



World Faiths  
Development  
Dialogue



## Women, Religion and Peace

A symposium organized by the World Faiths Development Dialogue, the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, and United States Institute of Peace

Georgetown University, July 7-8, 2010

### Meeting highlights

#### *Background and Objectives*

On July 7-8, 2010, development practitioners, scholars, and policy-makers met in Washington, D.C. to initiate a conversation about the ways in which women inspired by or linked to religion create and maintain peace.

The symposium was a partnership among the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, and United States Institute of Peace (USIP). Discussions were moderated by Katherine Marshall, Executive Director of WFDD, and Susan Hayward, Senior Program Officer in the Religion and Peacemaking Center of Innovation at USIP. The participants included representatives of a wide range of both secular and faith-inspired organizations, as well as scholars and grassroots peacebuilders from around the world. Preparations for the meeting focused on interviews with participants and with several invited colleagues who could not attend. Transcripts of the interviews were shared among the group in advance of the meeting, as was a background note that synthesized themes from the interviews. This background note will be expanded to include discussion from the conference and will be made publicly available in the coming months.

#### *Background*

Chester Gillis, Dean of Georgetown University, and Tara Sonenshine, Executive Vice President at USIP, provided opening remarks that highlighted the need to further understand the intersection of religion, women, and peacebuilding, and the place of this inquiry within both Georgetown and USIP's wider mission. Susan Hayward then described the project's genesis within her own experiences in the field. Although she had not entered the field of religious peacemaking with a focus on gender experiences and dynamics, she quickly became anxious about how far women's voices were marginalized in both theory and practice.

Kathleen Kuenhast, Gender Adviser at USIP, noted that increasing the role of women in peacebuilding, and understanding how religion can support their involvement, is crucial. While approximately 70 percent of casualties of conflict are civilians, most of whom are women and children, only about 2 percent of signatories to peace agreements are women. Furthermore, only

about 1 of 13 participants in peace negotiations have been women, and of 300 peace agreements negotiated since 1989, only 18 make reference to stopping sexual violence, though sexual and gender-based violence is well understood to be widespread and increasing.

Made clear in these opening comments is that religious women peacebuilders experience a double marginalization in their treatment from both the religious and secular peacebuilding fields. Within the academic and practical religious peacebuilding field, the failure to investigate and empower roles played by women is mostly due to the fact that formal leadership roles in most religious traditions are male-dominated. However, women have and do play critical, if mostly unrecognized, roles in active peacebuilding within their communities that draw upon religious ideas and institutions and that often reach across traditional lines of difference to create greater social cohesion. Within the larger secular peacebuilding field, while there has been an increased recognition of the critical roles women play in conflict situations, particularly in light of Security Council Resolution 1325,<sup>1</sup> their participation in peacebuilding remains insufficient and under-supported, and the religious context and faith motivations of female peacebuilders are not fully understood nor engaged.

In her opening remarks, Katherine Marshall laid out the symposium's agenda. The two-day symposium would open with framing remarks on the various nodes within the women, religion, and peacebuilding triad, provided by Scott Appleby, Kathleen Kuenhast, Azza Karam, and Manal Omar. Participants would then turn to regional experiences of women's religious peacebuilding, with each global region introduced by a few participants with experience in the area. Finally, drawing on themes and generalizations from the regional experiences, participants would formulate recommendations for policy makers, peace and women's organizations, academics, and donors for means to strengthen women's religious peacebuilding. The symposium was scheduled to close with a session open to the public in which participants would reflect on conclusions. This meeting summary follows this overall structure, highlighting the major issues that emerged during the two days of discussion.

### *Defining the Goal of Peace*

As Marshall stated at the beginning of the public session later in the symposium, "Through the many stories we have heard about what is important for building peace, women and men – but particularly women – take a view of peace that is about justice, about human rights, about sustainability, and that is thus far broader than just the absence of war. We have been grappling with how to define what we mean as peace, without becoming so broad as to lose focus."

In a similar vein, Scott Appleby, Director of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies and professor of history at University of Notre Dame, urged the group to avoid the term, "peacemaking" to define the mission of women religious peace activists. Instead, he encouraged use of the term "peacebuilding," which encompasses the complete set of practices

---

<sup>1</sup> On October 31, 2000, the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1325 (SCR1325), which focuses on women, peace, and security. SCR1325 recognized that armed conflict uniquely affects women, and that women have important roles to play in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and in building peace.

that counter the forces of violence and dehumanization. Peace cannot be made through negotiations; it is constantly being built within communities and structures.

Stories shared throughout the consultation reflected an overall consensus for this broader understanding of peace. The experiences and case studies discussed went beyond a narrow focus on women's roles in bringing together armed actors in support of ending war or their involvement in official peace negotiations. For example, Virginia Bouvier, Senior Program Officer at the Center for Mediation and Conflict Resolution at USIP, recalled being in a shantytown in Latin America and asking the community members what they were doing to build peace. They took her to a community center and pointed to it, as if to say, "This is what we are doing for building peace: creating spaces where people can come together." The examples of peacebuilding cited ran the gamut from experiences in creating educational and economic opportunities for marginalized communities to programs that support psycho-social healing for victims of war.

### *Gender and Peacebuilding: Analytical Needs and Challenges*

Participants observed again and again that in discussions of peacebuilding, positive and unique qualities are often attributed to women and their contributions to healing divided societies and raising educated children nurtured in religious teachings promoting peace, some of which derives from their use of "soft power." Yet participants also expressed a concern to avoid trapping women in gender stereotypes or making broad generalizations about women that gloss over contextual differences. Appleby, for example, insisted that these stereotypes can be a real danger if they posit marginality and dispossession as women's "gifts," and warned against promotion of a "soft power panacea." For his part, Tom Bamat, Senior Adviser at Catholic Relief Services, noted that his research has, somewhat surprisingly, revealed very little difference at the grassroots level in the processes men and women use to try to bring about peace; when they could act freely, men and women took similar actions in seeking peace.

Eschewing an assumption that all women serve as victims or peacebuilders in conflict regions, participants also recognized women's roles in perpetuating violence, such as through glorifying martyrdom, promoting religious teachings that legitimate violence, or directly taking up arms themselves. The reality of women's responses to conflict on-the-ground are varied, complex and beyond strict definition.

Appleby lamented that some work for peace in conflict environments – particularly "soft power" tactics such as dialogue initiatives– often does not translate into transformation of unjust or conflict-sustaining institutions and structures. In this vein, he urged that peacebuilding at every level be strategic, leveraging personal relationships into social change and political transformations, and asked, "Is there no room in hard, consequential, public religion for women who demand gender equity as the sine qua non of peace?" Similarly, Jacqueline Moturi Ogega, Director of the Women's Program at the World Conference of Religions for Peace, urged that instead of romanticizing women of faith, and seeing their influence as limited to the grassroots level, we must bring them to the table alongside other actors to ensure their voice is used to shape policy.

While being careful to avoid hard-and-fast generalizations or definitions that glorify women's marginalized state as the source of their influence, the conversation did reflect participants' observations of some of the unique contributions of female peacebuilders. Women in areas of conflict seem better able – or more willing -- to reach across religious and cultural divides and to find common ground. Andrea Blanch, President of the Center for Religious Tolerance, cited several examples of Jewish and Muslim women's engagement from Israel/Palestine, and Bilkisu Yusuf, journalist and Executive Director of the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria, spoke about Christian and Muslim women coming together to march in protest immediately following the first round of recent violence between the communities in Jos, Nigeria. Some voiced that this could be women's tendency to privilege relationship-building and communication. Many felt it was also in part due to the fact that women are perceived as less threatening by armed actors, and so can undertake some activities that might otherwise be seen as a threat to the agenda of armed actors. For this same reason, Amina Rasul-Bernardo observed that women can have an advantage as mediators. Ogega agreed, describing women in Sierra Leone who were able to negotiate successfully with rebels for the release of several child soldiers at a time when the efforts of the inter-religious council in Sierra Leone, made up of male religious leaders, had been frustrated. Mari Fitzduff, professor at Brandeis University, similarly recalled women using their "non-threatening-status" to great effect in Northern Ireland in support of ecumenical schools. But as Joyce Dubensky, Executive Vice President and CEO of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, reminded the group, echoing Appleby's earlier warning, this advantage has a flip side: women get audiences with primary actors in conflict situations because they are non-threatening, but they can lose leverage for that same reason.

Andrea Blanch described the roles women and spiritual practices play in the Middle East to promote healing in the face of long-term trauma. This work helps to stem and transform the psychological processes that lead to further violence.

Kathryn Poethig of California State University warned that the nurturing image of motherhood that is often appropriated by female peacemakers must be used in a way that does not disempower single women. On the other hand, Marianne Cusimano Love, professor of politics at Catholic University of America, stressed that we need to be careful about criticizing women for utilizing pathways to affect change that are often the only paths available to them, such as using their community authority as mothers. She framed the challenge for those seeking to empower women peacebuilders as discerning a means to respect and build on the work that many women are doing, and the mechanisms they've found to assert authority and effect change, while undertaking efforts to move to more strategic paths.

Participants' experiences in Latin America brought this dilemma into focus. Tom Bamat described the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, an association of women whose children had been "disappeared," who demonstrated in front of the Casa Rosada (the presidential palace) at a time when men could not because of security threats. Bamat described this group as taking advantage of stereotypes and patriarchal taboos, turning victimhood to active agency. Bouvier observed that the image of women holding pictures of their dead or disappeared child has been powerful throughout Latin America, but a problem emerges post-conflict when women's roles become solidified as mothers during times of conflict: they often become marginalized from the public sphere when democracy emerges, relegated back to their place in

the home as mothers. She pointed out that in giving increased visibility to women's victimization by war, we need to ensure that women are not disenfranchised and made to feel helpless. They need to be empowered as citizens, and a pre-requisite to their active political involvement is economic and psychosocial support. Bamat and Bouvier discussed the roots of this empowerment during times of crisis, when women often take on leadership roles to fill their communities' needs. The key is to ensure that these women do not become disempowered when soldiers and traditional leaders return home.

### *Invisibility: Benefits and Drawbacks*

A major impetus for the meeting was a concern about the "invisibility" of female peacebuilders who intersect with religion in their work within both the secular and religious peacebuilding worlds of theory and practice. Many participants pointed out the different ways that women's peace efforts "fly under the radar," but Azza Karam, Senior Advisor on Culture at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), noted that this invisibility is sometimes consciously maintained by women to ensure their safety or the effectiveness of their work. She recalled her frustration when meeting with women religious actors who said they were not interested in the limelight, but only wanted more resources to continue quietly doing their work. Karam emphasized that those from the outside seeking to support women religious peacebuilders must be sensitive to some women's desire to maintain their invisibility for the sake of their work or security.

Other participants echoed this point, but also drew attention to the drawbacks of invisibility, both in providing role models to new generations of women and attracting adequate funding. Those who work invisibly will not be seen by funding organizations and other outsiders, and so may not receive financial or skill-training support to strengthen their work. A balance must be achieved between seeing these individuals and organizations in order to strengthen their work and increase their impact, while also respecting the degree to which they want their identity promoted in academic research or in the promotional activity of outside organizations.

### *Engaging Religion in Peacebuilding*

Within the field of policy and international relations, religion was often seen exclusively as a source of conflict in the past. More recently, it has been held up as a path to conciliation. The group cited situations that highlighted both the complex role religion plays in promoting both peace and violence – often within the same conflict environment.

Karen Torjesen, professor of Women's Studies at Claremont University, urged the group to pay attention to the diversity within religious traditions, and pointed to the benefits of *intra*-religious dialogue, bringing together networks from the left, right, and center of individual religious traditions. Carla Thompson, an ordained Episcopal priest and former police officer who works in the Haiti Relief program at the U.S. Department of State, spoke of the power of interpretation within religious traditions, and so the power wielded by those who interpret religious texts for a community, and so shape individual and social behavior. As others acknowledged, interpretation is not only the purview of ordained clergy and scholars, but is also undertaken by lay people

within families and communities. Filiz Odabas-Geldiay of the Art of Living Foundation argued that those interested in building up religious support for peacebuilding must promote those religious leaders who support a moderate/progressive vision of religion.

Dena Merriam, founder of the Global Peace Initiative for Women, commented that we need to balance intra-faith work with a model in which faith groups come together to do humanitarian work to avoid the suspicion associated with single-religion missionary work. Katherine Marshall noted that working across faiths can open some leadership doors for women by taking them outside of traditional structures.

Manal Omar, Director of Iraq Programs at USIP, brought up the issue of using religious leaders to gain legitimacy for various peace or development programs, saying, “There is no difference between religious leaders and other decision makers: both can be lobbied.” She described a time she had trouble with women not joining an education program, and so went to a religious leader asking him to look at the program. He then issued a fatwa that it was not only legitimate but required for women to be educated and to join this program.

Afeefa Syeed, Senior Advisor at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Middle East and Asia Bureaus, responded that the experience of USAID has been similar, but that some religious leaders objected to being used instrumentally by foreign governments and organizations. Instead of just being brought in at the end to lend support, religious leaders have often expressed the view that they wanted to be part of developing the project, and to lend the voices of their constituencies to the project development. She described a program USAID runs in Egypt, working with priests and imams on maternal health. In that program, the religious leaders, because of their social position, are able to describe trends they see in their communities, and USAID can build the project based on that.

While engagement of religious leaders was discussed as an important strategy, the group also pointed out that this focus can marginalize women, who are excluded from the religious leadership in many traditions. Nevertheless, women do in fact have authority in shaping religious traditions, interpretations, and attitudes, and we have to be more aware of the ways in which they do this. As an example, some cited cases of women writing sermons for male religious leaders to preach in places where women cannot take up the pulpit. Examples cited pointed to the fact that this tactic is employed particularly in instances where the topic being addressed by the sermon is something more directly related to women. Others pointed to women’s participation in religious schools, their heavy involvement in local worship activities, their roles in shaping children’s religious motivations and understandings, and their leadership roles in social arms of religious institutions. Love remarked on the prominent role women play in leadership roles within Catholic social organizations, despite their marginalization from the central Catholic hierarchy. Love urged that in order to encourage greater consideration of women’s roles in religious peacebuilding, we need to move away from a framing of “religious leader engagement” and toward “religious community engagement.”

### *Religious Feminism*

A lively conversation was had around the topic of religious feminism. Appleby asked about the continued presence and relevance of historical feminist streams of thought and advocacy. He wondered if it was possible to retrieve these paradigms to embolden a new generation of women religious peacebuilders and to challenge religious interpretations that marginalize women from peacebuilding work.

Speaking to the academic realm, Poethig noted that there is often little conversation between scholars focused on feminist religion and those focused on religion and conflict/peacebuilding. There is a need to braid these academic conversations together. Omar, Karam, and others discussed the backlash against feminist and religious feminist paradigms in the practitioner world. Omar noted that it's not the ideas that are often rejected, but the individuals who promote those ideas who have been discredited. They pushed ideas forward, but younger Muslim women in the Middle East often seek to avoid identification. Karam noted that the secular feminist world often tends to be discomfited by feminist voices that engage religion, and vice versa. This divide hamstring the overall movement to empower women, and so must be divided. Omar affirmed the need to preserve a "middle ground" for women to be both faithful and proponents of women's empowerment.

Merriam noted that for women's groups, she often finds that the "divine feminine" is a fruitful subject for discussion. When the image of the divine becomes female, the paradigm shifts, and conversations about power and values change.

There appeared to be recognition of the need to document and better understand the ways in which religious narrative in different traditions are used to promote women's active role in peacebuilding: what stories are drawn upon, and practices used, that motivate women to take up leadership roles in peacebuilding? How are women participating in interpretive practices within their traditions and how is that reshaping them? There is a need for understanding the interpretations of religion that prize women's active role in political and social processes, to recognize the dynamism within religious traditions. The stories of female leaders within religious traditions serve not only as models for women, but can serve as a counter-argument to men within traditions that seek to limit women's active role.

### *Gender-based and Sexual Violence*

Many participants pointed out that any discussion of women, religion, and peace must touch upon issues surrounding gender-based and sexual violence, which constitutes a significant and growing aspect of armed conflict around the world.

Bouvier suggested that there is a need for more research on the relationship between war and domestic violence. She lamented that Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration policies have often failed to bring in gender-related issues, including not only the need for support tailored to the needs of female former combatants (some of whom were used as sex slaves, some of whom served as armed fighters), but to consider the impact on women when combatants return home. There must be steps taken to stem the often rising tide of domestic violence that accompanies the return of ex-combatants to local communities. She pointed out the ways in

which domestic violence can fuel continued and future violence: boys and girls are more likely to join armed groups if there is violence at home.

Bilkisu Yusuf raised the importance of working with security forces to rethink the way they approach gender-based violence. Others wondered what role religious communities have or should play in reducing sexual and gender based violence. Participants noted the sources within religious traditions that promote gender inequality and may perhaps contribute to creating an environment in which violence against women becomes the norm, Ogega and Sayeed mentioned a USAID funded program in which Religions for Peace developed a training manual for religious leaders to become engaged in reducing gender and sexual based violence, and recognized the need to expand the involvement of religious resources in addressing this issue. Dekha Ibrahim, Trustee of the Coalition for Peace in Africa (COPA) and of NOMADIC, observed that a female champion is often needed to break the silence about gender-based violence, and so women religious peacebuilders can play an important role in mobilizing religious resources in support of reducing sexual violence and to bring healing and support to victims.

#### *Providing Support for Female Peacebuilders: Recommendations for Policy and Research*

Participants noted that the lack of awareness and understanding of religious peacebuilding initiatives led by women has led to a lack of support. Despite the breadth of experiences and insights the group brought to the discussion, many noted that there remain significant gaps of information and systematic case studies of women religious peacebuilding. Without more coordinated information on this work around the world, it will be difficult to effectively and sensitively enhance the role of women in peacebuilding who leverage religious resources in their work. The group thus agreed that there is a priority need for further mapping exercises to provide a better understanding of the terrain of existing resources, initiatives, best practices and effective actors in the field. Furthermore, it is important to highlight which religious resources -- what teachings, practices, rituals, and institutional resources – are used to strengthen and support the peace work of women. These findings must be disseminated effectively to inform practitioners and outside supporters. There is also a need to bring feminist academic lenses into conversation with religious peacebuilding theory and analysis, and to document contemporary streams of religious feminism that may differ from historical trends.

Women’s initiatives and needs are often peripheral to religious and traditional peacebuilding. There is a need for greater support for women involved in their work – including not only financial resources but also training for skills-development in conflict resolution, organizational management, social change, and leadership in order to increase the effectiveness of their work. Ideally, this support should be mainstreamed into traditional peacebuilding efforts rather than treated as a side project or initiative in order to ensure greater coordination and effect.

Ogega pointed out that the international peacebuilding community tends to define expertise in a way that values formal education and devalues local experience and knowledge. She urged the group to consider how to foster amongst internationals a respect for local knowledge, including particularly local women. Dee Aker, Deputy Director of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ) at the University of San Diego, affirmed that in order to bring effective and

representative women to the negotiating table, we first have to listen at the local level to what women are doing and what their concerns are. In other words, the stance of outsiders seeking to support women religious peacebuilders should be consultative and non-presumptuous, while still seeking to push the envelope of what is available to these actors.

The issue of the extreme stress and trauma female peacebuilders experience was raised, and of the subsequent need to provide support beyond financial resources to ensure women are able to keep doing important and difficult work. Bouvier urged that funders be responsible for providing follow up and support for peacemakers in legal aid, psycho-social support, and physical sanctuary when necessary. Ibrahim noted the existence of such a sanctuary in Kenya, which might serve as a model to be replicated elsewhere.

The group also touched upon the importance of men supporting these issues. Ibrahim stressed that we need to work with men that will bring women's issues to the table, noting that women do not always support a woman's agenda. Kuehnast cited the importance of branding initiatives that focus on women's experiences and roles in a way that engages men.

Another point of agreement was on the important roles that effective networks of regional women involved in religion and peace can serve. Among other functions, networks are a powerful means to help share information and ideas, and to provide support – both emotional and tangible – for female religious peacebuilders and educators across the globe. Many participants observed that women can learn from the experiences and efforts of other women in conflict situations across the globe, and so called for more avenues at both local and international levels for women religious peacebuilders to network in a manner that is collaborative and coordinated.

Consensus was reached on the importance of mainstreaming religious women into peacebuilding conversations and institutions. This is needed within the sectors of religious peacebuilding, secular peacebuilding, and secular women's peacebuilding. Participants recognized that religious groups must be linked with secular organizations in order to increase the effectiveness of both, and noted with concern a growing gulf between secular and religious women's movements and organizations that must be bridged. Bridges can be forged between these realms through collaboration on specific issues, such as anti-corruption or poverty-reduction.

Participants stressed how great is the need to ensure engagement with gender issues in all non-governmental and governmental agencies that deal with foreign affairs and peacebuilding, down to the level of foreign ministry offices based overseas. The same standard goes for religious institutions and faith-based organizations involved in peacebuilding initiatives at formal and local levels. There is simply no substitute for having significant numbers of women at all tables where policies and practices are shaped and decided. In this vein, a few participants suggested the development of a general code of ethics for peacebuilding that would include language about the inclusion of women and women's groups, as a way of ensuring that all actors recognize the gender-related issues involved in peacebuilding.