

## Secretary of State's Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society

### Sub-Working Group on Religion, Women, and Peacebuilding Summary of Work and Recommendations January 19, 2017

**Mandate and activities:** Appointed in March, 2016, as part of the Secretary of State's Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society, the group was one of five sub-groups supported by the State Department Office of Religion and Global Affairs. The group met monthly, focusing on specific actions that could enhance State Department religious engagement that is sensitive to the participation of women in promoting peace, broadly defined. Group discussions explored links with the U.S. National Action Plan of Action for the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, approaches to violent extremism that involve women, State Department guidance to posts (including scholarly resources), and specific pertinent programs such as the International Visitor Leadership Program. Groups of members focused in depth on specific topics, particularly economic dimensions of peacebuilding. The group sought to highlight links to other sub-groups, notably in focusing on countering/preventing violent extremism and social justice issues.

The guiding context was the need for deliberate efforts to engage women in all aspects of religious outreach and peacebuilding (in part to expand religious engagement beyond outreach solely to male religious leaders who predominate, and to expand program effectiveness). This calls for measures that will enhance the appreciation of likely benefits that can result from such efforts. The group returned repeatedly to the particular importance of being alert to context because women's religious roles vary widely.

The group is keenly aware that to have lasting impact, the incoming administration's goals and objectives need to be taken into account as much as possible. The vital roles of women—and in this instance, women with strong faith and deeply held religious values—should be highlighted in the upcoming transition. Further, the group proposes to review its recommendations once there is greater clarity on future directions.

#### **Central arguments/"messages":**

The group's diverse membership highlighted both the complexity and sensitivity of its mandate to focus on women's religious roles. Conclusions and recommendations are set against four paradoxes:

- (a) *The "invisibility" problem:* Religious women's common invisibility means they are often taken for granted, and there is little effort to engage them as part of religious outreach and peacebuilding and development more broadly. This approach is misaligned with mounting evidence that women overall tend to be more religious than men and play pivotal roles in the shape and direction of religious institutions and practices. The strong faith and deeply held religious values of many women lead them to play major roles in maintaining their respective religious communities and engaging in peace building civic actions.
- (b) *No "one size fits all."* There are no "silver bullet" solutions for engaging women, in part because of the wide diversity in women's roles and situations. Women can be perceived to be relegated to subservient and often unequal roles. In reality, their roles are widely diverse. Common assumptions about women's roles in religious traditions belie this

- diversity, which encompasses female leaders pressing for social change as well as women who uphold deeply conservative traditions that negate core human rights.
- (c) *Women play roles that go to the heart of extremism and reactionary approaches:* Many efforts to address extremism and conduct that countenances violence downplay or ignore the central roles that attitudes toward women's rights and roles play in these narratives and organizations. That calls for efforts to understand concerns, as well as approaches and constant reaffirmation of core principles of equality and rights. Notwithstanding numerous success cases, women faith and religious actors playing leadership roles are overlooked and/or coopted by other actors to fulfill their objectives. It is vital to understand better means to recognize and support these efforts.
- (d) *"Oil and water:"* Persistent gulfs between many secular women's organizations and activists and women working from religious perspectives undermine impact. Bridging divides deserves priority.

*Positive messages:*

- Make positive efforts to engage women in religious outreach, recognizing women's high religiosity, complex leadership roles, and constituencies, even if women are absent from formal religious circles. Equity grounds is one rationale, and extending women's impact is another. Case studies can shine light on what is poorly understood.
- Engage women actively in research and discussions on relevant topics as part of religious outreach.
- Give priority to women's peacebuilding roles, including those inspired by religious belief. Research and policy analysis should focus on the widely different approaches that women with religious affiliations bring in many world regions and lessons from practical experience.
- Engage in promising areas for attention, notably health, education, food security, refugee policies, and fighting corruption.
- Work consciously to bridge secular/religious gulfs. Positive and broader outreach can yield results by consciously knocking down barriers and challenging preconceptions.
- Set clear expectations that State Department officials should be aware of research and reflections on women's religious roles, including ongoing reinterpretations of traditional religious and cultural teachings on gender roles and their differences in various contexts. State Department officials should be aware of and acknowledge efforts where women and men are working through civil society and legal mechanisms to advance peace and security, reform family law, and enhance familiarity with the content of negotiations at local, governmental, and transnational levels surrounding the UN Security Council Resolution on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).
- Explore possible further action on and potential cost-savings from engaging and creating partnerships with religious actors on humanitarian crises and broader peace and development issues like combating gender-based violence, human trafficking, education, and prominent health issues (e.g. HIV/AIDS, Zika, AMR, maternal and child health).

*Traps to avoid:*

- Essentializing women (e.g. "all women are peaceful")
- Instrumentalizing women (e.g. approaching women simply to further specific goals)
- Ignoring women (e.g. excluding women from meetings), failing to hear their views, or assuming that female religious "leaders" do not exist.

- Acquiescing in formulaic women's representation (e.g. resorting to tokenism or restricting engagement to non-representative women).

### **Recommended immediate actions**

- An appendix in the Religion and Diplomacy Handbook, drafted by the State Department's Office of Religion and Global Affairs, should provide context and guidance on engagement with women religious and faith-inspired actors who are working on peace and security, coupled with broader humanitarian and development initiatives. The guidance should focus on navigating the highly religious and cultural contexts within which women's roles and issues that affect them are often framed. It should also give guidance on and provide a knowledge, skills, and mentoring element on how to best map, support, and or engage women religious actors and broader faith-inspired actors in peace and security efforts.
- The International Visitor Leadership Program offers opportunities to include and engage women with religious affiliations, as well as women who work from within their traditional discourses, to reform family law and gender relations through legal mechanisms and policy. Sub-working group members can support these programs.
- State Department officials should identify and reach out to religious, female peacebuilders and pertinent civil society actors who recognize the importance of the intersection of gender equality, religion, and peacebuilding.
- Create a calendar of likely engagement for the upcoming year highlighting pertinent upcoming events (e.g. International Women's Day, etc.). Sub-working group members can support this effort and provide input.
- Identify and centralize scholarly information on women's religious engagement and ensure that it is readily available (e.g. on an academic website).

### **Working Group members:**

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