



the INTERFAITH RAINFOREST INITIATIVE: *a FOCUS on* WOMEN'S ROLES

Protecting tropical rainforests is crucial to combat climate change and environmental degradation, and religious institutions and communities are leading advocates on the issue. The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI) engages religious and Indigenous communities to protect rainforests in three regions: the Amazon, Congo Basin, and Southeast Asia. Religions for Peace, the largest global multifaith movement advancing multireligious cooperation, sees IRI as a priority for a sustainable environment.

Women's voices need to be listened to as part of rainforest protection efforts. Gender issues, however, still tend to be shunted to the margins of practical debates. To help shed light on this issue, *Religions for Peace* and the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) have explored both latent and manifest gender roles in faith-linked work on rainforests broadly and IRI specifically. The resulting two research papers address the intersections of gender, faith, and rainforest advocacy, hoping to strengthen on-the-ground responses to challenges facing threatened rainforests and their communities.

The first paper, entitled "The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative: A Gender Lens," examines the role of gender in the work of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative. It reviews the history and current activities of IRI's five country programs, identifying trends and exploring how gender is conceptualized and invoked in the organization. A main finding is that IRI lacks a unified vision and strategy on gender. While there have been no official statements on the actual or potential role of women and gender is rarely mentioned, absence of discussion does not mean that women's perspectives are overlooked. IRI representative stressed that many women are involved throughout the organization, from top leadership positions to the grassroots level, and that IRI works closely with women's groups in its efforts. IRI needs to strike a balance between promoting women's concerns and engaging effectively with some realities of religious and Indigenous communities that adhere to traditional gender norms, even as it promotes change.

The paper identifies five key areas where IRI and similar organizations can boost women's participation and leadership in decision-making spaces: by (a) bolstering engagement with existing women's organizations, (b) expanding community-based approaches that value women's contributions, (c) elevating women within IRI's leadership and broader rainforest protection, (d) using IRI's global platform to share women's stories, and (e) embedding and integrating gender dimensions within IRI's framing objectives.

The second paper, entitled "The Role of Gender in Interfaith Action to Protect Global Rainforests: Overview of the Research Landscape," gives an overview of academic research on faith-linked advocacy and activism on rainforests, with a special focus on how these efforts approach gender and Indigenous dimensions. Women are underrepresented in both secular and faith-linked decision-making on rainforest issues across the three regions; traditional gender norms, often shaped and promoted by faith institutions, are a major hindrance to women's participation and leadership. At the same time, religious communities and faith-inspired women's groups play roles in elevating women's voices by supporting capacity-building and educational initiatives for women on rainforest issues.

Both papers draw on academic sources, primarily in the English language but also in Spanish and French. The overview paper reviewed current news articles, primary sources from IRI, and interviews conducted by Katherine Marshall with prominent individuals linked to IRI. These included IRI regional coordinators Blanca Lucía Echeverry (Colombia) and Laura Vargas (Peru), and local IRI leaders such as Sister Lucero Guillén (Peru). Interviews drew on the wisdom of leaders active in forming IRI (notably Bishop Gunnar Stålsett, Honorary President of *Religions for Peace* and Charles McNeill, UNEP's Senior Adviser on Forests & Climate, and members of *Religions for Peace's* Women of Faith network.

Further information on IRI, including recent updates on its activities, can be found at its website: <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/>