



ACT ALLIANCE GENDER JUSTICE POLICY REVIEW: COMMUNITY-BASED JOURNEY OF LISTENING, LEARNING, AND TRANSFORMATION

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INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

ACT Alliance believes in an end to gender inequality and injustice, gender-based discrimination and violence, and in closing the gender gap to address unequal power relationships for the promotion of human dignity for all.

As an alliance working in humanitarian response, our members witness how gender inequalities are even more acutely highlighted in times of emergencies, conflicts and crises. In such situations, women, youth, and LGBTQI+ persons, form the most vulnerable groups and are exposed to greater risk of sexual violence in particular. In recent years, there has been growing evidence of the violence, harassment, discrimination, exclusion, stigmatization and prejudice directed against people because of their gender and sexual identities.

The response to humanitarian and development needs and rights must be designed to address unequal power relations and developed in a way that it pays attention to identifying the different needs, capacities and unique contributions of different individuals and groups. Ignoring these aspects has serious implications for the survival and protection of people and often create set-backs in efforts at long-term improvement. Thus, all initiatives ranging from emergency assistance, recovery, reconstruction through

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to long term development, should utilize and benefit from gender and power analytical tools and approaches. We cannot achieve gender justice without first understanding the context where we stand.

THE GENDER JUSTICE POLICY ITINERARY

In 2019, the ACT Alliance, as part of the first phase of its Gender Justice Programme, initiated a process of accompaniment with members to create contextualised gender justice policies. By strengthening the capacity of member organisations to advance gender justice, by institutionalising gender equality within their structures, programmes, and advocacy efforts. Rooted in principles of mutual learning, solidarity, and contextual relevance, this process brought together diverse members across regions to engage in critical reflection, peer support, and strategic action.

The initial phase laid the foundation for a collaborative journey, fostering a shared commitment to dismantling gender inequalities and embedding gender justice as a core value across the alliance.

To this end, the ACT Alliance expects each member to develop a board-approved, gender justice policy which is specific and relevant to their local cultural and programmatic context within three years of the adoption of the revised 2025 ACT Alliance Gender Justice Policy.

The first ACT Gender Equality Policy Principles were approved by ACT International Emergency Committee, 18 April 2008. On 6 September 2010 a revised policy was adopted by the ACT Alliance Governing Board, considering the broader mandate of ACT Alliance. Another revision was done in 2017 to make it congruent with existing standards and commitments adhered to by ACT Alliance. The 2025 revised policy includes a reference to the theological foundations, developed the policy's mandatory nature and aligned this with the overall Quality and Accountability Framework of the Alliance. This policy applies to the ACT Secretariat, all ACT Alliance members, and affiliated staff/volunteers, to improve the quality and accountability to our commitments on gender justice.

The revised Gender Justice Policy became an embodiment of faith in action—a call to reimagine justice through collaboration, courage, and commitment. In a time of



escalating resistance to human rights, especially around gender and sexuality, this policy revision became more than a document—it became a testament of faith in action.

The ACT Alliance has been shaping its gender justice framework for over 15 years:

- **2008:** Initial Gender Equality Policy Principles approved.
- **2010:** Revised policy aligns with the broader ACT Alliance mandate.
- **2017:** Policy updated for coherence with global standards and internal structures.
- **2024–2025:** A comprehensive review was launched—centered on inclusion, faith-rooted justice, and shared accountability.

While past iterations focused on aligning with external commitments and internal systems, the 2025 policy goes further: It centers the *process*—a community-based journey of listening, learning, and transformation.

POLICY IN MOTION – A LISTENING JOURNEY

The 2024 review of the ACT Alliance Gender Justice Policy was not simply an exercise in editing—it was a collective act of listening, discerning, and shaping a shared vision. Grounded in extensive consultation, the process engaged more than one hundred representatives from members across every region of the alliance. Input came through surveys, dialogues, and regional exchanges, ensuring that voices from diverse contexts and perspectives were heard.

This bottom-up, member-driven methodology honored the unique realities and wisdom each region brings. The process emphasized *mutual accompaniment*—members walking alongside one another to reflect, challenge, and co-create a just future. As well as collective ownership of a revised Gender Justice Policy shaped by our members.

A working group made up of theologians, gender advocates, and accountability specialists led the drafting process, weaving together lived realities, technical expertise, and theological grounding. This inclusive and participatory approach enriched the policy's relevance, strengthened its responsiveness to member contexts, and fostered a deep sense of collective ownership. A recognised challenge is that gender justice is perceived as the sole responsibility of the gender focal point or manager in any organisation. Yet, the revision of the policy emphasised that gender justice in the alliance is not the



responsibility of a few—it is a shared commitment that calls for shared responsibility in implementation.

Among the most significant shifts in the revised policy is the removal of binary language. Moving away from framing gender solely in terms of “men” and “women”, the policy now adopts language that recognises and affirms the diversity of gender identities, promoting dignity, respect, and visibility for people across the gender spectrum. This change reflects not only global best practice, but also the alliance’s theological and human rights commitment to inclusion and to leave no one behind.

The policy also strengthens its integration of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE). These are no longer peripheral references, but central components of the policy framework. By naming these explicitly, the alliance reaffirms its commitment to bodily autonomy, human rights, and the dignity of all people. The revisions acknowledge that while not every member can publicly advocate for SRHR or LGBTQI+ rights—particularly in restrictive contexts—there remains a baseline expectation: members “hold the line” by not acting against these commitments.

Another important shift is in the language and approach to change. The policy moves beyond the terminology of being merely “gender sensitive” and instead commits to being “gender transformative.” This signals a deeper intent—not only to recognise gender differences but to address and dismantle the structural causes of gender injustice. Such a stance demands action that challenges systemic inequities rather than settling for incremental or surface-level adaptations. This is not a tick box exercise, but a clarion call that our work for gender justice is integral to how we practice our faith.

Accountability is also at the forefront of the revised policy. What was once voluntary alignment is now framed as mandatory implementation, directly tied to ACT’s Quality and Accountability Framework. This ensures that the policy is not aspirational rhetoric but a binding standard for all members. By embedding compliance into the alliance’s operational and ethical commitments, the policy strengthens the shared standards that hold the alliance together as a movement for justice. The process affirmed a central truth: gender justice can only be advanced through solidarity, not prescription. Context matters. But complicity matters too. The policy began to reflect this balance—acknowledging nuance while holding a clear ethical line.



Taken together, these revisions mark a bold and progressive shift in the ACT Alliance's journey toward justice, equity and inclusion. They move the alliance from awareness to action, from sensitivity to structural transformation. The policy now reflects a living commitment—one shaped by the voices of its members, grounded in human dignity, and determined to meet the complex realities of a diverse global community with courage and clarity.

THEOLOGY MEETS JUSTICE

A pivotal part of the 2024 revision of the ACT Alliance Gender Justice Policy was its theological grounding. Faith has always shaped how ACT members engage in justice—but history also bears witness to the ways faith has been misused to justify inequality and exclusion. The revision process created space to confront this reality, to listen to diverse theological voices, and to reframe gender justice not as a departure from faith, but as a faithful expression of it.

In close collaboration with the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), gender and theology advisors, the policy's foundation was revisited and reimagined. Rather than treating scripture as a symbolic footnote, the revision embedded it at the heart of the framework, drawing deeply from Galatians 3:28—"there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female"—and from the life and ministry of Jesus. These were not referenced as abstract ideals, but as radical calls to inclusion, equality, and liberation.

Building on a bold and prophetic experience of Jesus, who disrupted patriarchy, gave a common ground for a tradition to claim. That disruption was not merely a social stance, but a spiritual one—rooted in the conviction that every person is created in the image of God and is entitled to full dignity, safety, and participation.

The revised policy openly acknowledges that sacred texts have too often been weaponised to legitimise gender-based violence, exclusion, and the subordination of women and gender-diverse people. In response, it calls for liberating theological interpretations—readings that affirm life, uphold dignity, and strengthen the equal worth of all. This commitment is not only a theological exercise but also a pastoral one. It recognises that for many communities within the alliance, faith is the lens through which



justice is understood and lived out. Thus, the policy affirms that gender justice is not a threat to faith; it is a faithful response to God's call for justice.

This theological re-grounding also draws from the tradition of **transformative diakonia**—faith-based social action that moves beyond charity or short-term relief to address the structural causes of injustice. In this vision, advocacy for gender justice is not optional or peripheral; it is a core expression of discipleship and service. The policy challenges faith-based actors to model what it calls “liberating, inclusive praxis,” where belief and action align to dismantle patriarchal systems and promote equitable relationships.

“Using the language of faith, ‘Act Alliance encourages members and partners to prayerfully engage with scripture and tradition’ that empower its members for institutional transformation. Gender justice policies of Act Alliance members and partners should be firmly grounded in theology, and easy enough to be translated into programmatic strategies: to walk the talk and to act what we preach, to ensure all people are safe and feel safe and protected, especially those who are deemed most vulnerable. This is the will and vision of God.” (Rev Siera Bird – Gender Advisor at Uniting World, Australia. Member of the Gender Reference Group).

Importantly, the policy does not shy away from the tension between tradition and transformation. It invites members to engage in courageous theological reflection, moving beyond interpretations that reinforce patriarchy toward those that embody the liberating spirit of the Gospel. This is not about abandoning heritage but about reclaiming its justice-bearing essence.

In the end, the theological dimension of the revised policy is not an appendix—it is the heartbeat of the whole. It names the harm caused when scripture is distorted, honours the liberating witness of Jesus, and calls the alliance to a faith that acts.

By anchoring gender justice in both spiritual conviction and human rights, the revised policy offers a unifying and prophetic vision: that pursuing equity and inclusion is not only socially necessary, but spiritually non-negotiable.

INTERSECTIONALITY: NAMING THE UNSEEN

The updated policy places intersectionality at its core, affirming that gender justice cannot be separated from the realities of age, disability, class, race, faith, or sexuality. Outdated references were removed, and inclusive definitions strengthened, ensuring the voices of those historically pushed to the margins—LGBTQ+ individuals—are recognized and amplified.



Around the world, rights and protections faced renewed pushback. For many, the intersections of identity intensified vulnerability: a young woman with a disability navigating conflict, an LGBTQ+ advocate confronting legal threats, an interfaith leader building solidarity across divides.

Their words influenced more than the policy's language. They informed its tools, sharpened its principles, and reimagined its framework. Intersectionality here is not an abstract concept but a lived reality, woven through every section of the policy, ensuring no one is unseen and no struggle stands in isolation.

A LIVING DOCUMENT, A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Gender justice is not a final destination—it is a journey we walk together. The ACT Alliance Gender Justice Policy is therefore not a static statement of principles, but a living document: a shared commitment that evolves with changing realities while remaining anchored in its core purpose of advancing justice, dignity, and equality for all.

The 2025 revision reaffirms ACT's identity as a transformative faith actor—one that is unafraid to name and dismantle patriarchy, and determined to build inclusive systems where all people can thrive. This is not a policy to be filed away or treated as a compliance exercise. It is a compass—one that guides collective action, shapes decisions, and inspires courage in the face of resistance. Yet, it is also important that the Gender Justice Policy is part of our compliance procedures, to ensure accountability, and that we are all walking towards gender justice – even if in different contexts, paces, and practices.

To bring this compass to life, the updated policy introduces a robust and practical framework for implementation, learning, and accountability. Among its key commitments:

- **Mandatory Gender Justice Policies** for all ACT members.
- **Annual progress reporting** to the ACT Governing Board, ensuring transparency and shared responsibility.
- **Development of contextualized action plans** by each member, adapted to their specific realities while upholding shared principles.
- **Enhanced digital learning and engagement tools**—including interactive e-learning modules, toolkits, and resources—for accessible and ongoing training.



- **A process of developing and sharing among members a variety of tools, like:** Gender audits, gender-responsive budgeting, and mainstreaming of gender justice into all levels of programming.
- **Peer learning spaces and regional mentoring**, enabling members to learn from one another's successes and challenges.
- **Safe space dialogues** for members operating in politically or socially sensitive environments, ensuring they can engage meaningfully without compromising security.

This is a framework designed to be both **operational and adaptable**. It recognizes that ACT Alliance members work in highly diverse contexts—from countries where advocacy for gender justice is embraced to those where it is restricted or contested. While members in more constrained spaces are not asked to violate national laws or risk undue harm, they are expected to refrain from actions that undermine the core principles of gender justice.

The policy's real strength lies not in the text itself but in how it is lived out by every member, every program, every faith leader, and every advocate. Its effectiveness depends on collective ownership: the understanding that gender justice is not the work of a few specialists but a shared responsibility woven into all aspects of humanitarian, development, and advocacy work.

"Most of the time, when we hear the word 'policy', we think rules, control, maybe even corrective measures. But, let us see a policy in a different way: it is about care—a way for an organization to walk alongside the people it works with, helping them live out what they believe. A guide, a companion, showing us how to practice justice in the way we relate to each other."
(Pilar Cancelo – Director SEDI, Argentina and co-chair of the LAC Gender Justice Community of Practice).

The next step is **co-designing the Implementation Roadmap**—a process guided by principles of accompaniment, contextualization, and peer exchange. This roadmap will outline clear timelines, training opportunities, and monitoring processes, ensuring that commitments made on paper are translated into action in communities worldwide.

With progress reports, capacity-building initiatives, and community-level engagement at its heart, the policy becomes what it was always meant to be: a living tool for transformation. Together, we ensure it continues to breathe, adapt, and inspire,



moving us closer to a world where justice, dignity, and inclusion are daily realities—not distant ideals.

CHALLENGES ON THE HORIZON – WALKING WITH COMPLEXITY

The journey to revising the Gender Justice Policy was marked by strong consensus on purpose—but also by moments of tension. The process surfaced theological disagreements on LGBTQI+ inclusion, political and cultural resistance to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and operational challenges in fragile or repressive contexts. Some members voiced concerns about alienating supporters; others worried the pace of change was too slow.

Rather than sidestep these differences, the ACT Alliance chose to hold space for them. Through conversations, facilitated dialogues, and honest exchanges, members were encouraged to bring their questions, fears, and convictions to the table. This approach did not erase disagreement, but it deepened trust and fostered a shared commitment to walking the path of justice together.

The policy review reaffirmed that transformation is rarely straightforward. Real change requires navigating complexity, embracing nuance, and staying engaged even when the conversations are hard. Every four years, the Gender Justice Policy will be reviewed—not to rewrite its purpose, but to adapt to shifting realities while remaining anchored in the Alliance’s core vision of justice, dignity, and equality for all.

The next chapter will be written not only in policy language, but in lived experience. Stories and testimonies will be gathered from across the Alliance—narratives that reveal the layered ways injustice operates, and the resilience communities bring in response. These voices will keep the policy alive, ensuring it remains not a checkbox, but a compass guiding transformation in every context where ACT Alliance serves.

REFERENCES

You can find the ACT Gender Justice Policy here:

ACT ALLIANCE. *Gender Justice Policy*. Available at: <https://actalliance.org/documents/act-gender-justice-policy/>. Accessed on: Sept. 30, 2025.

You can also read some of the stories of transformation from across the Alliance in our publication “Stories of Change”, including accounts on gender policy reviews:



ACT ALLIANCE. Stories of Change. Available at: https://actalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/StoriesOfChange_English-1.pdf. Accessed on: Sept. 30, 2025.

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