. God's love and care is unconditional and includes all people without exception, regardless of biological sex, gender identity or sexual orientation. God is the God of life and is constantly at work in the world to create a life of fullness, accessible to all. This means that all people have the same rights to live a life without oppression and discrimination. Being part of God's mission means to identify and combat the oppressive power structures and life-denying systems, and to choose to work for equal opportunities and rights for all people.

Gender equality means that all people, regardless of gender, have the same preconditions, opportunities and rights to shape their own lives and influence society. To reach this goal, it is important to understand how power and discrimination are interlinked and how structures and practices that negatively affect gender equality can be counteracted within organisations and societies. This is done by highlighting power relations between women and men, as well as power relations within groups of women and groups of men.

### 3.1 Human rights and international commitments

SMC's work for gender equality has human rights at its foundation. Human rights are universal moral principles and norms protection within the international legal frameworks. All development work supported by SMC should be conducted with a human rights based approach with non-discrimination, participation, transparency, and accountability as guiding principles.

The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Subsequent conventions reinforce various principles and rights. All rights apply to all without distinction, but there are some conventions that are particularly relevant in relation to gender equality. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, CEDAW, emphasises that governments have an obligation to eliminate discrimination against women on the basis of sex, both in law and in practice. The convention against transnational organised crime has a supplementing protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking of persons, especially women and children.

Many states have also committed themselves to work for gender equality through the declarations and action plans of the UN Conference on Women in Beijing, as well as from the population conference in Cairo. The latter emphasises that issues concerning population should be connected to sexuality, reproduction and individual rights. The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security and subsequent resolutions are important tools for the inclusion of women in peace processes around the world.

The goal of achieving gender equality is the fifth of 17 global sustainable development goals of Agenda 2030. It also indicates that the gender perspective should permeate the monitoring of all goals.

Humanitarian aid efforts should, in accordance with international humanitarian principles, start from the needs of destitute people, without discrimination in regards to gender, ethnicity, religion or political opinion. This approach also permeates the current qualitative criteria of the *Core Humanitarian Standards*, a standard with nine commitments which organisations and individuals can use to improve the quality and efficiency of humanitarian interventions.

### 3.2 Gender and development

Poverty and oppression often affect women and men and girls and boys in different ways. Women are discriminated against in many areas economically, socially and politically. Discrimination can include, for example, access to the right to education, the right to decide over one's own body and the right to freedom of religion or belief. SMC believes that both women and men benefit

from increased gender equality, since this leads to both women and men having increased freedom to live as they want. Poverty is combated by consciously and consistently working for the equal rights of women and men.

Gender equality has often focused on interventions for women only, in order to strengthen the role of women and their ability to influence. Such efforts are needed, but in working for equality and against discrimination, the participation of both men and women is necessary for long term sustainability. In conversations about equality, we prefer to speak about *gender and development* rather than *women and development*. Gender and development is broader, and stresses that it is not only about strengthening women, but also about changing the power relations between men and women, as well as within groups of women and within groups of men. Gender refers to the socially and culturally constructed norms of behaviour and attributes that characterise what society considers appropriate for women and men. What is considered feminine gender and masculine gender, as well as the potential to exceed those expectations, differs between contexts. Gender identity refers to the gender that an individual prefers to identify themselves as.

It is important to emphasise that in speaking in terms of groups and power structures involves generalisations and that all individuals within a group are different. Analyses of contexts and gender should look at how factors such as age, gender, level of education, disability, health status and sexual orientation affect the access to power and the social status of women and men. Such simultaneous analysis of several factors is based on a so-called *intersectional approach*. It then becomes clear that gender identity is only part of a person's entire identity, and that individuals and subgroups may have needs that differ. This will be explored further under the heading 5.2 Gender analysis and intersectionality.

Social, cultural and religious norms that define notions of masculinity and femininity in a particular context often counteract equality and constitute obstacles to social progress. A masculine norm that idealises and promotes the use of violence may lead to boys and men putting themselves and others at risk. These norms and ideals contribute to the fact that gender-based and sexual violence against both men and women remains a major global problem. Alcohol and drugs can act as a catalyst for destructive behaviour and reinforce prevailing gender norms by removing moral barriers. Similarly, a feminine norm which idealises submission and passivity contributes to the maintenance of systemic injustice and hampers the strengthening of women's influence and empowerment.

In many contexts, restrictive gender norms lead to behaviour or expressions that differ from these norms being associated with social stigma, risk of discrimination and sometimes even direct threats to life. LGBT people (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) are often vulnerable, deviating from commonly strong social norms through their gender identity or sexual orientation. SMC will

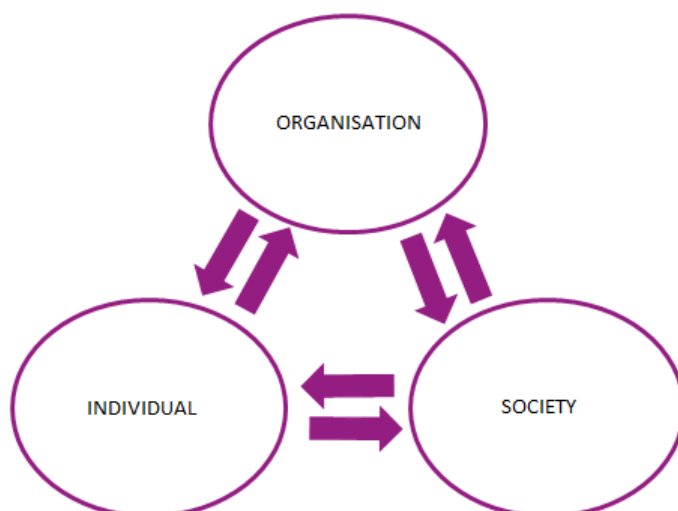
not shed further light on discrimination against LGBT people here, but works with the issues through the framework of a rights-based perspective.

The lack of gender equality is particularly evident in the context of humanitarian disasters. Armed conflicts and natural disasters affect women and men differently. For example, women and girls suffer more often from gender-based violence such as rape, assault and trafficking. Men, on the other hand, are at risk of being forcibly recruited into the army or migrate in search of work in the role of breadwinner. In this way, structures preventing the achievement of gender equality become especially clear. Humanitarian efforts should be planned and implemented in a way that includes women, men, girls and boys in order to get their different perspectives on recovery and disaster prevention work, and thereby increase the possibility of positive change, also for gender equality.

## 4. SMC's theory of change from a gender perspective

The lack of gender equality exists at all levels of society and in all areas of life. Oppressive social structures hinder development and affect life conditions, yet all people are unique individuals who make, and have responsibility for, their own choices.

SMC's theory of change assumes that societies, organisations and the individual are three factors that influence each other. The purpose of this section is to show that SMC understands that work with gender equality can be conducted at these three different levels.



## 4.1 Society/State

At the level of state and society, gender equality work can highlight and influence discriminatory structures in family law and women's positions in relation to the judicial system. It is important to influence both the creation of laws and their implementation. Work at this level can also entail the challenging of attitudes and values among both men and women linked to masculinity and femininity, and critically reviewing the norms and power structures which, for example, contribute to violence against women.

Since several of SMC's member organisations are church denominations and faith-based organisations, SMC has the opportunity to contribute, through continuous dialogue, to a changed perception of gender equality in religious contexts and in societies strongly marked by religious values.

## 4.2 Organisation

All organisations involved in development cooperation contribute by the way that they operate, communicate and work to influence the perception of women and men, and the norms of what is considered masculine and feminine. This affects both individuals and communities, and takes place whether organisations are aware of it and actively pursue gender equality or if they are not thinking about it. In the latter case, they possibly contribute to consolidating or strengthening existing power structures, by not questioning the social norms that adversely affect the equal opportunities for women and men.

Churches and faith-based organisations often reflect society at large. They may in some cases be obstacles to gender equality by maintaining discriminatory structures and traditions. At the same time, they are able to have a positive influence on people's life choices, affecting gender equality at an individual and a societal level through their local presence. Gender equal organisations with can serve as role models and thus contribute to a more equal society, both as models and actors.

Working for increased gender equality can entail both reviewing the organisation's own practice and approaches. Questions that are good to review are: Who has power over the organisation's resources? How does representation take place? Who is targeted by the work? What are the reasons for the current situation? It is also important that the organisation intentionally avoids portraying people in a stereotypical way in their communication.

Religious leaders, as well as other leaders, have great power and legitimacy in many of the communities where development cooperation is carried out, which creates opportunities for them to influence attitudes that either strengthen gender equality or help to strengthen gender inequality. It is often strategic to

influence and involve religious leaders, in order to strengthen them as actors for positive change.

### 4.3 The Individual

People have strong power to change their own situation and to transform the communities they live in. The rights perspective emphasises that people can be limited by oppressive structures, but also that they are actors in their own lives. All processes of change start from people's ability to take initiative, which highlights the importance of those affected having opportunities to articulate their problems.

Unless both groups of women and groups of men are included, there is a risk that the talents and ideas of parts of the population are not taken advantage of, and that the most vulnerable do not get their needs and rights met. In development initiatives, work to empower women can sometimes be seen only as a means to achieve other goals, rather than being an end in itself. This is an *instrumental* view of women's rights. Since SMC works for gender equality from a rights perspective, it is clear that gender equality is both a means to and a prerequisite for sustainable development and therefore an important goal in itself.

#### 4.3.1 Strengthened empowerment

Education, vocational training, literacy, and education in human rights and gender equality are all important ways to strengthen both women and men. In many contexts, women do not have the same educational opportunities as men, which means they have no access to domains that are male-dominated.

Another way to increase women's empowerment is to work towards strengthening them financially and empowering them to have their own livelihood. This can, for example, be achieved through education, organisation of savings groups and access to loans. Changes in family livelihood and changes in household responsibilities can in turn lead to women having opportunities to engage in the community, and men having closer relationships with their children and other family members, as well as influence over housework.

#### 4.3.2 Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)

Promoting respect for sexual rights and health are key elements of effective work towards gender equality. Increased knowledge about reproductive health, sexuality and sexual rights, access to information about legal abortion<sup>1</sup>, access to appropriate health care, and contraception are examples of areas that are important for SMC to work with.

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<sup>1</sup> Member organisation Caritas Sweden has made a reservation against the following formulation "... access to information about legal abortion ...".

Work for SRHR must involve both women and men. SMC wants to contribute to a stronger link between work on gender equality and health, for example, in efforts related to HIV and AIDS. It is important that every person's right to control their own body is emphasised in communication and advocacy work related to sexuality, health and relationships.

## 5. The basis of assessment for applications

As an intermediary organisation, SMC works to strengthen work towards gender equality in development by contributing to the capacity development of organisations through knowledge, policies and practices. SMC assesses applications and interventions on a number of aspects that are central to effective development cooperation. This chapter describes these aspects.

### 5.1 Roles in cooperation and partnership

SMC's member organisations and partner organisations are different and have different preconditions and frames of references in their work for gender equality. Cooperation and dialogue is nourished by independent organisations having their own identities rooted in strong values. Mutual respect and cultural sensitivity are important pre-requisites for development cooperation to contribute to long-term change.

At the same time, there is a risk that organisations avoid challenging each other and that implementing organisations adapt to prevailing norms to such an extent that they fail to contribute to the desired change. This allows people who already have power, on the basis of gender, age or position in society, to continue to decide over what can be changed and what cannot. In order to have an influence, organisations need to actively prioritise gender equality and in a respectful way, dare to ask questions which can be perceived as uncomfortable. SMC and those organisations receiving support must use their financial support in such a way that it contributes to increased gender equality and prevents the consolidation of discriminatory structures. Development in this area is monitored by SMC's reviews of applications and reports.

When assessing an intervention or an organisation, SMC stresses the importance of the organisation's direction and its commitment to develop, be challenged and change in the long-term.

### 5.2 Gender analysis and intersectionality

To understand the dynamics of a society or an organisation, it is important to conduct a power analysis. This entails assessing who has the most representation, voice or resources in a community, organisation or intervention.



Gender analysis is an important part of power analysis. Identifying power relations between women and men is central to all development cooperation. Instead of only empowering women within existing structures, efforts should focus on challenging the power relations themselves. Often, the focus of an intervention is on empowering women and increasing their awareness of rights, without *also* looking for changes in how attitudes, behaviours and norms in society allow women to be discriminated against or how they have little power in the first place. Interventions may, for example, include measures aimed at facilitating women's work without addressing the causes of the unequal division of labor between men and women. A gender analysis should also shed light on whether women are given the right to speak for themselves and tell about their lives or if this is done by proxy. When a group speaks for another, those voices needing to be heard are sometimes silenced.

As previously mentioned, it is also important to identify and analyse power relations within groups of women and men as there are also social hierarchies and layers of status within groups. In designing interventions so that no-one is discriminated against, the organisation needs to be aware of the subgroups that are most vulnerable and those that are the most privileged. To see the needs and rights of the different subgroups, and the discriminations they face, requires a power analysis using an intersectional approach. For example, older women in rural areas are often involved in maintaining norms and practices that mainly affect young girls, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation. Another example is that men with disabilities are often treated differently by the surrounding society than men without disabilities. These examples show that it is not enough to direct an effort to target "men" or "women", and that it is important to show *which* men and women benefit from the intervention and to what extent. The intersectional approach therefore contributes to a more nuanced picture of the problem intended to be addressed by the intervention.

### 5.3 Gender mainstreaming

It is important that gender equality is not only specialised area, but becomes a central issue that permeates all aspects of the work. This means that the promotion of gender equality should take place at various levels within an organisation. An organisation that promotes gender equality in action in the South loses credibility if positions of power in the organisation in Sweden are only held by men. Organisations receiving support need to work on gender equality in the long term, for example by training staff.

Gender equality should be integrated into every stage of an intervention. The intervention needs to be based on a gender analysis, allowing it to influence activities, objectives, indicators and monitoring. The gender analysis can lead to an organisation choosing to implement a targeted gender intervention or to a broader intervention with another main focus in which gender equality is integrated in all parts of the intervention (so-called gender mainstreaming). For example, gender can be integrated by inviting both men and women to

conversations about project activities, by taking their needs and wishes equally seriously, ensuring that there is no discrimination in the recruitment process and actively addressing the factors preventing women from participating in decision-making.

Gender equality is also about resources, as much power lies in who gets what, and who takes decisions on economic guidelines. It may be helpful to count how many men and how many women are targeted by the intervention to discover imbalances in who is reached by the development effort. However, it is important to remember that counting people and their gender does not say anything about how power, ideals and expectations are changing at any depth.

## 6. Further reading

Read more about methods and tools on gender equality, religion and development at our [Learning Center on our website](#).