

“Women, Religion, and Peace: Exploring Experience, Probing Complexity” Meeting Report January 5-6, 2012

On January 5-6, 2012, the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, and the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) organized a second symposium on women’s religious peacemaking at USIP headquarters in Washington, DC. A small group of academics and practitioners gathered to discuss submissions for a call for papers issued in February 2011; the research will form the basis of a book to be published later in 2012. The papers and the January discussion address themes emerging from discussions in a prior symposium in July 2010 that warrant further investigation. The focus was on on-the-ground experience in conflict zones and on common themes across countries, regions, and faith traditions. The meeting was primarily a closed session focused on discussion of draft papers but concluded with a public session that highlighted pertinent themes and possible recommendations to policymakers and peacemakers.

Day One: Morning Session (Private)

Katherine Marshall (BC/WFDD) and Susan Hayward (USIP) launched the meeting with presentations that took stock of work to date, highlighted emerging issues in women’s religious peacebuilding, and drew on common themes linking the draft papers. Issues of scope and definition needed to be addressed at the outset given the newness of the exploration and varying approaches. The introductory presentations highlighted the following themes and questions.

Definitions: Different understandings of core vocabulary and the terminology used in this discourse can lead to dramatically different approaches, suggested Marshall. “Peace” can signify several things, for instance formal negotiations at the table to silence guns, or, in contrast, a far broader, working process of development, through which decent lives are built in a structure of a lawful and peaceful society. Even the use of the term “women” can stir disagreements because focusing on women’s contributions to peacebuilding implies that men and women have different experiences, skills, attributes, and qualities, which can well imply an essentialization of women’s roles. The forthcoming book will address the pitfalls of generalizations. Clarifying assumptions and exploring in detail specific cases and challenges can help to highlight both unifying themes and differences among experiences, regions, and religious traditions.

Themes: Some common themes emerge across the several case studies that paper authors explored and from the extensive interviews with practitioners. These illuminate and affirm the significant roles that women play in peacebuilding and suggest important themes and challenges. Drawing on work to date, Hayward highlighted several of these themes:

- **Religious women engage actively in peacebuilding efforts: sometimes through formal religious institutions, and sometimes outside them.** Much work by women for peace is inspired and shaped by their faith. Women are particularly active at the grassroots level, commonly approaching peace from a broad perspective, including development, education, and social well-being in their definition.
- Women shape religious motivations, interpretations and behaviors, even when they are not interpretive authorities in the traditional sense. **Not only do women’s religious motivations percolate up to clergy from the grassroots level, but women also wield influence on their family and religious institutions, in both progressive and traditional directions.** Women are often active in religious ritual and worship, and thus shape the religious character and life of the family and broader community; sometimes women nurture a feminine/feminist theology and a women-centric interpretation of the tradition, drawing on female figures in religious texts to discern their contemporary role. Religious women do not always support peaceful or pluralistic

interpretations of religion: they have also been influential in nurturing cults of martyrdom, influencing religious bias, and enforcing religious customs and laws that infringe on rights and so forth. **Women's influence is highly complex.**

- **Women are marginalized from central peacemaking efforts, as well as religious peacebuilding work, and in many circumstances religious women are excluded from major secular women's movements for peace. This constitutes a triple marginalization from peace processes.** Therefore their work and impact is often invisible, which has both negative and positive consequences. On the one hand, their invisibility commonly results in a lack of funding and supportive networks, and an inability to shape agendas or address their interests. On the other, their invisibility affords women peacebuilders access to insecure areas and to different parties in a conflict, since they may appear unthreatening; their "under the radar" status can allow them to get things done with some protection from political meddling.
- There is a common tendency of religious women to **gravitate toward interfaith or cross-border initiatives** (thus non-traditional approaches), perhaps a result of the flexibility and lesser risks afforded by their invisibility or a common tendency to focus on relationships. The latter explanation reflects a common stereotype about women but may be largely a product of women's status in communities. For example, as mothers, women rebel against the effects of violence on their families and communities, and build on their experience as survivors in post-conflict countries.
- Religious institutions generally do not have the best track record in addressing "women's issues." While there are examples of Catholic and Buddhist nuns with recognized authority, women leaders of faith-inspired organizations, and women academics, traditional religious leadership is often exclusively male. **As women gain institutional leadership, do they address these issues more than their male counterparts, and does their work for peace change? Are they constrained by that power to work for peace and take controversial positions?** Answers to these questions illuminate the ways in which women can strategically influence change, whether at the negotiating table, in different locales clouded by invisibility, or perhaps a combination of the two.

A short discussion followed. Noting the last theme – that religious institutions generally do not have the best track record in addressing women's issues – Jacqueline Ogega stressed that documentation has special importance. Criticisms of religious institutions that fail to empower women can put those religious leaders on the defensive, and thus thwart constructive dialogue. There is a need to document practices in order to set the record straight and avoid unwarranted accusations and defensive reactions.

Another major way to advance dialogue, especially interfaith dialogue, is education, suggested Anjana Dayal de Prewitt. The messages women give to their children (biological and surrogate) about other religions, often stemming from their own educational experience of religion, commonly have more influence than those of clerical leaders; women are important bearers of interfaith messages. Educating women is thus crucial.

It is important to address the dynamics of liberal versus conservative and progressive versus orthodox groups to understand better how this affects relationships between groups, Andrea Blanch argued. Margaret Jenkins suggested that we need to engage orthodox groups more actively; the religious groups seeking out interfaith dialogue are often on the more progressive end but other perspectives are also important. Zilka Siljak-Spahic emphasized the importance of studying the impact of politics on such interactions, arguing that they are ubiquitous in post-conflict countries especially.

Authors then divided into small groups to review draft papers.

Afternoon Session

Launching the afternoon session, Kathleen Kuehnast (USIP) reviewed the significant UN Security Council Resolution 1325: the prized result of intensive lobbying by numerous women's organizations and the United Nations Development Fund for Women that was ultimately unanimously adopted on October 31, 2000. "1325" was the first piece of legislation to require parties in a conflict to respect women's rights and to support women's participation in peace negotiations and in post-conflict reconstruction. With the changing nature of warfare increasingly targeting civilians with wide ranging impact on both men and women, Kuehnast sees women's inclusion as a foundation and catalyst for peace negotiations. Although criticized for limited enforcement, 1325 has spurred governments to integrate women in peacebuilding. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's U.S. National Action Plan is a prominent example and 30 countries, 12 of them post-conflict, have also adopted National Action Plans. These plans aim to connect women peacemakers, building bridges between formal and informal peacemaking processes.

Marshall and Hayward reviewed the stance of international organizations and U.S. government on these issues and remaining gaps. There is considerable unease and lack of knowledge in many institutions and professions in approaching religion; many tend to oversimplify, for example equating religion with opposition to condoms or oppression of women. Both perceptions and realities, therefore, should be addressed, necessitating a thoughtful, professional discussion on the complexities of religion and the roles it plays, for instance within the State Department, the UN system, and elsewhere. Also needed is support for religious engagement in conflict resolution, human rights work, and development, as this may help both to mitigate religion's destructive capacities and to build on religion's many strengths. Various signs suggest that the U.S. government is increasingly taking notice, with a flurry of activity in the State Department, USAID and DOD, inter alia, involving religion. Thus the field of religious peacebuilding is increasingly moving from a purely defensive posture, beseeching the international community to take religion seriously, to a more critical one, asking such questions as: *what has been effective? What has had an impact? Where are the gaps? How is this best operationalized?*

The women, religion, and peace initiative seeks answers to those questions, defining and addressing gaps in evaluation, integration, and coordination with other sectors, but also the attitudinal barriers to constructive dialogue and research.

Day Two: Open Conference

Theme Session One: Contesting and Working with Women of Faith's "Double Invisibility/Marginalization" in Peace Processes

Bilkisu Yusuf explored women's ongoing roles in peacebuilding in Nigeria, focusing particularly on Kaduna State. The long-standing, ethno-religious conflict has profoundly affected the lives of women and children there; they represent a majority of the victims, as well as those in the camps for internally displaced people. Women play significant and active roles in civil society efforts to build peace, but Yusuf argues that their major contributions at the community level contrast sharply with their exclusion in state government peacebuilding initiatives and other national level activities.

Etin Anwar discussed women's varying roles and involvement in peacemaking during the conflict between the government of Indonesia and the militant members of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). Her context is Muslim women's view of gender equality as central both to Islam and peace. Anwar argued against the common argument that Islam played only marginal roles in Aceh's conflict resolution. Islam, she commented, pervades all aspects of Acehnese life and was central to movements towards peace.

Margaret Jenkins presented a case study of an all-women peacekeeping group of the Mindanao People's Caucus (MPC) in the Southern Philippines, laying out some complexities in this effort to mainstream gender in peacebuilding efforts. This all-women peacekeeping group of very diverse religions and ages formed in response to their complete marginalization from the formal peace process; after the ceasefire agreement between the government of the Philippines and MILF (the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the largest of several insurgent guerrilla groups fighting for Muslim self-determination), women were excluded from the formal ceasefire committees and international monitoring teams that were established. A group of women changed the trajectory by starting their own contingent. A central question that arises is: *is an all-women entity an effective way to mainstream gender?* Jenkins argued that it is essential because quota systems, which have been tried for years, have not worked. Hayward raised the concern that separate women's initiatives may take pressure off central bodies to integrate women's issues and may prove insufficient alone address women's issues.

Jenkins concluded from her Mindanao study that when women are not welcome at the negotiation table, they often use the informal, grassroots networks to take the lead in other areas. The peacekeeping force has to work much harder, in terms of advocacy, than male ceasefire groups, to prove that they deserve a presence there. One result is that the all-women group often goes to the most dangerous places and situations as a way to prove their toughness and ability to do the job well.

The subsequent discussion revolved around women's roles in formal and informal peacebuilding processes and the many reasons why women are excluded from high-stakes discussions. Yusuf pointed to the common explanation in many areas of the world: that if women want to be at the central peace processes, they have to carry guns because those who call the shots at the table are those who pose a real threat to the government and can perpetuate violence. Anwar commented that in the case of Aceh, Indonesia, even combatant women carrying guns were excluded from peacekeeping processes because of their exclusion from the mainstream political sphere; the problem is deeply structural in nature. Manal Omar suggested that lack of space for women in the political environment, plus underwhelming efforts by women to fight for their place, explain slow progress. As an example, each region in Libya elects a representative to the Transitional Council, but none of the regions wanted a woman to represent them, as it would be perceived as a weakness. She saw this as evidence of the ineffectiveness of quotas. Omar quoted a head leader from the Transitional Council in Libya who remarked that men were embarrassed by the women who were out working for peace because, he said, it suggested that the men in some way had not stepped up; however, he also expressed a kind of gratitude to those women because their actions impelled men to be more involved.

The issues discussed at the formal peace talks are often issues from which many women are commonly excluded. Based on women's testimonies, Mary Ann Cusimano Love noted that women are involved in peace processes centered on disarmament and demobilization, and in reintegration, where women were doing most of the work. Many women go into reintegration work, Hayward pointed out, because they can gain leadership positions in that; however, when the conflict is over, many of these women are told to go home and they lose the leadership that led them into the movement in the first place. Cusimano Love observed that women represent 2.5 percent of peace signatories in formal processes; with 90 percent of that 2.5 percent being the women in the Philippines. Without those women there is statistically zero female representation in formal talks, despite 1325. Voices of faith have also been excluded from peace talks, and in the few religious voices that are included, women are entirely absent. Cusimano Love urged the group not to give up on quotas, given the leveraging power they possess for "shaming and naming."

Shobana Shankar lamented the absence of mechanisms to enforce equal provisions for gender in 1325 and religions more generally. The search for legitimacy is ongoing for women: at times women latch onto 1325, operating in a secular, UN-type framework, and at other times women who have some kind of religious authority can use that sphere strategically. Lack of legitimacy is a struggle even among women;

Ayse Kadayifci cited Iraq, where women often do not vote for other women. This begs the question, *what kind of stereotypes of women do other women promote?* Ogega cautioned against the pitfall of lumping women together as a homogeneous group; it is important to differentiate women of diverse faiths building peace, utilizing resources, facing challenges, and relating to religious structures, practices, and rituals. Context, particularly colonial legacies, Kadayifci added, is crucial to understanding these dynamics better.

Theme Session Two: Women Reshaping Religion

Zilka Siljak-Spahic described her experiences with women peacebuilders in post-war, post-socialist Bosnia and Herzegovina. During and after the war, women within secular human rights organizations were the key peace players; their peacebuilding efforts began during the conflict with an NGO formed in 1993 to provide a safe place for women, trauma healing services, and other forms of support. Despite women's important work, after the war, women occupied only two percent of Parliamentary seats and were excluded from public life. Siljak-Spahic explained that women's pivotal role as the first people to cross ethno-religious identity-borders, as well as physical borders across Croatia and Serbia, was often viewed as a betrayal by their own communities. Although these women were stepping out to start a dialogue for peace, they were faced with judgment and ostracism when they returned home. Even so they were remarkable effective in securing legislation to protect women's human rights, though enforcement has been nonexistent. A lack of awareness among women, especially in rural areas and small communities, that these laws exist, explains the lack of reaction to government failures to enforce them. Thus, Siljak-Spahic underscored the need to integrate religion into secular, human rights organizations as an important way to reach these women. Siljak-Spahic's organization developed a training manual to teach women in NGOs how to use religious perspectives in peacebuilding. Acknowledging sensitivities around a UN-centered human rights approach in some communities, Siljak-Spahic noted that they strategically decided not to state publicly that they based their fight for women's rights on either human rights or feminist arguments; they found it was more effective to use arguments that were acceptable to religious traditions, and to include multi-religious perspectives, including non-religious worldviews, like atheism.

Monica Maher described the Honduras experience where a complex coalition of women reshaped religion through their peacebuilding efforts. Women commonly connected the integrity of the state and democratic institutions with the integrity of women; they viewed abuses against women as seriously as state abuses. After the 2009 coup, the new president immediately annulled the law allowing emergency contraception; this was a live issue with rising incidence of gang rapes. Feminist women began to speak out against religious conservative groups who had supported the coup. In the northern region women did not identify as "feminists," but they fought for women's rights on the basis of the feminist theologies within the Catholic and other traditions. Private religious symbols and practices emerged as part of the demonstrations, with many women viewing their struggle to find a voice as part of a religious calling. As a result, their political and spiritual involvement reinforced each other, and human rights discourse was viewed in a more spiritual way, acting in parallel with other religious discourses.

Andy Blanch described her experiences with Israeli and Palestinian women through a women's empowerment program, *Women Reborn*, now in its fourth year, in a Muslim Palestinian village in northern Israel. The program is an ongoing collaboration among local Muslim women, Jewish Israeli feminists, and international partners: three elements that are often seen to detract from peace (Islam, feminism, and international NGOs) but were very successful in bringing change in this case. The process began with personal exploration of personal beliefs: a local woman, who had training outside Israel, led discussions of the Qur'an. The women took note that the Qur'an does not endorse violence against women, but felt a struggle between the true message of the Qur'an and cultural norms, debating what they should do as good Muslim women if their husbands beat them. Cultural oppression had prevented most

women from becoming educated, Blanch explained, and since they were not able to read the Qur'an by themselves, they were *de facto* captured by the male interpretation.

By the second year, women started to move past this inner process to build interfaith coalitions, and started to see similarities between their own struggles and that of the other religious women. They organized a women's parliament with a Jewish feminist group, *Shin*, focusing on the issue of early marriage in Islam and Orthodox Judaism. Religious authorities were featured as speakers, and ultimately 150 men and women, Muslims and Jews, and several Christians attended. At this point, the Muslim women began to see parallels between their struggles within their religion and their Jewish sisters' within Judaism.

In the third year, the shift continued from an internal to an external focus, as women felt they could not complete their own empowerment process without their communities also transforming. Sixty residents attended a public lecture on the Qur'an and another thousand people attended an organized celebration for International Women's Day. Women who were involved stated that they felt an increasing comfort with their identities as Muslim women and as active, powerful women who can make a difference. One woman observed, "The one thing I learned is that I can be a good Muslim and a feminist too." The experience has been a struggle – with ups and downs, resistance and growth – but not a single woman has rejected her faith in the process.

The women started to address domestic violence, launching a process of questioning what they previously perceived to be unquestionable, spurring an empowering process to challenge all kinds of authorities. The question emerged: "What else in my life have I assumed had to be the case that does not have to be?" Women used phrases such as, "strength under the veil," to discuss the new balance they perceived was possible. Crucial to this process, Blanch said, was that secular Jewish women stayed in the background and did not impose their agenda (i.e. did not push the issue of domestic violence before the Muslim women wanted to discuss it); the initiative came from the Muslim women themselves.

The reactions of religious authorities to the program were positive with many voicing support for women's rights, but the women expressed some caution, concerned that male authorities might seek to use the movement (and the positive attention it has received in the media, etc.) as a way to stay in control. Offering support to women who are abused is, in some cases, a way of holding onto power. *Women Reborn* has struggled with this constant process of negotiating a real shift in power, not a stated shift in values.

The ensuing conversation highlighted the issue of domestic violence and early marriage (or "unsafe marriage") and ways to use religious argumentation to combat religiously justified practices that oppress women. Blanch explained that the process takes a long time, going beyond mere recognition that the Qur'an does not support abuse of any kind ("no harm" law). Women must also feel safe, and society must provide supportive structures that are culturally acceptable (safe houses are not) so that women have personal and external strength for change. However, religious argumentation still has a big role to play in combating domestic violence, Siljak-Spahic added, because they are provide good arguments that women can make to their husbands and families and have a chance of being accepted.

Difficulties in access to women who would benefit from such programs were discussed. Yusuf observed that the gatekeepers to the community, especially women, are men. This makes it necessary to form partnerships with men and to educate them on these issues. Blanch initially had to work through men, but once the program enabled women to socialize outside their extended family, they formed connections horizontally among themselves, and this provided paths to women who were formerly unreachable. Omar's experience confirmed this: her legitimacy in the women's eyes was based on whether she had gone through male leaders first; women were actively legitimizing male power in that way.

Theme Session Three: Creating and Cross Boundaries: Women's Experience with Interfaith and Secular-Religious Dialogue

Anjana Dayal de Prewitt explored a different kind of peacebuilding: trauma healing, and how interfaith dialogue and engagement are important where there has been violence across religious divides. Trauma, she argues, is caused not only by outright violence, but also by a loss of connection and hope; trauma healing aims to foster connection, hope, and forgiveness. By providing a safe space for women to express their feelings and make sense of what has happened to them, also from the viewpoint of their faith, they are more able to reconcile with it and move on. Using the idea that “by healing others, I am healed,” this long-term process aims to develop community-based healing strategies that result in sustainable peace. Local healing strategies and lessons from past experiences can help bring peace from the bottom-up. The interfaith component is vital because if Christian women can see that their struggles are similar to those of Muslim women, it provides a starting place for recovery and dialogue.

Manal Omar described her experiences in Iraq in 2003 and the Arab Spring; in both cases there is a survival instinct that responds to the vacuum created by trauma, with many types of people coming together, taking to the streets, and unifying for a short time. This opens the door to a whole new social contract to be forged at the peace table, so it is crucial that women be at the table; if women are absent, they are the ones who pay the price, and related issues are ignored. However, once the euphoria of the revolution winds down, women's groups begin to divide between secular and religious; they miss the ability to influence principles in the legal framework, as they argue about the specifics of that framework (religious or secular). This frustrating series of events has been repeated many times.

Omar takes three major lessons plus many questions. First, naming the tension and trying to work through it before it polarizes is crucial. In Iraq, when the first monolithic introduction of Islamic law was introduced, women unified to fight the law, organizing the first street protests after the fall of Saddam and the first petition to the inter-government council, which then repealed the law; this was a powerful example of what women can achieve, but afterward, Iraqi leaders referred to these women as “garbage bags” and “people walking in coffins,” highlighting a major double standard because no international organizations would support the opposite. Feminists react quickly to Afghanistan and lack of education, but they have no comment on France. *How can we address this double standard and work through the tensions to make women less vulnerable to manipulation by political leaders? How can we prepare women's leadership to fight against the temptation to be coopted by political parties?* In Libya, women are not qualified to lead, but men are not much more qualified either; the double standard prevails in that women are held to a higher standard.

Second, international organizations tend to phrase the debate in a polarized, oversimplified form: sharia or secular law. In many focus groups in Iraq and Libya, women choose Islamic law but sharia means different things to different people. Religion provides a space to challenge and ask; in the past there have seemed to be only two choices: either to defend or attack religion. However, there is something in between.

Third, trust-building needs to happen so that women can define their own issues. It is important not to jump into discussions of domestic violence before women have decided to address it; it took 16 months, in Omar's experience, of building trust by finding consensus on small issues for women to start discussing the Status Law issue. *How do we move these issues from the fringes to the mainstream, while also recognizing the red lines in a society?* Defining those red lines is difficult, especially since personal religion is involved. LGBT issues, sexual freedom, and the veil are current red lines, which, if crossed, raise emotional issues and lead to targeting of women's groups, but red lines also change (e.g. domestic violence), and there is a certain timeline and approach to these issues. *How do you allow the community to draw these red lines while gently pushing so you are not using cultural relativism?*

Jenkins summarized an underlying assumption that often divides secular feminist groups from more religious feminists or religious women who do not self-identify as feminists: that empowerment must involve some transformation that goes beyond the literal interpretation of religious texts. Religious women are often more aware that this assumption underpins discussions because it can suggest that their empowerment will involve something difficult for them, or something they do not endorse. As a result, many women are not coming to the table.

Responding to Beth Huse's (State Department) question about the extent that individual fear keeps women from stepping out and getting involved in the peace processes, Omar focused on women's fear that they are disobeying God. A practicing and pious person needs to know that what they are doing is right; empowerment can then be attractive. There is also another step of being willing to represent a community. Ogega remarked that other factors (structural, socioeconomic, etc.) may compound fears.

Lunch: Presentation by Susan Thistlethwaite: The Power of Women Religious Peacemakers is Open Source Power"

Susan Thistlethwaite focused on power: it must be included in any discussion about authority, religious or otherwise. Until women are involved in power structures, nothing will happen to alleviate poverty, no matter how great their grassroots influence. Their presence at the table, however, raises problems of tokenism and essentializing, if it is implied that women leaders (often elites) speak for millions. Until the female share of the power structure reaches 30 percent, problems of elitism, marginalization, essentializing, racism, classism, homophobia, essentializing Christianity, etc., will all remain. Women's involvement at the table also raises questions as to how peace is defined. There is an invisibility to peace, not just the women who are working for it; most of the time people do not realize that they are living in peace, that their social systems are structured to protect them from interpersonal or communal violence. As to how to define power, those who do not possess power have a better understanding of who has it and who does not; women thus know more than men about how power is working or not working for different people. Power is one person's ability to get another person to do what they want whether they agree or not; its definition assumes resistance. Further, power is defined by a weak/strong dualism, which is sustained often by violence against women. Given the way American society codes gender and sexual orientation as weakness, this is a macro issue. Violence against women is not peripheral to ideas of peace and war; it is central because it reinforces the idea that it is acceptable to beat the weak.

The nature of power is shifting, however, through the explosion of the internet and social media, which provide space for the many voices that have been marginalized to write the "source code". This "open source power" is a strategic opportunity for women, who already use this kind of multiple, diffuse power at the grassroots and community level. Social media also creates opportunities to redefine how many see themselves: transforming those who previously were people upon whom others acted, to agents of change who can have an impact on their surroundings and spheres.

Either way, the ways in which women engage religion and peacebuilding are not uniform: sometimes women change religion to build peace, and other times they enter into religion to use what they already believe to engage peacebuilding. Part of Thistlethwaite's experience as a woman religious leader and peace activist was to recognize that that role was possible. The problems are so multiple, multifaceted, and entrenched that there is no "magic bullet," but it is critical that women recognize those limitations, what peacemaking is, and the nature of power. **The struggle is to name the already existing sources of women's power in religiously-based peacebuilding, while asking how this can be maximized in the new power dynamic of social media, and in a way that does not let go of what has been learned from the margins.** Women possess a wealth of knowledge from the margins of society, primarily of who is in pain; that knowledge must be treated with integrity as women aim to capture the center.

During the ensuing discussion Blanch highlighted the historical context: women have been the property of men from the Code of Hammurabi 2,000 years ago, and it was not until 1964 that it was no longer legal in the US for a man to beat his wife, and it was not until 1984, that raping his wife was made illegal as well. The passage of the Violence Against Women Act in the 1990s was the first step toward any enforcement of these measures. Against this historical backdrop, Hayward highlighted promising news: there are now more women entering Christian and Judaic seminaries in the United States than men, meaning that there will be more women as heads of religious communities than men in the future.

Cusimano Love cited examples of women who are already working across the distinctions of formal and informal networks and encouraged participants to “name it and claim it,” and not look at relational power as second class power. Women need to document the work being done and their part in it; the other forms of power need to be engaged by women as well, but work in areas where women have comparative advantages, particularly from a faith-based perspective, should continue. Thistlethwaite emphasized the practice-norms approach: mapping what works in order to maintain women’s insider/outsider perspectives at both macro and micro levels.

Theme Session Four: Institutional and Denominational Experience: Religions for Peace, Global Peace Initiative of Women, Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, USIP

Outlining the approach of Religions for Peace (*RFP*), Ogega highlighted its multi-religious model. It aims to mobilize already existing networks as building blocks, rather than building new organizations and networks. Religions then work together on a common issue, e.g. HIV and AIDS or conflict, and through that common action they find a mechanism to build better relationships. A Global Women of Faith Network was created to provide a space for religious women to network and mainstream them into the nearly entirely-male, interreligious councils. RFP aims to achieve 30 percent representation of women of faith in interreligious councils, and highlights training, organizing, and convening women of faith. One such program, the Restoring Dignity Initiative, targets human rights issues within a religious framework. It is a rights-based approach but vocabulary is used carefully (“restoring dignity” as opposed to “human rights”) to prevent backlash from religious communities, while still intelligently handling the important issues. In this initiative, women serve as mediators and meet with rebels to negotiate peace. One combatant responded to a visiting woman of faith, saying she looked like his mother. Thus RFP can tap into trust. In this case the woman suggested that they pray together, ultimately negotiating the freedom of fifty child soldiers. Women work to engage religion in a unique way, to talk about their traumas, and build relationships through their struggles and experiences.

Speaking on Muslim peacebuilding initiatives in particular, Ayse Kadayifci contrasted assumptions about Islam and the realities: the perception that Islam oppresses women and is inherently violent sharply contradicting the rich peacebuilding principles laid out in Islamic texts, with examples of Muslim women as queens leading armies and being peace actors. Muslim women peacebuilders were most active in advocacy, education, and mediation (informal, mostly, and both inter- and intra-faith). However, their marginalization from the public sphere has been attributed to globalization and the pervasiveness of Western culture that creates a defensive posture in Muslim communities, fearing a loss of identity; histories of colonialism, which are often perceived to be perpetuated through globalization today; and a notion that feminism is a Western imposition.

Cusimano Love discussed the role women peacebuilders play in the Catholic Church, especially their work within large institutions, the Catholic hierarchical institutional structures (not as priests, but on the staff of bishops’ conferences), at the grassroots level, and within faith-inspired organizations (in education, healthcare, etc.). Women have a strong presence as institutional leaders in the functional arms of Catholic institutions; they are expanding the definition of leadership by strategically reclaiming the language. Some Catholic leaders courageously label themselves as feminists, but in doing so they become

vulnerable to male leaders, who get to decide whose theology counts. As a result, many Catholic women peacebuilders have used the traditional language and structures of the church to challenge the institutions, asking, “To what degree do you do what you say you do?” Many lay workers and women use the saints, particularly Mary, as a way to promote feminist theology in a way that cannot be made controversial in the traditional structure. Strategic use of language is central to legitimacy and success.

Women possess the “power of numbers”: there are 1.2 billion Catholics in the world, and only one pope and 5,000 bishops. She relayed the comment of one male leader that “we have no functional capacity in the field without the contributions of the work of women.” As a result, women have a great deal of autonomy to do work at the grassroots level; without the permission of their institutions, they design, plan, organize, and carry out programs. The question is, *how can we stand behind these women who are at the forefront, and do it in a way that looks to the strengths they bring that are supporting capacity and expanding definitions of power, as well as in a way that expands critical mass, without merely fighting against old categories of leadership?* Responding to a question on female ordination, Cusimano observed that many women are working towards formal ordination or the expansion of its definition, while others assert that in their baptism they were baptized as “a priest, prophet, and a king,” and therefore do not need additional permission; these women see themselves as priests though they do not wear the collar.

Hayward discussed her experience studying religious peacebuilding, particularly through the traditional religious leadership in Colombia. The male leadership was removed from the community because of their focus on institutions, while the women were in touch with the people’s needs and concerns. In this way, women have a more sophisticated understanding of conflict dynamics and are responding to the needs of victims, convening with armed actors because they are seen as trustworthy, non-threatening sisters. The question remains, however, *when to prevent separate initiatives from becoming ghettoized?* It seems to be a double-edged sword, in that it is created because a gap exists, but when it is created, it gives central institutions a way out of discussing these issues because the women are already doing it.

Closing session: Promising ideas, removing bottlenecks

In closing the two-day conference each participant was invited to state either one take-away from the sessions or suggestions on next steps.

- Kristen Lundquist (Institute for Global Engagement) emphasized multi-lateral, multi-disciplinary, and multi-sector engagement. It is important to be involved in formal peace processes and at the grassroots, and if legitimacy is at stake by not being a part of those high-level discussions, then the next step is to find ways to form more multilateral networks to secure a presence at the table.
- Thistlethwaite underscored her enhanced appreciation that the Catholic Church is not without dynamic women religious leaders. Where there is dynamism, there is effectiveness, but also roadblocks; the commonality is that women are not accepting the premise of the question.
- Kuehnast (USIP) saw an implicit hypothesis from the session that women, particularly women who are an integral part of religious communities, have insights that are not being reflected in standard narratives. We need to draw on wisdom from women that is missing. Second, to do this is complicated.
- Blanch suggested that potential solutions to these extremely complex situations are sometimes simple actions that can make a difference.

- Jenkins' take-away was that women on the ground need to be consulted to see what would work best to move women into the public sphere. Sometimes the first instinct (asking groups to bring women to the table) can cause major harm and create backlash. How can we prevent that from happening?
- Marie Dennis (Pax Christi) underlined the importance of making use of already existing relationships that are part of religious structures, citing integration of local people into international organizations. Those structures that simultaneously network, introduce global partners, and have a deep rootedness in local communities give crucial insights that enable appropriate responses in different contexts.
- Jean Duff cited the intentionality that must be used in not replicating power of inequalities, but instead in mining religious traditions for change and leveraging relational networks of ordained and non-ordained faith leaders.
- Kadayifci stressed the importance of making skillful alliances with men and religious leaders who can break boundaries. For Muslim women, male imams are the gatekeepers, and the direct and indirect messages they convey set the limits and possibilities in society.
- Siljak-Spahic agreed, noting the importance of male alliances, as well as positive relationships with priests, imams, and other women's organizations.
- Anwar advised caution in these male alliances; her experiences have revealed that men will often achieve more air-time in the press and continue to maintain the patriarchal system.
- Dayal de Prewitt encouraged the involvement of men, but expressed disappointment that men do not view these issues as important.
- Cusimano Love encouraged the group to consider: *what are religious women's comparative advantages?* Men have to guard institutional structures and women often do not have to, she said, which frees them to spend more time in service for the community. *What are the strengths in where women are located institutionally? What does that give the freedom to do that male counterparts cannot?* If the data that emerges consistently across surveys is true (that women across cultures, countries, age, class, etc. are more religious than men – in belief, activity, and attendance), she postured, then women need to be at the table because religion is their comparative advantage. She encouraged the group to present the challenge before any organization that would have an exclusively male engagement strategy, turning around what is often seen as weaknesses, as strengths and rationales for being present at the table.