



Religion, Gender Equality, and Social Inclusion: A Qualitative Systematic Literature Review of Contemporary Ethical Debates in Mexico

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Abstract

This review synthesized contemporary scholarship to identify how religion is framed in debates over gender equality and social inclusion in Mexico, and to clarify which ethical patterns recur across exclusionary, ambivalent, and inclusive positions. A qualitative systematic literature review guided by PRISMA 2020 was conducted on 44 documents published between 2005 and 2025, with emphasis on recent studies from 2019 onward. The corpus included peer-reviewed articles, chapters, institutional reports, and movement documents. The material was coded thematically using a three-stage interpretive process focused on normative claims, social inclusion mechanisms, and institutional conflict. Four themes dominated the corpus: anti-gender mobilization, reproductive justice, inclusive Catholic and feminist reinterpretation, and the tension between secular constitutionalism and religious influence. The literature shows that exclusionary religious discourse often relies on family protection, religious freedom, and moral panic, while inclusive religious actors frame gender equality through dignity, care, conscience, and social justice. Mexico appears as a highly contested secular public sphere in which religion remains influential but not monolithic. Religion in Mexico is neither simply an obstacle nor an automatic resource for gender equality. Its ethical significance depends on whether religious actors reinforce hierarchy or reinterpret tradition in ways that expand inclusion. The review offers a comparative framework for scholars and policymakers working on gender justice in religiously plural societies.

Keywords: *Gender Justice; Anti-Gender Politics; Catholic Feminism; Social Inclusion; Reproductive Justice; Mexico.*

A. INTRODUCTION

Religion remains a central force in debates over gender equality because it continues to shape moral authority, family norms, sexual ethics, and public legitimacy. Recent comparative scholarship shows that religious actors are among the most visible participants in anti-gender mobilizations across Latin America, while other faith-based actors have begun to reclaim religion as a language for feminist justice and inclusion. In Mexico, this tension is especially visible because the country combines a strong Catholic heritage, a formally secular state, and expanding movements for reproductive justice and LGBTQ+ rights. Pew's 2026 regional report shows that Catholicism remains the largest religious affiliation in Mexico even as affiliation declines and religious unaffiliated populations grow, which means religious authority still matters in public debate even in a changing moral landscape.

The literature on gender and religion now emphasizes a more complex picture than a simple church-versus-rights opposition. Quantitative studies show that religiosity and religious tensions often correlate with weaker gender equality outcomes, especially where governance is weak and gender roles remain rigid. A spatial analysis across developing countries found that religious tensions are associated with lower gender equality and that these effects can spill over across neighboring settings. Meta-analytic work on religiosity and ambivalent sexism similarly indicates a positive relationship between religiosity and both benevolent and hostile sexism. Yet this pattern is not universal or one-directional, because religious traditions also generate emancipatory reinterpretations, feminist theologies, and activist networks that support inclusion.

Mexico is analytically important because it is one of the clearest sites where these tensions are visible. Wilkinson's study of anti-gender activism in Mexico shows that campaigners use a security frame to describe gender as a threat to the family, transforming "gender ideology" into a moral and existential danger. Vaggione and Machado argue more broadly that Catholic and Pentecostal sectors in Latin America have developed political identities centered on religious freedom and Christian sexual morality, and Biroli and Caminotti show that the backlash against gender equality emerged from transnational conservative coalitions rather than isolated local reactions. These dynamics matter for social inclusion because anti-gender politics do not only contest abortion or sexuality education; they also shape whose belonging is recognized as legitimate in the public sphere.



Existing studies have not sufficiently synthesized the ethical debates in Mexico across exclusionary, ambivalent, and inclusive religious positions. The scholarship is rich but segmented. One cluster focuses on abortion and reproductive rights, another on anti-gender mobilization, another on Catholic feminism, and another on constitutional secularism. These streams rarely speak to each other in a single analytical frame, even though they are linked by the same normative question: who gets to define gender equality, and on what moral grounds? That gap matters because social inclusion depends on how religious authority is negotiated in public life, especially in a country where religion remains socially influential while the state formally claims secular neutrality.

This article addresses that gap through a qualitative systematic literature review of contemporary ethical debates concerning religion, gender equality, and social inclusion in Mexico. The objective is to map the main arguments, identify recurring ethical patterns, and explain how religious discourse can function either as a barrier to inclusion or as a resource for justice-oriented reinterpretation. The contribution is interpretive and comparative. It links religious studies, gender studies, and ethics into one review framework that can inform future empirical and policy work. Section 2 reviews the thematic literature. Section 3 describes the review design, corpus, and coding strategy. Section 4 reports the thematic findings. Section 5 discusses the implications for gender justice and social inclusion in Mexico. Section 6 concludes with practical implications and future research directions.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

The first theme in the literature concerns anti-gender mobilization. Across Latin America, scholars show that anti-gender politics emerged as a transnational conservative backlash against feminism, reproductive rights, and sexual diversity. Biroli and Caminotti describe the backlash as a structural response to the expansion of gender equality claims, while Vaggione and Machado show that Catholic and Pentecostal actors in Latin America have developed stable political identities around “Christian sexual morality” and the defense of religious freedom. Wilkinson’s Mexican case study sharpens this picture by showing how conservative actors use the security frame to make gender appear not just immoral but dangerous to the family and nation. The ethical move is important because it turns inclusion into a threat narrative.

A second theme concerns reproductive justice and abortion. Mexico has become a major site of contestation because legal liberalization has advanced, yet social legitimacy remains fragmented and state-level implementation remains uneven. Scholarly work on Catholic women’s activism in late twentieth-century Mexico shows that the Catholic field itself has never been uniform. Gasparowicz demonstrates that Catholic women’s activism for abortion was already present in the late twentieth century, while Bedrosian’s recent analysis of Catholic feminists in the Americas shows that CDD México and related movements explicitly reinterpret Catholicism in relation to reproductive justice. These studies matter because they demonstrate that religion is not reducible to hierarchy. It is also a site of internal ethical contestation.

A third theme concerns sexual and gender minority inclusion. Regional scholarship on Latin America shows that legal inclusion has progressed unevenly, with major gaps in protection for transgender people and continued inequality in health, documentation, and social recognition. Malta and colleagues show that many Latin American and Caribbean legal frameworks remain incomplete for sexual and gender minorities. Other work shows that religiosity can interact with stigma, but social support and personal faith may also buffer minority stress under some conditions. This duality is crucial for Mexico because religious discourse can intensify stigma in one setting and provide emotional support in another. The ethical question is not whether religion is present, but whether it is used to police identity or widen belonging.

A fourth theme concerns secularism, public policy, and institutional inclusion. Mexico’s constitutional secularism has not eliminated religion from politics. Instead, it has created a contested public sphere in which religious groups, feminist organizations, and state institutions negotiate legitimacy. The literature on reproductive rights in Mexico shows that legal victories do not automatically produce social inclusion because cultural resistance can persist long after court decisions. Work on Catholic constitutionalism, abortion politics, and religious freedom shows that institutions may use rights language selectively to protect hierarchy while denying full equality to others. At the same time, inclusive religious organizations, especially Catholic feminist groups, use the same moral language of dignity, conscience, and care to support marginalized women and LGBTQ+ people.

The gap in the literature is not the absence of evidence. It is the lack of a synthesis that connects these themes into one ethical map of Mexican debates. The field needs a qualitative review that shows how exclusionary religious discourse, feminist religious dissent, and secular rights claims interact in the same moral arena. That is the purpose of the present study.



C. METHOD

Research Design

This study used a qualitative systematic literature review design guided by PRISMA 2020. The purpose was interpretive synthesis rather than statistical aggregation. The review sought to identify how religion is discussed in relation to gender equality and social inclusion in Mexico, with attention to the ethical arguments used by conservative, moderate, and inclusive actors. A qualitative systematic review was appropriate because the corpus contained empirical studies, conceptual papers, institutional reports, and movement documents that could not be meaningfully pooled in quantitative form. The analysis relied on reflexive thematic synthesis, which is suitable for heterogeneous evidence and allows the researcher to compare recurring claims across sources while preserving contextual nuance.

Data / Dataset

The corpus contained 44 documents published between 2005 and 2025. The corpus was constructed through purposive retrieval from Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, publisher platforms, and selected institutional repositories. Inclusion criteria were: explicit relevance to religion, gender equality, social inclusion, reproductive justice, anti-gender politics, or feminist religious reinterpretation; a Mexican focus or strong relevance to Mexican debates; and enough methodological or conceptual depth to support thematic coding. Exclusion criteria were purely devotional material, documents without analytic content, and items that discussed gender in Mexico without any religious dimension. The final corpus included 24 peer-reviewed journal articles, 8 book chapters or monographs, 6 institutional or movement documents, and 6 policy or report texts.

Model or System Design

The review used a three-layer interpretive model. The first layer captured descriptive features, including year, document type, and thematic domain. The second layer coded ethical orientation, such as exclusionary, ambivalent, or inclusive. The third layer coded inclusion mechanism, such as moral panic, rights language, feminist reinterpretation, pastoral care, or civic participation. Figure 1 would present this workflow as a flowchart beginning with corpus identification, proceeding to screening and coding, and ending with thematic integration. The model was chosen because the literature repeatedly shows that gender debates in religious settings are not only about doctrine. They also depend on institutional position, public framing, and moral authority.

Experimental Setup

The coding process was organized in NVivo 14. Each text was read in full and coded twice. The first cycle identified passages on gender equality, inclusion, sexuality, family, rights, and religion. The second cycle grouped those passages into broader themes and assessed whether the source framed religion as a barrier, a contested field, or a resource for inclusion. A short pilot phase on six documents refined the codebook. The pilot showed that terms such as “family,” “life,” “dignity,” “religious freedom,” and “inclusion” were highly overloaded and required contextual coding rather than keyword counting. This setup was suitable because Mexican gender debates often move through moral narrative rather than direct policy language.

Evaluation Metrics

Four qualitative metrics were used. First, **thematic recurrence** counted how often a theme appeared across the corpus. Second, **normative intensity** assessed whether a text treated a theme as central or peripheral. Third, **inclusion orientation** measured whether the text supported exclusion, ambivalence, or inclusion. Fourth, **institutional specificity** assessed whether the text identified the church, state, movement, school, or civil society as the site of ethical action. These metrics were selected because the study aimed to compare ethical debates rather than to measure causal effects.

Validation Approach

Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation across source types and through the comparison of negative cases. The review did not assume that all religious sources were conservative or that all feminist sources were secular. Instead, it retained documents that complicated those assumptions, especially Catholic feminist texts and rights-oriented religious organizations. The analysis also used an audit trail of coding decisions and memo notes to keep interpretive choices transparent. This approach fits qualitative review logic, where credibility depends on coherence, reflexivity, and the ability to show how the synthesis emerged from the corpus.



D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The corpus profile in Table 1 shows that the literature became more active after 2019, with a noticeable concentration in 2021 to 2025. This pattern mirrors the intensification of anti-gender campaigns, abortion debates, and feminist religious activism during the same period. Table 2 then shows how the main themes were distributed across the corpus.

Table 1. Corpus profile by type and publication period

Category	Subcategory	n
Document type	Peer-reviewed journal article	24
	Book chapter or monograph chapter	8
	Institutional or movement document	6
	Policy or report text	6
Publication period	2005 to 2010	4
	2011 to 2015	6
	2016 to 2018	5
	2019 to 2021	9
	2022 to 2025	20
	Mexico specific	26
Geographic focus	Mexico plus Latin America comparative	12
	Comparative global framing	6

Table 1 indicates a strong recent bias in the literature toward Mexico-specific and Mexico-plus-Latin America studies. That trend matters because the ethical debates have become sharper as reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and feminist theology gained greater visibility in public discourse. The corpus also shows that movement documents are important sources of ethical reasoning, not merely advocacy materials, because organizations such as CDD México explicitly articulate moral interpretations of Catholic identity and inclusion.

Table 2. Thematic recurrence and normative salience

Theme	Recurrence count	Mean salience (1 to 5)
Anti-gender mobilization	18	4.7
Reproductive justice and abortion	16	4.6
Inclusive Catholic feminism	14	4.3
Religious freedom as a political frame	13	4.2
LGBTQ+ inclusion and exclusion	12	4.1
Secularism and constitutional conflict	11	4.0
Women's leadership and authority	10	3.8
Social inclusion through care and accompaniment	9	3.7
Indigenous and intersectional inclusion	7	3.4

Table 2 shows that anti-gender mobilization was the most recurrent theme, followed closely by reproductive justice. This indicates that the ethical debate is not simply about abstract equality. It is about whether gender equality is defined as a threat to social order or as a democratic condition of inclusion. The presence of inclusive Catholic feminism in the upper tier of salience confirms that the field is internally divided and that religion cannot be collapsed into a single conservative position.

Three findings stand out. First, exclusionary religious discourse frequently relies on a family-protection script. In this script, equality is portrayed as danger, sexual diversity as disorder, and feminism as cultural corruption. Wilkinson's analysis of Mexico is the clearest example, because it shows how anti-gender activists use a security frame to attach fear to the idea of gender. Vaggione and Machado's regional analysis explains why this frame travels easily across Latin America: it connects family, morality, and religious freedom in a single political language.

Second, the inclusive corpus uses a care-and-dignity script. Catholic feminists in Mexico and the Americas do not reject religion. They reinterpret it. Bedrosian shows that CDD México and related organizations emphasize survey evidence, storytelling, spiritual accompaniment, and pastoral language to challenge the presumed opposition between Catholic identity and reproductive justice. Gasparowicz shows that Catholic women's abortion activism in Mexico has deeper historical roots than contemporary debate alone suggests. These texts reposition religion as a resource for accompaniment, conscience, and social recognition.



Third, social inclusion emerges where ethical claims are translated into institutional practice. The literature repeatedly shows that public policy victories, such as court rulings on abortion or anti-discrimination norms, do not automatically create inclusion if religious and social institutions continue to stigmatize women or sexual minorities. This explains why studies of Latin American rights frameworks emphasize uneven implementation, why reproductive justice scholarship stresses lived experience, and why social inclusion work ties equality to access, recognition, and participation.

Discussion

The review shows that religion in Mexico functions as a contested ethical field rather than a fixed barrier to gender equality. The strongest pattern is the coexistence of exclusionary and inclusive moral grammars. Exclusionary texts often frame gender equality as a civilizational or familial threat. Inclusive texts frame it as an issue of dignity, conscience, accompaniment, and justice. That split matters because it explains why debates about abortion, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and women's leadership cannot be resolved by legal reform alone. They are also struggles over moral interpretation.

The anti-gender literature is especially important for interpreting the Mexican case. Biroli and Caminotti argue that the backlash against gender equality in Latin America is not a marginal reaction but a durable conservative formation that connects Catholic and Pentecostal networks to broader political projects. Wilkinson's Mexican study shows how this formation uses security language to turn gender into an existential threat. The ethical consequence is the production of exclusion through moral panic. Equality claims become easier to delegitimize when they are tied to imagined family collapse, child protection, or religious persecution.

At the same time, the literature rejects the idea that religion is only reactive. Catholic feminist activism in Mexico shows that religious identity can be reworked from within. Bedrosian's work on CDD México is especially important because it shows that feminist Catholic actors use survey data and narrative to expose the gap between hierarchy and ordinary believers. Gasparowicz provides the historical depth that this contemporary activism needs. Together, these studies show that religion becomes an inclusion resource when it is reinterpreted as a language of conscience, bodily integrity, and social accompaniment rather than as a closed hierarchy of authority.

The literature on Latin America's broader rights environment helps explain why inclusion remains uneven in Mexico. Malta and colleagues show that legal protections for sexual and gender minorities remain incomplete across much of the region, especially for transgender people. Iqbal et al. show that religious tensions and weak governance can undermine gender equality in developing countries. Sobiecki and Kosakowska-Berezecka show that religiosity is positively associated with ambivalent sexism in many studies, although the relationship is not uniform and depends on context and affiliation. These findings suggest that Mexico's inclusion problem is structural as well as rhetorical. Religious discourse matters because it is embedded in governance, education, and the distribution of legitimacy.

The review also clarifies the role of secularism. Mexico's secular state does not eliminate religion from public life. It creates a regulatory field in which religious actors must justify their interventions in civic terms. That field can protect rights, but it can also become a site where religious groups invoke freedom to preserve hierarchy. The literature on Catholic constitutionalism, abortion politics, and anti-gender campaigns shows that rights language is often mobilized strategically by both sides. Inclusion becomes more durable when it is framed not as a culture-war victory but as a shared civic obligation grounded in constitutional equality and social justice.

A mechanistic reading of the corpus suggests three pathways. The first is moral threat amplification, where equality is framed as danger. The second is ethical re-signification, where religion is reinterpreted to support dignity and justice. The third is institutional translation, where discursive commitments are turned into services, accompaniment, legal advocacy, or education. The first pathway produces exclusion. The second and third produce inclusion, but only when they are sustained by organizations with social reach. This is why Catholic feminist groups matter so much in the Mexican corpus. They demonstrate that inclusion is not merely a legal status. It is a social practice that requires memory, language, and organizational continuity.

The practical implications are direct. Policymakers should not assume that all religious actors obstruct gender equality, but they should recognize that anti-gender discourse can influence public legitimacy even when law is progressive. Religious institutions that wish to support inclusion should move beyond abstract statements and invest in concrete mechanisms of accompaniment, anti-stigma education, and rights-based pastoral care. Feminist and LGBTQ+ organizations, for their part, may benefit from identifying internal religious allies rather than treating religion as a single adversary. The literature shows that such alliances already exist in Mexico, and they are strongest when they combine theological reinterpretation with social service and legal advocacy.



This review has limitations. The corpus is English-language heavy, so some Spanish-language local debates may be underrepresented. Movement documents and reports are included because they are central to the ethical debate, yet they do not have the same evidentiary status as peer-reviewed studies. The review also centers Mexico, so broader Central American and Caribbean dynamics appear only where they illuminate the Mexican case. A final limitation is that inclusion itself is a contested concept, which means different documents treat it as rights, belonging, recognition, or participation. That conceptual variation is analytically useful, but it limits easy comparison.

E. CONCLUSION

This qualitative systematic review shows that the ethical debate over religion, gender equality, and social inclusion in Mexico is structurally contested but not reducible to a simple church-versus-rights opposition. Anti-gender mobilization uses family protection and religious freedom to defend hierarchy, while inclusive Catholic feminists and rights-oriented religious actors reinterpret tradition through dignity, conscience, and reproductive justice. The main contribution of the review is to show that religion matters in Mexico because it remains a contested moral language that can either block inclusion or deepen it. For practice, this means that gender justice strategies should not only address law and policy, but also the religious narratives that shape public legitimacy. Future research should examine how these debates unfold at the community level, especially in parish settings, women's networks, and youth spaces where inclusion is negotiated in everyday practice.

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