

POLICY BRIEF | VISITING SCHOLAR SERIES

BETWEEN RELIGIOUS PATRIARCHY AND SECULAR FEMINISM: WOMEN OF FAITH AND THE PRACTICE OF PEACEBUILDING

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Modern international relations theory and its correlative system of laws, organizations, and diplomatic efforts have long been accused of insufficient attention to the religious dimensions of national and international politics and decision-making. This gap in understanding has had significant repercussions, leading to failures on behalf of the international community, particularly the West, to anticipate and respond to religiously-inspired revolutionary or violent movements, to partner effectively with faith-based actors and organizations, or to bring into conversation the normative aspects of the international system, including human rights law, with religious and cultural frames. The “secular bias” in an international system born out of Enlightenment-era Western Europe was absorbed into the theory and practice of conflict resolution as developed particularly in post-World-Wars Europe, leading to insufficient understanding of the religious dimensions of conflict and peace. Meanwhile, international relations and conflict resolution practice has reflected a gender bias that privileges the experiences and priorities of men and that marginalizes women from decision-making. While great strides have been taken in recent decades to correct these gaps in understanding and practice, reflected and motivated by the passage of myriad UN Security Council resolutions, the creation of non-governmental organizations, and the establishment of foreign policy offices and priorities focused on women and religion, rarely do these two streams of effort overlap. The subfield of religious peacebuilding has tended to focus on the experiences and efforts of male clerics across traditions. The women, peace, and security sub-field has tended to privilege the experience and leadership of secular-oriented women. As a result, women of faith involved in peacebuilding efforts have “fallen through the cracks,” often rendered invisible and unengaged despite extraordinary work they are doing worldwide, across religious traditions, to transform violence. This must be remedied. Women religious peacebuilders bring particular skills and insights that can enrich the peace agenda and ensure a more sustainable peace.

Illuminating the work of religious women peacebuilders across the world and across religious traditions reveals several broad themes to, and takeaways from,

their efforts. First, they tend to engage across lines of identity difference – including conflict divides -- to create coalitions that can exert greater political and social influence in advocacy efforts with armed groups and the state. These diverse coalitions, often grounded in shared faith motivations and solidarity in experiences of suffering, also help to transform social (including religious) prejudices. Second, in addition to sculpting narratives out of their religious traditions that challenge and transform exclusion and violence, they also lift-up religious narratives that affirm and defend the experience of women in violent conflict and their own agency as community leaders to those who would challenge their social and political leadership. In other words, they argue from within their faith traditions to defend women’s dignity and leadership and so challenge gender inequality or violence against women justified by religious reference. Third, they seek to draw attention to issues of sexual, gender, and domestic forms of violence and trafficking that affect women and young people in particularly acute ways in wartime, ensuring these critical issues are central on the peace agenda. Their work to address this issue often includes both advocacy for accountability and prevention, as well as psycho-social and spiritual support and protection to survivors. Finally, women religious leaders often are rendered invisible – operating under-the-radar of armed actors, community leaders, and national and international practitioners and policymakers, who see them as politically impotent or non-threatening. These women will use their invisibility in strategic ways – to gain access to sensitive areas, negotiate for the release of hostages, and engage in activities that might otherwise be socially and politically risky. However, their invisibility also means they face hurdles in terms of getting knowledge and financial resources, networking globally, and feeding into negotiated political agreements to restructure the state post-conflict. To correct this issue, peacebuilding practitioners and policymakers must seek out these women religious peacebuilders to provide them crucial support while respecting their “strategic invisibility,” engaging them in ways that are sensitive to how they navigate gatekeepers within their tradition and community, while still ensuring that their critical insights and priorities are included on the peace agenda.

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