

This Policy Brief is based on an event held in New York on March 11, 2014, entitled “*Involving Religious Leaders for Women’s Rights: Innovative Practices and Challenges from the Field*”, and builds upon recommendations formulated by women’s activists from 21 countries, during two Consultations on “*(Inter)faith-based Peacebuilding: The Need for a Gender Perspective*” (2010 & 2013), organized by the Women Peacemakers Program (WPP).

Contributors:

**Carolyn Boyd Tomasović**  
Managing Director  
Ecumenical Women’s  
Initiative (Croatia)

**Patricia Ackerman**  
Director of the Women and  
Gender Studies program at  
the City College of New  
York (USA)

**Akinyi R. Walender**  
Director Women’s  
Leadership for Peace and  
Security Programme,  
Cordaid (The Netherlands)

**Anthony Keedi**  
Program Coordinator  
ABAAD- Resource Center for  
Gender Equality

**Isabelle Geuskens**  
Executive Director Women  
Peacemakers Program (The  
Netherlands)

Politicians, media, and public opinion are giving considerable attention to the role that religion plays during situations of conflict, especially when this manifests itself in the rise of religious fundamentalisms and the consequent erosion of women’s rights. Less attention is given to the many examples when religion plays an important role in promoting peace and human rights.

### Gender, religion and peace: two sides

It is the experience of WPP that many women activists find support in their religious beliefs and spirituality, which often sustain them to continue their challenging and dangerous work for peace and women’s rights. Religion can also provide opportunities for women, in terms of education, activism and collective action, empowering women to make their own choices in their lives.

However, religion can also act as a serious obstacle to activists. Religious institutions play a significant role in generating and perpetuating patriarchal structures and norms that subordinate women.

On a worldwide scale, religious leaders criticize women activists for becoming involved in public life and political issues. Women are prevented from active involvement in decision-making processes and during faith-based peace initiatives, as this domain tends to be dominated by male religious leaders. When religious leaders set the peace agenda, women’s needs, rights and concerns risk getting overlooked. At worst, women are undermined completely. This is not only a great obstacle for women peacemakers; it undermines sustainable and effective peacebuilding in the long term, and affects society as a whole.



### Rising challenges and the need to address them

On policy level, there is increased attention to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and the need to include a gender perspective in peacebuilding processes is recognized. More attention to the opportunities and challenges in relation to integrating a gender perspective in faith-based peacebuilding is needed.

Religious fundamentalism is a global phenomenon characterized by a rise in multi-religious strategizing, specifically to undermine the gender equality movement. Human rights language is frequently co-opted to advance the fundamentalist agenda. Religious fundamentalist actors use people’s unmet needs as well as the high levels of dissatisfaction and frustration caused by persistent and increasing inequalities and conflict as an opportunity to expand their agenda.

In divided societies, including on the basis of religion, women’s local initiatives for reconciliation and co-existence are often undermined and branded as unpatriotic. This limits women’s voices and space to advance the peace and human rights agenda.

When dominant powers use religion to maintain control and justify violence against others, the message of peace, present in every religion, is sidelined. As conservative and fundamentalist views dominate the public discourse, progressive religious interpretations are increasingly silenced.

Progressive religious women and theologians face opposition in their religious institutions and communities. They often work in isolation and struggle to translate their progressive theology into community activism. In addition, there is a disconnection between secular feminist organizing and the organizing of progressive women working within religious settings.

*“My dream is to see religion as playing a role in peace and justice and no longer being used for destruction”*

*“To achieve change, we need to invest in people who can provide alternatives, who can go beyond the notion of only criticizing or banning religion as the solution for addressing religious fundamentalism.”*

With special thanks to:



## Recommendations:

### 1. Support progressive religious voices:

- Feminist theologians and women activists of faith have a **powerful potential to challenge patriarchy and fundamentalism in faith communities from within**. Through support and solidarity they become part of a transformative process to eradicate patriarchy and other structural injustices that feed gender biases, including homophobia, violent conflict and fundamentalism.

- By investing in activist spaces, through **education and capacity building**, the voices of religious scholars, feminist theologians and women activists of faith can be amplified.

- To ensure attention for women's equal participation and leadership within religious institutions and societies, **women need to be motivated to use their voice and decision-making agency** to promote their ideas about gender, religion & peace.

### 2. Invest in building bridges:

- Faith-based peacebuilding need not be isolated; **bridges can be built between (inter)faith-based women activists and secular women activists**, based on common goals and values, to work together for the women's rights agenda and gender-sensitive peacebuilding.

- **Involve and support progressive male religious leaders as allies** in women's work for gender justice and gender-sensitive peacebuilding; their views are influential in the community, and they can act as role models to other men.

- Explore practical ways to **involve religious clergy at parish level and other members of religious institutions** in civil society initiatives. Although religious hierarchy can block cooperation, clergy "on the ground" are some of the most open for dialogue, as they share the reality of their communities.

### 3. Analyze the dynamics of fundamentalism and invest in language of peace:

- With religious fundamentalism being a global phenomenon, secular and faith-based civil society needs to **analyze the political economy behind the emergence of fundamentalist beliefs** and movements, and **organize on all political levels** (International, regional and local) to address the undermining of human rights, in particular women's rights.

- **Make use of local cultural and religious teachings** to advocate for women's equality and support progressive religious leaders and women activists in their **work with youth** both via secular and religious schools. Awareness of local progressive teachings and youth who have a balanced education about religions are two mechanisms to counter the fundamentalist agenda.

- **Create opportunities for engagement at UN level and invest in the language of peace** - through nonviolent communication and dispute resolution processes - to counter religious hate speech and fundamentalist claims and arguments.

### 4. Create an enabling and safe environment for progressive religious voices:

- Progressive religious leaders often face threats to their personal security. This comes from within and outside of religious communities, from state and non-state actors. States need to exercise due diligence to **ensure that the human rights of progressive religious leaders and faith-based advocates are upheld** and they can exercise their beliefs free of persecution and fear.

- Media need to be more balanced in reporting on religious fundamentalism. Proponents of fundamental views receive a disproportionate amount of media coverage. **Media campaigns showcasing religious leaders supportive of women's rights and peace** are an important tool to counter weight the dominance of religious fundamentalisms in the media.