

*(Inter)faith-based Peacebuilding*  
**The Need for a  
Gender Perspective**



**An International Consultation  
Organized by the  
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**WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM**  
International Fellowship Of Reconciliation



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The Women Peacemakers Program (WPP) is a program of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR). IFOR is an international, interfaith movement of socially engaged citizens committed to active nonviolence as a tool for social transformation.

IFOR's mission is to empower civil society through active nonviolence and to promote cultures of peace based upon the values of tolerance, inclusion, co-operation, and equality. As an interfaith movement for peace and active nonviolence, IFOR has a 90-year history of practical experience and knowledge of how religion can be a positive resource for peacebuilding and justice. Started in 1997, the Women Peacemakers Program endeavors to support women activists who are working for peace and justice through active nonviolence.



*Without peace, development is impossible, and without women,  
neither peace nor development can take place.*

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# I. Background and Rationale



With an estimated 70% of the world's population being believers in one or another of the world's major religions, the role that religion plays in conflict situations is receiving more and more attention. While its role in peacebuilding and conflict is still a relatively new field of academic study and research, the media and public opinion are giving considerable attention to the negative role that religion plays in conflict (e.g. the increased tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in the West or the communal violence in India). The rise of religious fundamentalisms (e.g. the Taliban in Afghanistan or the Christian Right in the USA) and the threat they pose for the human rights of women are also receiving much attention.

Less attention is given to the many historical examples of how religion can play a positive role in promoting peace and human rights (e.g. the Civil Rights Movement in the USA or the role of the Catholic Church in the People's Power movement against Marcos in the Philippines) and to the successes of interfaith cooperation (e.g. the joint peace efforts undertaken by Imams and Christian ministers in Nigeria, the cooperation between Hindu and Christian communities in the 2002 strikes in Madagascar or the joint reconstruction efforts by Muslims, Jews, Orthodox and Roman Catholics in Bosnia).

Women have an important role to play in such initiatives. Whether working within their own faith communities or engaging in multi-faith dialogue, women of faith are often among the first to engage in peacebuilding efforts. A well-known example of interfaith-based work for peace by women is the Liberian women's peace movement, in which Christian and Muslim women worked together to end the bloody civil war in Liberia (2003).

Women peace activists use the common values that are present in many religions, such as love and the respect for human dignity, to build bridges and work towards peace for all. It is the experience of IFOR/WPP that many women

activists become involved in peacebuilding because of values such as tolerance and respect for diversity. Many find support for such values, and are often sustained in their dangerous work for peace, in their respective religious beliefs and spirituality.


Nonetheless, religion can also act as a serious obstacle to women peacebuilders. Women peace activists struggle with the fact that they are often criticized for becoming involved in public debates by male religious leaders, whose interpretations of religious texts support the exclusion of women from public life. The patriarchal nature of religion also hinders the active involvement of women in faith-based and interfaith peace initiatives on a leadership level, as those levels are generally dominated by male religious leaders. This is not only a great obstacle for women peacemakers; it is also undermines sustainable and effective peacebuilding in the longer term and hence affects society as a whole.



**“We need to look at gender injustice in our communities. As women, even if we fight dictators and establish democracy, the oppression of women and girls can continue. Women cannot own land and women have a low status within the family, where they operate as servants. Many of our religions reinforce this view of women as inferior.”** – Netsai Mushonga, Zimbabwe, at the WPP Intercontinental Consultation, 2005

The current thinking on the role that religion can play in peacebuilding often lacks a gender perspective. So far, the need to engender the discourse on religion and peacebuilding – including the point at which religion, women’s rights and peacebuilding intersect – has received little attention.

As the tenth anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) was approaching, IFOR/WPP felt that the momentum was there to merit highlighting the work done by women peacebuilders from within the different faith traditions, as well as to support the inclusion of a gender perspective in faith-based peacebuilding. It was against this background that IFOR/WPP decided to organize its International Consultation “(Inter)faith-based Peacebuilding: The Need for a Gender Perspective”.



The Consultation was held from 13-15 September, 2010, in Nicosia, Cyprus and brought together 35 women activists from 21 different countries, representing a variety of religion-inspired and secular organizations. The group consisted of a mix of progressive female theologians, women’s-rights activists and grassroots peacebuilders. The main goal of the Consultation was to create a safe space for the women to formulate their own analysis as well as to come up with recommendations in terms of advancing a gender perspective in faith-based peacebuilding.

This report provides the reader with an impression of what was discussed during the Consultation days, along with the recommendations and follow-up actions as formulated by the participants. In view of the participants’ security, the group agreed that no names or pictures would be included in this report.

## II. Objectives



Prior to the Consultation, participants completed an application form on which they could indicate their expectations of the Consultation, any important discussion topics they felt needed to be addressed and what they could offer in terms of workshop sessions. This initial input helped to inform the program design of the three-day Consultation.

The overarching goal of the Consultation was to create a safe space that would support women activists from different religious traditions in formulating their own analysis and in coming up with recommendations on how to integrate a gender perspective in faith-based peacebuilding.

The specific objectives of the Consultation included:

- assessing and analyzing the point at which religion, gender, and peacebuilding intersect;
- mapping out the positive and negative aspects of religion in relation to gender and peacebuilding;
- adding a gender perspective to the current discussions on (inter)faith-based peacebuilding.

The Consultation aimed to generate:

- an in-depth analysis of the intersection of gender, religion, and peacebuilding;
- a deeper insight into and an updated overview of the current (best) practices in relation to the topics of religion, peacebuilding, and gender;
- a collective post-consultation strategy.

The Consultation group consisted of representatives of all the five world religions – Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism – as well as secular women. It included progressive female theologians, women's-rights activists and grassroots peacebuilders from 21 countries

around the world.<sup>1</sup> The majority of those who were invited to take part came from conflict or post-conflict countries, but there were also a number of representatives from global and regional organizations that are working directly with activists from those contexts. This brought to the Consultation a wealth of experience and perspectives that helped to generate in-depth and multi-angle discussions.

The Consultation days consisted of a combination of plenary sessions (mornings) and interactive workshops (afternoons). The participants' own expertise and experiences informed the different sessions, with the facilitator, Diana Francis,<sup>2</sup> leading the process of joint analysis and learning. Using a gender lens, the participants analyzed the multiple roles that religion plays, both in terms of women's rights and within current conflicts. Women activists who are working for peace and justice within their religious traditions shared some of their successes, as well as some of the obstacles they have encountered in their work. The group then brainstormed about how to overcome those obstacles, formulating several recommendations and action points for policy makers, academics, civil society organizations, women activists, and donors.

1 Participants came from Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Canada, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Israel, Kashmir, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, Macedonia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Nepal, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Palestine, the Philippines, Sweden, and the United States.

2 Diana Francis has worked as a consultant on conflict transformation with local activists in Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. She is a former president of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR) and was chair of the Committee for Conflict Transformation Support. She has written several publications on issues of war and peace, including *People, Peace and Power* (2002); *Rethinking War and Peace* (2004) and *From Pacification to Peacebuilding: A Call to Global Transformation* (2010).



Upon the conclusion of the Consultation, the participants emphasized the importance of remaining connected as a group. They had felt safe and supported in each other's company, and they wanted to continue this experience once back home, where many of them work in very challenging and dangerous settings. For the immediate term, it was decided to create a Google group that would serve to support the continued exchange of experiences, resources and updates among the participants. For the longer term, the WPP will further integrate the Consultation network, insights and outcomes in its 2011-2015 program focus.

In what follows, we offer a consolidated overview of each day of the Consultation, including some of the participants' personal reflections and experiences. We also provide suggestions for action and recommendations.





## III. Day-to-day Impressions



**September 13**

### Discussing Gender and Religion

The first day started with a welcome by the WPP, during which the background to, rationale for and objectives of the Consultation were shared with the participants. The facilitator, Diana Francis, then explained how on the first day the group would be looking at the nexus *gender and religion*, discussing both the negative aspects of religion in relation to women's rights and women's activism, and considering how religion can be a positive factor in women's lives and a driving force in women's peace activism.

As an activity to help break the ice, she asked participants to take a piece of paper and use it to create an image of themselves or of an aspect of their identity that they considered important to share with the group. Those portraits were then put on the wall for display throughout the Consultation days.

The group then moved to a discussion of the ground rules for the Consultation proceedings. Those served to create a safe space in which people could discuss the Consultation topics.

#### 1. Brainstorm session on gender and religion

After the introductory session the group split up into smaller groups in order to discuss the theme of the first day: Gender and religion. A list of questions was put up on a flipchart by the facilitator as to guide the discussions within the subgroups:

#### Discussion questions: Gender and religion

- 1 What are some of the major obstacles in relation to gender posed by religion in your context?
- 2 How are women's rights specifically affected in this regard?
- 3 Which obstacles do women's rights/gender activists face in their work (please focus on the relation with religion)?
- 4 Which strategies are used to overcome those obstacles (focus on best practices)? Which advances have been made/which setbacks have there been?
- 5 What is required in terms of overcoming the main obstacles/what is currently lacking?
- 6 Which positive dimensions does religion/spirituality bring to women's lives and more specifically to the lives of women activists?



An impression of the discussions that went on within the subgroups follows below.

In one group, the discussion quickly turned to how religion and daily life are closely intertwined. The group agreed that patriarchy exists in every religion and has spilled over into non-religious spheres, manifesting itself for example in the fact that all over the world, women are still earning less than men working in the same job.

An activist from India shared how the Dalit community experiences serious discrimination in Hindu society, being

seen as the lowest caste and as “untouchables”. For the women in that caste, that means double marginalization: as a Dalit *and* as a woman. The activist shared how the Dalits have started to organize themselves to claim their rights, with some deciding to become Buddhists as a way of stepping out of the discriminatory caste system. She shared that she has personally experienced more equality between men and women in Buddhism, but that patriarchy also exists here.

The participants agreed that it is not so much religion in itself that discriminates against women, but rather the interpretation of religion that tends to do that. *Religious interpretation* – no matter where you live in the world – is very much intertwined with cultural traditions and practices, with few people daring to question or challenge things. A participant from Madagascar shared how she was born into a Christian community where you were expected to just accept and internalize what people told you. There was no one to turn to with your questions and hardly any space for challenging things... She explained how internalized fear played a big role in all this: the fear of punishment and of going to hell. Asking questions in this climate meant that you needed to be very strong, since, as she put it: “You need to accept not being accepted.” There had been times when she had wondered whether it was all worth it: “It is sometimes hard to visualize the change you are aiming for, since you are up against a very organized structure.” She did not know whether women should focus on working for change within oppressive religious environments or whether they should step out and focus on creating new – parallel – structures. With that statement, she voiced a dilemma that would emerge repeatedly during the Consultation. She concluded: “I think we as women are still not clear on what it is that we want and how to construct that.”

The participants also discussed *how politics, culture, and religion all reinforce each other in relation to the oppression of women*. A participant from Kashmir shared that women whose husbands have gone missing (often they have been taken by the security forces) have started to hold vigils and sit-ins, bringing together thousands of women to demand clarity on what has happened to the men. Those women, so-called half-widows, have no certainty about the fate of their husbands, as there are no bodies to be able to prove they are dead. As they are not considered to be widows, religious tradition does not allow them to remarry for at least seven years. This has many consequences, with the half-widows ending up living in poverty. Not being allowed to remarry means that there is no one to support them

in taking care of their families. Nor does the government provide them with any support as their husbands are considered to be anti-government actors.

A participant from Palestine shared how *women are only allowed to play a very limited role in her church*: “They are allowed to collect the money but may not hold the cross, as they are considered *unclean*.” Often these women are not aware of the fact that they have rights, and thus they also contribute to the cycle of oppression. When conducting gender trainings for the women in her church, she often sees women acting against themselves, their daughters and their mothers. She experiences a lot of resistance during her trainings, with women stating that her teaching is against their culture and against the Holy Bible. “It is not easy to convince them,” she told, “for they will mention verses from the Bible to underline their points – although often they don’t really know or understand them!”

One of the Israeli participants shared how she, too, had witnessed during her workshops with couples that *the women often struggle to allow their husbands to take up “women’s roles”*. “Many women have internalized traditional gender roles and find it difficult to let go of the few societal domains that belong to them,” she stated. She admitted that she recognized some of those struggles, struggling herself even at that very moment, having been away from home for five days, although she knew that her husband would take care of the children and the household. “Change really starts with the recognition of one’s own role in the change,” she concluded.

The participant from Palestine added that we should never forget that *those men who support women and who are not afraid to challenge traditional gender roles also face a tough time*. “Their manhood is questioned severely, with people wondering whether they are ‘real men’, so they also sacrifice for our freedom.” She had seen this happen to her own husband, who was often questioned about his allowing her to travel for her work.

Participants concluded that, as women alone, it would be impossible to challenge gender discrimination, whether it be perpetuated by religion, politics, or cultural practices. *For real transformation, it is important to include men in the struggle*. Some had empowering personal experiences of getting support from religious men. A participant from Malaysia shared: “As a Muslim woman, I experienced a lot of discrimination, especially within my own marriage. Whereas Muslim men can easily request a divorce, Muslim women face a tough time. I went through this pain-

ful process myself, to the point where it made me start to question my faith. Then support came from an unexpected angle: When visiting London, I met with Muslim men who supported me in my struggle by explaining how I could get my divorce. This was the first time in my life that I experienced support from men.” She continued to share other examples of supportive religious men: a Bosnian Imam who had told her that women should not just follow what others preach, but should study the religious texts themselves, and Muslim men telling her that women religious leaders are needed to step in and bring the dimension of love and humanity back into religion. She shared how empowering these experiences had been for her, and how it had helped her to reconnect with her faith.

Other participants agreed that *a lot of ignorance exists among women in terms of what religious texts actually say*. One of the participants said: “We are submitting to religious authorities, allowing women’s rights to be undermined, yet the more I read and interpret religious texts myself, the more I feel liberated...” She stated that women needed to go back to the texts and study them instead of just relying on male religious leaders’ interpretations. “To be able to challenge those leaders, it is important to speak their language; hence knowledge of the religious texts is crucial,” she concluded.

Another participant added: “*Going back to the texts also empowered me*; it comforted me as I discovered the love that is in the texts, and not the discrimination that I was hearing from male religious leaders. Now my spirituality is clearer, and I try to find that in every religion.”

The group concluded:

**“It was not so much religion that was the problem, but rather the religious interpretation that is used at the expense of women and which is predominantly in the hands of male religious leaders. Reclaiming and redefining the texts from a woman’s perspective was considered crucial.”**

Several participants emphasized that, at their core, all religions have messages of love, harmony, co-existence and peace, yet we have allowed religious leaders who twist those messages to take the platform. One participant commented: “As women, we are still not strategic enough. We should raise our level of knowledge and challenge much more.” Another stated: “Those who make you

suffer are people who are not informed; and because we are silent, they do not know.” One participant suggested focusing specifically on the younger generations since they have a lot of energy and are more flexible. Hence, their involvement would be crucial in order to create a new and more inclusive religious discourse.

## 2. Major obstacles and strategies forward

After a coffee break the large group reconvened and presentations were made by each subgroup so as to share the main outcomes of the discussions. The presentations showed a lot of overlap and focused on the obstacles that women face due to religion along with some possible strategies to overcome these. A compilation of the main obstacles that were identified and of the proposed strategies forward follows below.

In terms of *obstacles*, participants noted that:

- *The overall gender socialization of women and men is a problem (mindsets)*, as it makes women internalize gender oppression and silences them.
- *Women are being pushed down on multiple and intertwined levels*, including religion, tradition, economics, and politics. Several participants mentioned how politicians and religious leaders are working closely together in their respective contexts, which means *women face opposition from both levels*. Also, some women face *double marginalization* due to religion (e.g. Dalit women, both as women and because of their caste).
- *Most religions are strongly patriarchal. Gender inequality and injustice is linked to the fact that religious leadership and decision-making is male-dominated and to the resulting lack of space and voice for women*. Although women are very active within religious spaces, in most religions they not allowed to take up leadership roles and positions. One Israeli participant noted that it is very difficult for women to assume a leading role in Judaism, referring to a group of female rabbis who are not being accepted by the male religious leadership in her country. One of the other participants, a female reverend from Indonesia, confirmed that female religious leaders face a lot of obstacles, yet said that it is not impossible for women to have an impact. Being a religious leader herself, she has experienced opposition, for example when she openly supported same-sex marriages and was called on that. Nonetheless, she feels it is important to continue investing in speaking out and building trust. She also shared how, at home, women



from different religious backgrounds are making a difference by working together, which is important, since many politicians are using religion to divide the people.

- Scriptures themselves do not discriminate, but the *male-biased interpretations of the scriptures do*. The *male domination of religion has resulted in misinterpretations of religious scriptures* at the expense of women (e.g. with women being perceived as the origin of all sin, which in daily life means that men have more privileges than women).
- Patriarchal and conservative religious interpretations are still very strong. *More moderate interpretations do exist, but those also face a lot of opposition* from conservative religious groups.
- *Women are not well versed in terms of what religious texts say*, hence they internalize oppression or find it hard to challenge religion-based discrimination.
- When women question discriminatory religious interpretations and men's domination of religion, they are often *labeled as "bad women"*. Women who work for women's rights often face *opposition from male religious leaders*; standing up for women's rights is often interpreted as going against religion.
- There is *growing fundamentalism among some groups of young people (Azerbaijan was mentioned as an example)*, in which the concept of women's rights is very unpopular.

In terms of *strategies* to overcome the obstacles, the participants suggested:

- *Underlining the message of love in each religion and the common humanity of men and women*, and challenging those who dehumanize "the other". The participants stated: "As women, we need to overcome our own victimhood and be bold enough to openly address the discrimination and exclusion of women in religion, being patient yet strategic in doing so! As human beings, we need to invest in teaching people not to define themselves and others according to one strong – religious – identity, but rather to celebrate our multiple identities." Religious values can also support women's rights, and that is something that women activists need to take advantage of more. Also, focus on the commonalities between religions in this regard.

- *Working towards integrating peace education and education on women's rights within the mainstream education system*. The group felt that it would be important to work through young people, since they are the ones who make up the future generations.
- *Investing in activist spaces for religious women*. One of the Israeli participants argued that religious women activists need their own space to come together and define their own ways of working and their own solutions. In such support-group settings, those women activists can experience solidarity and not lose focus and hope. Having such spaces is also important because religious women activists do not always feel understood or accepted by secular women's NGOs who perceive religion mainly as being a source of oppression for women.
- *Working on building trust among women*. At times, women may react negatively to a woman in a position of power rather than supporting her. At the same time, women in power positions may lose touch with grassroots women's concerns. It is important that women work on building trust among each other.
- *Being strategic* in terms of choosing which identity to highlight when addressing issues. Women activists need to consider how they present themselves in different situations. In conflict zones where religion is a contributing factor, for example, the "woman activist's voice" might be perceived as being more neutral than the "religious woman's voice".
- *Learning about each other's religion* in order to broaden your understanding and overall analysis of gender and religion.
- Identifying *good practices within the different faith traditions* as well as *religious role models (both men and women)*, as those are living examples of how change is possible.
- Investing in the *involvement of men and youths in the struggle for gender equality within the different religions*. It is important to communicate that men are not the problem: fundamentalist thinking is. And men are also victims of that. By emphasizing that it is more likely that men will see that they have an important stake in getting involved in gender-equality work.



- Co-operating actively with *progressive men within the different faith-based traditions*. Those, too, are important allies in the work for gender justice.
- Reaching out to and *investing in involving male religious leaders*. Call upon them and empower them to support women's rights. For example, ask them to speak out against domestic violence during religious ceremonies.
- Investing in *religious messages that support gender equality and women's empowerment/rights by*:
  - interpreting scriptures from a women's perspective: "Religious interpretations that are male-dominated are handicapped interpretations; we need more *female interpretations*," one participant from Nepal concluded. As to *how* to do this, there was still some discussion: Some participants advocated challenging and re-educating the existing institutions, while others felt there was an urgent need for women to start building new – and more inclusive – institutions.
  - empowering women to have direct access to and gain knowledge of the holy books; so they can *question the prevailing religious interpretations* more and engage in *religious research*.
  - *building the capacity of women* as a way of developing their potential for religious leadership.
  - simplifying human rights documents to make them more accessible to women and the general public.
  - investing in mass awareness-raising about the importance of gender equality and justice from a religious perspective.
- Being mindful in order to engage in this challenging work with a *spirit of creativity and compassion*, and work with *positive role models as to be able to inspire others*.
- Educating gender activists on *nonviolence* so they can work for change from a nonviolent perspective (do not fight the perpetrator, but rather the oppressive system).

As for *actions* that could be taken in the short term; participants suggested that the Consultation should lead to the creation of:

- a *support network* on the topic of gender-sensitive faith-based peacebuilding, which could eventually turn into a movement;
- a list of *like-minded and supportive organizations* so as to create a platform for action. Such a platform could focus on organizing joint campaigns and/or sending out messages of solidarity;

- a website with a *statement* on the importance of gender-sensitive faith-based peacebuilding *that people can sign* to show their support.

### 3. Reflections and discussion: Male religious leaders – Examples of support and opposition

Upon conclusion of this exercise, the floor was opened for further critical reflections and feedback.

A major discussion developed around *whether it was more important for faith-based women activists to work first on building their own analysis and strengthening themselves as a group or to open up right away to a wider pool of people – including male religious leaders* – in order to have a louder voice. Some participants feared that including male religious leaders at this early stage might pose a risk; they were concerned that some of these leaders might come in to sabotage the work. Others felt that male religious leaders are not a homogenous group, but rather represent a wide variety of perspectives. "There are people in religious circles who support our focus and work," one participant said, "and we should not automatically focus on those who oppose us and hold oppressive views. Rather, we should focus on finding those religious allies that are close to our way of thinking!"

One participant from Macedonia shared how her organization, a women's rights NGO, had recently started a project that focused on setting up local coordinating bodies to address domestic violence. Male religious leaders were invited to join those bodies because they have a lot of influence on the public's perceptions. Many of these leaders turned out to be very *supportive*, which in turn had an especially positive impact on the men's perceptions. She stated: "For me, this was a good example of how women's rights activists can work together with male religious leaders. For sometimes we hold the same vision: a society without violence!"

Others shared experiences of *opposition* from (male) religious leaders. One participant shared a specific example of a female religious leader undermining her work for women's rights. The woman, whom the participant had invited to one of her trainings, came in repeating what her husband – a conservative religious leader – had instructed her to say. She concluded: "Even if we involve women religious leaders, we still need to be very strategic; they don't necessarily share our thinking just because they are women. We need to start by finding the feminist religious allies in this field as we go about it!"





A participant from Nigeria responded by saying that precisely because that husband had had so much influence on his wife – to the point where she ended up simply voicing his perspectives – we as a group cannot afford not to engage with men. She explained: “This issue of religion is actually about power. And those with power will not relinquish it easily! We therefore need to understand their perspectives and be patient. Meanwhile, we need to keep close to us those men who are sympathetic to what we do. It is just a reality that something that has been in place for so long simply won’t disappear overnight...”

A female religious leader from the United States shared how hard it is to be a female religious leader and urged everyone in the group “to befriend them with the compassion that we discussed earlier.” She reminded people to “bare in mind that they are engulfed in rules and dogmas and that religious practice keeps them very ‘boxed’”.

Another participant added that we should not restrict the notion of “religious leader” to those within institutionalized religions. She shared how she also considered herself a religious leader, even though she did not operate within a religious institution. She concluded: “I try to see divine light in everyone and to do good wherever I go.” A participant from India agreed, adding: “Religious people should not exist ‘outside’ of what is going on in society; it is only if you are amongst the people, that you can really reach them.”

The facilitator concluded the discussion by stating that:

**“As women activists, we need to find a healthy balance between being strategic and assertive on the one hand and keeping an open mind on the other. She stressed the importance of not getting sidetracked by painful experiences and that we should always be mindful not to exclude others because of our own experiences of exclusion.”**

#### 4. Afternoon session: Workshops

Next, the program featured two workshops that took place simultaneously, each facilitated by two participants. One workshop looked at the outcomes of the AWID study on religious fundamentalism, while the other workshop focused on what it means to develop a spiritual approach to peacebuilding.

#### Workshop on religious fundamentalisms, gender and rights – AWID

The Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) is an international, multi-generational, feminist membership organization committed to achieving gender equality, sustainable development and the human rights of women.

The workshop sought to engage participants from different regions, religions and perspectives in a dialogue on strategies to advance women’s rights in the face of the global rise of religious fundamentalisms. The facilitator began with a presentation of the outcomes of a study that AWID conducted in 2007 and 2008 on how women’s rights activists around the world experience religious fundamentalisms. The extensive research project drew on over 50 in-depth interviews with key experts in the field along with the survey responses of over 1,600 women’s rights activists in different regional and religious contexts, highlighting both their diverse and shared experiences of the workings and impact of religious fundamentalisms.

AWID’s research shows that women’s rights activists in every region face fundamentalist tendencies within the world’s major and minor religions. Their work is negatively affected by those fundamentalisms, whether the religious context is Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim or Sikh. Also localized religious traditions and new religions show fundamentalist tendencies.

Fundamentalism is therefore not the monopoly of any one religion, nor are any of the religions covered by AWID’s research lacking in fundamentalist actors. At the same time, the research also revealed numerous examples of women who work from within the framework of religion to challenge fundamentalisms, and thus a distinction must be made between religion and religious fundamentalisms.

According to 76% of the women’s rights activists surveyed by AWID, the strength of religious fundamentalisms has increased globally in the past ten years. Fundamentalist movements are gaining power to shape social norms, to influence international institutions and national decision makers, and to define laws and policies, especially in areas that touch upon “morality” and bodily autonomy.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> New Insights on Religious Fundamentalisms: Research Highlights, AWID 2009, 2.

The women's rights activists interviewed by AWID caution against presumptions about who is or is not likely to be a religious fundamentalist. When asked to identify the most influential fundamentalist actors in their contexts, they named a wide variety, and nearly every religion in every region has a similar cast: religious leaders; local/national and international religious institutions, organizations and groups; militant parties or groups with religious discourse; religious and secular political parties; and NGOs and charities with fundamentalist links. In some cases, the state itself was identified as a fundamentalist actor. When asked to indicate the levels of influence of a variety of fundamentalist actors, the women's rights activists rated religious leaders and local or national religious institutions as the most influential of all.

In the experience of eight out of ten of the women's rights activists surveyed, religious fundamentalisms have a negative impact on women's rights. Because their messages become strongly internalized as part of people's identities, religious fundamentalisms are able to restrict the space for dissent much more than other patriarchal systems.<sup>4</sup> Over two-thirds of the women's rights advocates who took part in the research regarded religious fundamentalisms as obstructing women's rights more than other political forces. In that light, religious fundamentalisms emerge as the main political challenge in the struggle for women's rights.<sup>5</sup>

Participants of the workshop were invited to discuss and debate the research findings, to brainstorm how best to advance women's rights in light of the growing influence of religious fundamentalisms, and to share their own views on religious fundamentalism from their own different cultural and religious backgrounds.

The questions they discussed were:

- What are the strategies of religious fundamentalisms in your context?
- What are some of the ways that religious fundamentalisms impact your work (if any)?
- What are the strategies used by women's rights activists in your context to confront religious fundamentalisms?

4 New Insights on Religious Fundamentalisms: Research Highlights, AWID 2009, 6.

5 New Insights on Religious Fundamentalisms: Research Highlights, AWID 2009, 7.

The aim of the workshop was to involve the participants of the Consultation concerned with gender justice or working to counter the negative impact of religious fundamentalisms. By taking a comparative approach to the issue and analyzing trends across a broad range of religious and regional contexts, the workshop sought to bring out a shared understanding among participants of the rise and impact of religious fundamentalisms.

### Workshop: The voice of compassion

This workshop invited participants to approach religion from a spiritual perspective: to view the whole of humanity as a loving family, while celebrating its diversity. A number of basic statements guided the group discussions and reflections:

#### *Do you know your family story?*

In many societies, history and religion were passed down to us through the voice of a "strict father", which is *his story*. What happened to *her story*? Where are our mothers' stories of contribution to humanity and spiritual development? Once women know their rightful place in the development of humanity, men and women can move forward to *our story* of love and compassion.

#### *What is spirituality?*

Spirituality is a spectrum of loving emotions in action: the collective of positive emotions that religions have in common and that connect us to others and to our experience of "the divine".

#### *The need for spiritual emotional development*

All human beings are hardwired for loving emotions, and those positive emotions are a common denominator for all major faiths and all human beings. Those emotions are essential to the survival of humanity. We can use our own knowledge of faith traditions to appreciate what we have in common with the faith traditions of others.

#### *The current collision course of religion*

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century begins, a great many people are in search of common spiritual ground. However, the current societal stress and the intolerance for patriarchal dogma are leading many to abandon mainstream religions. The shift to secularism is being offset by a steady increase in fundamentalist religions that isolate their believers from the rest of the world.



*Creating a collective vision and voice*


Contemporary culture holds no universally accepted view of human nature. For the world to function as one whole, the development of some kind of a consensus regarding human nature is essential. That consensus should include the recognition that our natural state of being is one of love.

*Unity*

There has been a failure to understand and connect emotion and reason, spirituality and religious dogma. They treat each other as “strangers” while there is a potentially rich connection. Positive emotions help humans behave more communally and creatively.

*Evolution of the self*

Evolution towards spirituality can take place in the lives of every one of us.



**“That peace will come when you let the presence of God settle into your heart. If there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace in the nations. If there is to be peace in the nations, there must be peace in the cities. If there is to be peace in the cities, there must be peace between neighbors. If there is to be peace between neighbors, there must be peace in the home. If there is to be peace in the home, there must be peace in the heart.” – Lao Tse**

*Our stories of love and compassion*

Are you aware of positive stories stemming from your religious tradition? Let’s compile and share these stories to promote compassionate cultures. Spiritual values are universal human values that have the potential to bring everyone together.

**September 14****Discussing Gender, Peacebuilding, and Religion**

The second day looked at the nexus between gender and peacebuilding, as well as how this nexus has played out in religious contexts. Participants discussed the obstacles to and the progress that has been made in terms of integrating a gender perspective in peacebuilding. They then went on to review whether this analysis also applied to faith-based contexts and peacebuilding initiatives.

The facilitator, Diana Francis, started the session with a passionate plea:

“Excluding women from decision-making and the use of violence against women is something we can label as a war going on against women. There is a huge loss of people going on every day because of gender violence. It is the biggest, most endemic war we know.” She continued: “This also applies to men, as current notions of masculinities trap everyone. Men, who are largely responsible for the violence committed against women, are also trapped in a story of ‘eat or be eaten’. Violence is glorified in all cultures, as it is used to define what it means to be a man, and that includes domination over women as a daily exercise of violence. But in the end, everyone loses out...” She concluded: “We come from interdependence. We do much better with each other than without each other! Co-operation will bring peace and human flourishing.”

WPP Program Manager Isabelle Geuskens then gave a short background on why the WPP considered it important to focus on a gender perspective in faith-based peacebuilding:

“Increasingly, people are starting to recognize that besides being a contributor to conflict, religion can also play a constructive role in peacebuilding. The role that religious leaders play as peacebuilders is receiving increasing attention, as is the need to involve them in conflict resolution processes. Although that is in itself a good development, for women’s rights activists this trend also raises dilemmas. After all, whose peace are we talking about? Women peace activists all over the world welcomed UNSCR 1325, as it supported their claim that women have a crucial role to play in peacebuilding and are affected by conflict in



specific ways.<sup>6</sup> With religious institutions and leadership positions being dominated by men, the trend of focusing on religion-led conflict-resolution processes might imply another setback in terms of the involvement of women in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction processes. This would mean that half of the population's peacebuilding potential is not being tapped into, and that women's voices and perspectives are not being taken on board when reconstructing the fabric of society. In this regard it is important to emphasize that any conflict also carries a momentum for transforming restrictive gender roles, since women often step out of the traditional 'female' gender box during conflict situations. If peacebuilding processes are left in the hands of male religious leaders, it is likely that women will be pushed back into earlier gender roles (justified by religion), which may be even more restrictive than before the conflict..."

### 1. Brainstorm session on gender and peacebuilding

After these introductory words, new subgroups were formed to reflect on the following questions.

#### Discussion questions: Gender and Peacebuilding

##### Part 1: Women and peacebuilding

- 1 To what extent, and in what ways, are women involved in peacemaking/ peacebuilding?
- 2 In your context, what are some of the major obstacles that women face and the advances that they are making?
- 3 What strategies are used to overcome those obstacles, and what still needs to be done?

<sup>6</sup> On October 31, 2000, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), which focuses on women, peace and security. The Resolution recognizes the specific impact of conflict on women's lives and the important role women have to play in conflict prevention and peacebuilding processes.

##### Part 2: Relate the above also to faith-based peacebuilding initiatives

- 1 What is the position of women in these initiatives?
- 2 Are people aware of UNSCR 1325 and related resolutions, and are those considered relevant?
- 3 What specific obstacles and advances in terms of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Resolutions can be found in faith-based peacebuilding contexts/initiatives?
- 4 What is lacking and what is required to overcome the obstacles?
- 5 Are there examples of good practices? Please share!

After breaking into subgroups, the participants came back to present their findings to the larger group. In terms of the *involvement* of women in peacebuilding, the following roles were identified:

- Women as victims of war.
- Women as survivors of war.
- Women as actors during wars: both as fighters and as peacebuilders.

A compilation of both the main obstacles identified in relation to integrating a gender perspective into peacebuilding and the strategies that were proposed for moving forward follows below.

In terms of *obstacles*, the participants noted the following:

- Although women are making peace everywhere in the world, they are still *not recognized* enough as important peacebuilders, which shows in their absence at the higher decision-making levels. The main obstacles in this regard were identified by the group as "peacebuilding being in the hands of *male-dominated institutions and discriminatory practices*" (patriarchy).
- During and after peace processes, *religion-based violence against women might increase, yet that is often ignored* by political leaders. Most religious leaders also are *unaware* of the WPS Resolutions.



- In terms of religion, a major obstacle stems from the fact that most religions *teach women how to be obedient*, while as peace activists it is sometimes important to go against the flow.
  - *The limited access of women to education* in many parts of the world was also identified as a major problem, as in the long run that prevents them from participating in politics.
  - Grassroots women peace activists often lack *connections on the political level*. Many women activists work on the level of initiating dialogue between representatives from “enemy” groups or in organizing joint activities to bring people together. While that is important work in itself, it also carries the risk of being work “in a bubble”, i.e. with those who are already open-minded.
  - *Women peace activists tend to stay away from politics* because of the power politics and corruption that go on there. Still, it is the place where change can be made and thus where women should be. Although some women do manage to enter the field of politics, they often become detached from what is happening at the grassroots level. The latter point triggered a lively discussion in the larger group, with several participants sharing their personal experiences involving difficult relations with high-level women. Despite this, the group agreed in the end that these women *should be supported*, as they, too, experience their own challenges at the top.
  - Often legal instruments do not support women’s rights and the participation of women in public life, and may even work against them. *Many laws are contradictory and discriminatory*; one participant mentioned how in her country men can be elected twice, while women only once.
  - *The lack of awareness of women’s rights* at the grassroots level means that women don’t claim their rights (including those in relation to UNSCR 1325).
  - The media could play an important role in terms of raising the public’s awareness about women’s rights and women’s work for peace. However, the *media are biased*: issues regarding women’s rights and women’s perspectives on war and peace are systematically ignored.
  - Women still *lack access to and control over funds*, which limits the impact that women can have, also in the realm of peacebuilding.
- In terms of *strategies*, participants mentioned the following as being important and/or necessary:
- *Investing in the education* of women in order for women to be empowered enough to challenge men on political levels.
  - Investing in a more *holistic approach to peacebuilding*, which includes lobbying for peace education to be included in the formal education system.
  - Investing in further awareness-raising and capacity building with regard to the WPS Resolutions, as these are *vital tools that women can use to push for the involvement of women in peacebuilding*.
  - *Supporting religious solidarity*, as this can be an important tool for peacebuilding. A participant from Nepal shared how during the war, different religious groups came together to work for peace, despite the attempts of political parties to instigate conflict between them. The United Nations recognized this as a unique example of religious solidarity.
  - *Working in solidarity as women peace activists to push the implementation of the WPS agenda on national, regional and international levels*; this is already occurring more and more through national, regional and international networking.
  - *Getting more women involved in high-level politics, e.g. through advocating quota systems*: when more women are in Parliament, new laws supporting women’s rights are more likely to be passed. It is particularly important to have *laws and policies in place that will underpin the WPS Resolutions* in order to facilitate their implementation.
  - Investing as women peace activists in identifying political allies, so as to *bridge the gap between grassroots peace activism and political decision-making*.

## 2. Reflections and discussion: Challenges and creative solutions

The presentations triggered a further exchange of experiences and discussions between participants.



As for quota systems, not all participants were convinced that those would provide the answer to making sure women's rights are served. One participant from Ghana cautioned: "We have now women in Parliament, yet many of those women won't push the women's agenda."

A participant from Liberia confirmed that she saw the same thing happening in her country, yet she felt it was not the individual women who should be blamed, but rather that the situation should be viewed within the bigger picture: "The President (Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf) is doing her best, pushing for women's rights and actively supporting women's organizations. But there are 94 Parliamentarians, only 14 of whom are women. It is not so much a question of whether they are pushing the women's agenda, but rather that they still can't beat the male majority... Elections are coming up next year and we are now mobilizing women everywhere – not just any women, but gender-sensitive women who really understand and are willing to push for women's issues. However, it remains a struggle for grassroots women: many try to come up and want to take on decision-making roles, but they come from very traditional backgrounds, with pastors telling them to be submissive to their husbands..."

A participant from the United States mentioned that things have improved in the US recently, with 12% of the Senate currently being female, and three female Supreme Court judges in place. President Obama is supportive of women's rights, and US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton is well connected to the global women's movement. "However," she continued, "while there are quite a number of powerful and rich women in the US who use their influence and money to do some good things with it for women's rights, they are also often disconnected from what is really happening to women out there. They collude with corporate thinking and capitalism and are also linked to the military-industrial complex..."

"I have seen women enter political institutions," a Nepalese activist shared, "yet their inclusion is very formal and once they are 'in' they face a tough time trying to change things from the inside." A participant from India mentioned how she sees women assuming local leadership positions but then acting as their husbands' spokespersons. "Opposition to women's rights is still very strong," she added. "Recently, when a bill was being passed in India to support quotas for the political participation of women, even hard-core political enemies teamed up and aligned themselves to oppose it..."

A participant from Macedonia added that while her country has quota for women at the Parliament and municipality levels (33%), that does not mean that the WPS agenda has been prioritized. She explained: "Although some women's groups are working for UNSCR 1325 at the grassroots level, none of the Ministries is really pushing it. Many women are still unaware of its existence, and due to gender prejudice in society it is difficult for women to apply for WPS-related positions." The Consultation discussions made her realize that it would be important to start involving the religious communities more on WPS-related issues, since religion plays a major role in sustaining traditional gender roles. She continued: "In Macedonia, the link between civil society organizations and religious communities is still quite weak. In terms of women's rights, they are mainly involved in issues such as domestic violence."

Several participants then talked about the difficulty of facing opposition – especially when this comes from within your own circles. A religious leader from Indonesia shared how she often felt afraid when speaking out about peace or human rights in her work, matters that only a few religious leaders dare to speak about in her country. She often felt torn between on the one hand wanting to obey the Church and on the other hand wanting to work for people's freedom. She explained: "The Church has its own rules, and as a reverend you need to represent your Church. If you talk about human rights, then the Church will often not agree... It means I have to sacrifice... At times the Church makes me shut up... Sitting here listening to all of you makes me realize that I need to take more risks."

A Dutch participant working for an international peace organization spoke about her organization's roots in the Catholic and Protestant faith traditions, which means the organization works closely with the churches and other religious institutions in conflict zones. When it comes to the participation of women in peacebuilding processes, she often hears from her colleagues that "it is no use including women, because at that level, the men do not want this." She continued: "Although at the grassroots level we do support women as an organization, when it comes to the higher decision-making levels my colleagues focus on the men." She shared how a Palestinian colleague had mentioned to her that "there are only men around the peace table, so what is the use of getting women involved?" Overall, she has witnessed a lot of skepticism towards the idea of integrating a gender perspective in the organization's peace work. She continued: "This is really an issue that I am struggling with: how can I change this? It is always up



to me to *prove* that working for gender equality has a direct and positive effect on peacebuilding...”

All participants agreed that further awareness-raising and capacity building with regard to gender equality and women’s rights, and in particular with regard to the WPS Resolutions, remain crucial. “As long as there are still women who lack knowledge and skills, they will be prey to manipulation, even by their husbands,” one participant stated. A participant from Nigeria added:

“When I go into villages to speak about rape, I often find that women don’t even know that it is their right not to be raped. Those women do not know how to stand up and say stop; they believe that rape is part of womanhood!”

The group noted that it is particularly important to raise awareness in such a manner that local communities can make sense of international instruments and internalize them. Participants also underlined the importance of involving both men and women in these awareness-raising and capacity-building efforts, increasing men’s involvement and support for gender equality by integrating a masculinities perspective in the gender focus.

### The importance of creativity

A Ghanaian participant shared how tensions were on the rise during the 2008 elections. In response, women came out on the streets of Accra to urge the men not to use violence. Another participant from Ghana shared: “In the Volta Region, Nkonya and Alavanyo queen mothers spoke out, telling the chiefs that “enough is enough” and demanding that peace negotiations would continue.”<sup>7</sup> She shared: “The queen mothers told them they were willing to die for this, which convinced the chiefs they were serious about it and managed to de-escalate the situation in the end.”

A Liberian participant shared how Muslim and Christian women came together in Monrovia to demonstrate against the war. They prayed for peace together in public, and they approached the warring factions to convince them to end the war. The women even followed them

into Ghana to ensure that the peace negotiations would be a success, making sure the men could not leave the negotiation room for lunch or even a bathroom break until the peace agreement had been signed. When this pressure finally resulted in a signed agreement, the women continued their activism. They monitored the signatories’ actions and got involved in DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration) processes. In the end, anyone involved in the Liberian peace process made sure to always consult the women activists, as their activism had rendered them a lot of credibility among the population and the warring factions.

A Nepalese activist spoke about how women’s groups in Nepal started to form alliances right after the war in that country. They joined together for a common cause: ensuring that the women of Nepal would have a voice with regard to the future of their country. When the women noticed that they were being sidelined by the political leaders, they approached the UN to point out that the peace process was male-dominated and not inclusive. The UN issued a statement supporting the inclusion of women in the constitution-drafting process. “Still,” she noted, “I have observed that when women become part of the political machinery as party members, they change; they become very obedient... So I told them that they need to be more disobedient: be ‘bad women!’” She reminded everyone: “We need to continuously challenge ourselves and to know when to be committed and when to be disobedient!”

A participant from India added a comment about how important creativity is in terms of awareness-raising with regard to UNSCR 1325. For example, her organization would bring religious leaders together to teach them about conflict resolution. They made sure to include sessions on UNSCR 1325 to emphasize the importance of taking the realities and perspectives of women into account and including them in all peacebuilding efforts.

An activist working in Bosnia and Herzegovina shared an example of a Muslim woman who was very dissatisfied with the post-war education system, which did not teach the children how to live together peacefully. She started to bring other Muslim mothers together to create an Islamic Peace Manual for schools and approached Christian theologians and peace activists for support. Once the manual was finished, she also approached Islamic religious leaders for support, but without success. The group responded by stating they would contact the media if a meeting was not granted. Almost immediately they were received. This led to the manual’s being adopted by over 90 schools in

<sup>7</sup> These two communities in the Volta region were in conflict for 86 years.

Sarajevo. Stunned by these results, the religious authorities also started to promote the manual, as did the Ministry of Education. She concluded: “Sometimes you just need to go ahead and use the backdoor, for if this activist had kept on waiting for permission, she would never have gotten there!”

### Connection and personal strength

A Liberian participant concluded: “In the end, you must take risks if you want to bring about peace...” Another participant added: “Often, because of the conflict, you see that everything is shaken up, with huge consequences for women. But you also see women taking up the spaces that are being created... They assume roles they’ve never had... It is so brave, how women all over the world persist in their struggles for justice and peace, while they could also opt for an easier life!” One participant summarized: “If we do not do this challenging work, who will? I feel called to do it, although there are times that I want to give up... Therefore spaces like these are empowering; I need them to go on!”

A participant from Palestine shared how a group of Israeli and Palestinian women connected with each other through their bereavement as widows and as mothers. For these women, peacemaking is mainly about building trust. An activist working in the Balkans shared a similar example of Serbian women activists connecting with Bosnian women through the shared identity of motherhood. They traveled from Belgrade to Srebrenica, where they displayed banners apologizing, as mothers, for the crimes their sons committed against the people of Srebrenica.

The group stressed the importance of having inner courage and being creative when working for peace. It was noted in that regard, that it is important that women are led by women, because having female role models is empowering. Several participants emphasized that women activists need their own spaces for solidarity: places where they can discuss what is happening to women within the different religious settings, as well as strategize how to challenge religion-based discrimination and exclusion. Yet others felt that it would be important to always keep the bigger picture in mind, with one participant stating: “Men are also affected by systems of violence, and hence need to be part of the solution. Although women as a first step need a safe space to come together; without male involvement a breakthrough will be difficult.”

One activist concluded by stating that it is important that women dare to challenge things, but that self-care is also crucial. She stated: “We should not kill ourselves when engaging in our activism. We should always remember that we did not sign up for death, but rather for life! We have to be aware that the theology of religion can also make us outrun ourselves and lead us into martyrdom. We also need to be critically aware of that!”

### Faith-based and interfaith-based peacebuilding

The facilitator, Diana Francis, stated that the group brought forward a lot of valuable input regarding the dimension of gender and peacebuilding, yet she wondered whether participants couldn’t share more in relation to the specific nexus of religion-peacebuilding-gender. Participants indicated they were still grappling with that, mainly due to the fact that religion is part of such a very complex web of factors that jointly impact on women.

Several of the participants explained how religion plays an important role in their work for peace within faith-based peace organizations. One participant shared how she got engaged in peace work because of her spirituality, stating that “her impulse for action came from within.” A participant from Malaysia shared how that personal drive can sometimes come out of a painful journey. She shared how she had seen a lot of violence being done in the name of religion and how she often could only find peace outside of religious spaces. Yet over time, she had learned how to speak out at religious forums as a moderately liberal woman, and she feels empowered enough to question religious leaders. She concluded: “I have left the God of Fear and now a God of Love.”

The group struggled in terms of distinguishing between faith-based and interfaith peacebuilding. It quickly became clear that the context in which one was living influenced the interpretation that was given. For example, the participant from Bangladesh shared that, in her country, people are more open to interfaith peacebuilding work, which means people of different faiths working together for peace. Faith-based peace work is regarded there with suspicion, being seen as an attempt to “convert people to your faith”.

Several participants stressed that when working in a multi-faith setting, you need to be very responsive to people’s sensitivities and fears. An Israeli activist shared: “We organize initiatives that bring people of different faiths together, so as to help people see the similarities between the different religions and to look beyond the differences.





That works best with children, as they are very open, while their parents are often the ones who are afraid of conversion.” In her experience, it is mostly the older generations that struggle with interfaith peace work.

A Liberian activist shared how during the Liberian war, Christian and Muslim women joined hands to end the war, realizing that the bullets would make no distinction between the different faiths. The Christian women went into the churches to mobilize women there, while the Muslim women went into the mosques for the same reason. She shared how this interfaith peace message really managed to unite people.

### Religious structures

Still, working within religious structures is not easy, most participants have experienced. A participant from Nigeria mentioned that, though some awareness-raising is possible, there are limits as to how far you can go. “We trained women leaders from different churches and did a lot of work at different levels, yet we found out that while we had had some impact at the informal level, we did not manage to effect changes at the higher and more formal levels.”

The Indian participant added that persistence is key when working with religious bodies, sharing an example of how she and a group of women decided to work on changing the disadvantaged position of women in her church. After a lot of lobbying, the group managed to get a women’s board included within the Church’s structures. That group then started to work on a gender policy for the Church, which has now been adopted. An activist from Nepal shared that the network of women’s NGOs she is part of decided to include different religious groups (Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims) in their awareness-raising with regard to gender equality and the participation of women in peacebuilding. At first, these groups did not show much interest in the network’s gender programs, as they considered themselves to have a different focus. The network then managed to bring them on board by providing them with materials about gender and religion, which empowered them to take part in the networks’ discussions on the importance of gender equality. She concluded:

**“Religious leaders are important role models in society: their position on gender equality matters a lot, as it influences the public’s position. Hence it is crucial to ensure their involvement.”**

Persistence is key, as is being realistic in terms of what level of religious support one can expect. Hence, women peace activists need to think strategically when trying to generate support for their work from religious leaders and institutions.

### 3. Religious obstacles in women’s peace work: How to get beyond patriarchy?

After the lunch break, the facilitator, Diana Francis, invited participants to get into groups once more to further investigate the religious obstacles they encounter in their peace work. The main question she asked the groups to answer was: “How should we get beyond patriarchy in faith-based peacebuilding?” A short impression of the discussion that went on in one of the groups follows here.

The group noted that most religious institutions are completely modeled according to a strictly male-dominated hierarchy. Though some have created niches for women, that patriarchal status quo remains safeguarded. Women who speak out against it face an incredible amount of opposition, often to the point where they actually leave the religious institutions in the end. One participant, who – being a Christian religious leader herself – had witnessed 18 years of critical women being ostracized within the churches, concluded: “There is just a lot of anxiety about women who are critical...”

A female religious leader from Indonesia confirmed this and shared how she witnesses women activists inside the Church being reprimanded and reminded that “they are Indonesian women, not Western women, and hence should behave according to Eastern values.” Another obstacle lies in the fact that most Indonesian women theologians do not have a formal background in feminist theology, which means that religious leaders can easily question the authority of their words when they speak about feminism.

One of the participants, working as a gender advisor for an international faith-based peace organization, shared how she relates some of the opposition towards the integration of a gender perspective within the organization to that organization’s faith-based background.

“I do think part of this opposition has to do with our background in the Churches, as other – more secular – CSOs at home are way ahead of us in terms of integrating a gender perspective in their work. I also see the same thing happening in relation to our diversity policy. Some colleagues question whether we can implement that, as a Christian organization ... Can you imagine? And this discussion is going on while we are working in very diverse contexts!”

She also noted how the relatively negative perception of feminism – as being damaging and moralistic – results in ridicule when she brings up gender and women’s issues. Men in particular fuel that ridiculing, although also women may sometimes join them in doing that – especially those who are climbing up in the organization. She shared: “Women are not automatically supportive: I often see female colleagues going along with the ridicule. Maybe it’s because they fear that objecting to it would mean they would no longer be taken seriously.” She continued: “One female colleague who had a genuine interest in gender issues got less and less involved as she climbed up in the organization, to the point where she now rejects anything related to gender.”

An activist working in the Balkans shared how she experienced opposition because of the interfaith work she is doing with fellow women activists, which is being politicized due to the cross-border approach of interfaith work: “We are discredited a lot; we are told that this is not our territory but the men’s, and we are accused of pro-Yugoslav thinking...”

Another activist shared that an important obstacle in her faith-based peacebuilding work came from the division between women’s NGOs and women from the religious communities. The group agreed that it is important to get out of the binary thinking which pits women’s rights against religion, for this will only complicate matters more, with religious women feeling they have no place in NGOs that advocate women’s rights, while women’s rights activists might feel inhibited to share with others that religion and spirituality can also be a source of inspiration for their work. One participant concluded:

“We do not want to choose between religion and women’s rights. We need to claim our right to redefine religion, bring out its positive aspects in women’s lives, and strategize against the negative practices that are being justified on the basis of religion.”

One participant concluded the discussion by advocating the creation of a multi-religious women’s peace network that could support women activists from different religions in learning from each other and advocate the integration of a gender perspective in faith-based peacebuilding at the United Nations.

The groups then returned to a plenary session where they presented the outcomes of their discussions. A compilation of the groups’ findings, focusing on obstacles and strategies for overcoming these, follows here.

#### In terms of obstacles, participants identified the following

- Religion is a *source of conflict and power struggles*.
- Patriarchy is at the heart of religious practices everywhere
  - *Cultural and religious practices are closely intertwined and lead to primacy being given to the boy child in many cultures, which in turn leads to men having more opportunities in life (i.e. power is in the hands of men).*
  - Patriarchy manifests itself in religious leaders being mostly male, including in faith-based peace organizations.
  - Patriarchal values also dominate in (inter)faith-based peacebuilding initiatives and organizations: e.g. inter-religious round tables for peace often *marginalize women*.
- Religion itself does not discriminate against women, but the *interpretation of the religious texts* does.
- Women activists are *blocked from entering spaces of worship* and speaking about/mobilizing others for women’s rights.
- It is *difficult to get beyond patriarchy*: why should men change and give up power? Women also play a role in upholding patriarchy.



- Governments might ratify CEDAW and the WPS Resolutions, yet they are *limited* in terms of *influencing religious structures* to do the same. Religious structures have a large influence in society, hence their lack of support for/opposition to those resolutions is an important undermining factor in terms of their implementation.
- There are *divisions* between women's rights activists in the NGO sector on one hand and women who are active within religious communities on the other. This hinders an effective collaboration for women's rights.
- Religious women sometimes collude by not accepting the women's rights framework.
- *lobbying for gender and diversity policies* to be implemented in faith-based (peace) organizations;
- setting up women-led *inter-religious peace initiatives*, as for example when Madagascar was caught up in a conflict between Christians and Muslims and women's groups from both faiths worked together to prepare handouts, collect articles and organize meetings on peace. They managed to reach people by underlining the common values present in each religion;
- investing in *unnerving existing prejudices* against "gender", for example by including a *masculinities perspective* in the work for gender justice;
- involving *gender-sensitive men as partners* in ending violence against women and gender injustice;
- educating *donors, peacebuilding institutions, governments*, etc. about interfaith and faith-based peacebuilding and how this impacts women's lives (e.g. how it can both advance and undermine women's rights).

As *strategies*, participants proposed:

- *encouraging women activists to work together* and disseminate information about women's rights in relation to religion and peacebuilding;
- *inviting a broad range of stakeholders*, including representatives of religious bodies, when organizing events around UNSCR 1325;
- encouraging women's CSOs groups to reach out specifically to *religious leaders and communities to educate them about women's rights and the WPS Resolutions*;
- cooperating with women religious leaders, who often operate on mid-level and hence can *act as mediators in terms of reaching high-level male religious leaders*;
- *identifying female religious scholars* as allies and role models;
- identifying *progressive male religious leaders* as allies and role models;
- encouraging women activists to question oppressive religious practices through *critical study and to invest in the re-interpretation and teaching of religious texts* from a feminist theological perspective;
- starting up centers for *women's studies* within religious communities;
- creating *parallel, women-led, religious institutions*;
- setting up *support groups for women activists working in religious settings to help them remain persistent and courageous*;
- recognizing the continuing need for *mass education and awareness-raising efforts* about women's rights (particularly aimed at the younger generations); those efforts should make the case that religious texts can also be interpreted as championing women's rights;
- seeking *redress for infringements of women's rights in courts of law*, as most religions will leave the woman in a disadvantaged position;

#### 4. Afternoon session: Workshops

The second day ended with two participant-facilitated workshops. A short impression of each one is given below.

##### Workshop on reconciliation, by the Parents Circle-Families Forum (PCFF)

The Parents Circle-Families Forum is a grassroots organization of Palestinian and Israeli families who have lost immediate family members due to the conflict. Together, they work on transforming their pain and bereavement into a joint mission of reconciliation and coexistence in the midst of ongoing violence.<sup>8</sup>

At the Consultation two members of the Parents Circle (one from the Palestinian side and one from the Israeli side) gave a workshop in which they shared personal stories of bereavement and their search for peace. The aim of the workshop was to enhance the participants' understanding of both the conflict and the needs and aspirations of both nations, which must be acknowledged and met through compromise and sharing if there is to be a lasting peace.

Both facilitators had lost someone close to them as a result of the conflict. During the session, both shared about their process of grieving and the difficulties they experienced in coming to terms with their loss.

<sup>8</sup> For more information, please visit: [www.theparentscircle.com](http://www.theparentscircle.com).



The Palestinian participant shared how she lost her brother, who died from the long-term consequences of being hit by a bullet from Israeli soldiers. For a long time after his death, she felt no urge to meet with the enemy. After some time, however, she heard about Palestinians who had lost family members meeting up with similarly bereaved Israeli families. She became curious about how this was possible and decided to join the PCFF. Although it took her some time to understand the Forum's way of viewing the conflict, she realized it was the only way to deal with her personal pain. Today she is an active member of the organization and the Palestinian founder of the PCFF's women's group.

The participant from Israel lost her husband in the war with Lebanon in 1982, just six months after they got married and being pregnant with their first child. During the week of mourning, while she was sitting there, mourning her husband who was killed by a soldier from the other side, she thought there surely was a woman on the other side who was mourning her husband who had been killed by him. In her eyes, this situation showed the senselessness of war, where both sides only lose. As time passed, she learned more about the conflict, and with that knowledge she felt a growing need to meet Palestinian people directly and learn about their lives and their suffering. Four years ago, she decided to join the PCFF, identifying wholeheartedly with their message of dialogue, reconciliation and nonviolent protest, as well as the right of Palestinians to a state.<sup>9</sup>

Both said that they are often asked about how their relatives and friends react to their work in the PCFF, and about how they sometimes experience incomprehension regarding their work. They concluded: "Both sides of the conflict must understand that when they vilify and demonize the other side and ignore their legitimate needs, they are thereby giving the other side permission to do the same to *them*. We must rise above the habit of mutual blaming and start listening, maturely, to each other's needs."

<sup>9</sup> [www.opendemocracy.net/5050/aesha-aqtam-piera-edelman/peacework-to-love-stranger](http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/aesha-aqtam-piera-edelman/peacework-to-love-stranger).

### Workshop on The technique of the council circle: The art of listening and speaking from the heart

"An enemy is someone whose story you haven't heard" – Gene Knudsen Hoffman

This workshop was facilitated by a Palestinian and two Israeli participants, who use the council facilitation technique in their peace work.

The practice of council is simple: a group of people sits in a circle, which helps to engender a sense of equality. Since the facilitator is also a participant – rather than a lecturer or a teacher – everyone has the feeling of "being in the same boat". A "talking piece" is passed from person to person in the circle, so that each person is heard.

People have always used storytelling as a means of sharing stories about themselves, sharing and passing on wisdom, and passing on the collective memory of the family, community, tribe or people.

Storytelling is at the heart of the council practice, just as communication is at the heart of all human interaction. The quality of communication defines the quality of relationships, be they with partners, children, colleagues, or even enemies. Good communication starts with true listening – to others and to oneself. It requires listening from the heart, followed by speaking from the heart, for when people feel heard, they can begin speaking what is in their hearts and sharing their stories.

From this basic principle – speaking and listening from the heart – the council facilitation technique builds trust, self-value, deep communication, discovery of "the other", and true connection.

The facilitators led the workshop participants in a council exercise, with 15 women from all over the world speaking and listening from the heart, sharing stories about home and heritage, about what it means to be a woman, a mother, or a young girl, and about love, pain, sorrow, hope, and laughter.

### 5. Reflections on the day

After the workshop sessions, the group went back into a plenary session to share some reflections on the day's sessions:



- Participants were happy that the facilitator had intervened during the first part of the day, urging them to focus on the core theme of the day: gender in the context of (inter)faith-based peacebuilding. Participants attributed their lack of focus to the complexity of the issue, finding it difficult to distinguish between the different systems that contribute to the exclusion of women in peacebuilding: religion, economics, politics, etc.
- Participants appreciated the interactive and participatory methodology of the sessions.
- Some participants shared that they experienced the day as an analytical and emotional rollercoaster, moving from feeling desperation and hopelessness to finding inspiration and starting to see opportunities for change.
- Several participants shared that the Consultation sessions helped them break out of their isolation. As one woman put it: “I’ve heard new things here and discovered that all women are struggling, not only Arab women. It gives me strength to work more for all women in the world.” People felt that the sharing of experiences from different contexts was particularly enriching and inspiring.
- The group urged IFOR/WPP to publish the outcomes of the Consultation and to reach out to more people. They suggested involving the media in order to generate attention for this kind of work, showing the public a number of women from different religions who are working together for peace.
- Participants suggested incorporating the topic firmly within IFOR/WPP’s work in the longer term, integrating it into (for example):
  - training programs such as the IFOR/WPP Training of Trainers;
  - training manuals and publications such as the IFOR/WPP May 24 Pack;
  - the program work done with male peacebuilders and around masculinities;
  - IFOR/WPP’s networking activities, including those done with relevant organizations such as UN Women, in order to further mainstream the topic. It was decided that participants could also play a role in this by further spreading the Consultation insights in their respective networks.

## September 15

### Ways Forward and Conclusions

The final day of the Consultation was dedicated to formulating recommendations based on the insights gained during the different sessions. Diana Francis started the day with a presentation of the major obstacles and problem areas listed the day before. This list was put up as a background document for designing *ways forward*, with participants being asked to break into subgroups according to specific problem areas. To facilitate the groups’ analysis and strategizing, Diana presented the Goss-Mayr<sup>10</sup> tool for nonviolent action.

One participant urged the group also to look at *how* to reach out to people who object, stating: “If I look at the list we came up with, and the wording we have used, I am sure this will not appeal to those who oppose our thinking. We therefore need to find a communication strategy that can appeal to a multitude of people, using more inclusive language.”

#### 1. Tool for nonviolent action

Hildegard and Jean Goss-Mayr’s<sup>11</sup> tool for nonviolent action consists of three basic steps:

**Step 1** involves analyzing the situation, which includes

- *Defining the injustice* you wish to overcome. Give it a name and get a clear picture of the injustice (this process can take some time).
- *Discovering the pillars* that support the injustice. Start with the role of those who suffer from the injustice (e.g. by remaining passive for too long, one can sometimes end up being one of the pillars that allows the injustice to continue). Then name other groups (pillars) that are responsible for maintaining the injustice (e.g. certain institutions). In this form of analysis, the injustice is seen as an inverted pyramid that is able to remain in place only because it is supported by these pillars. If they are removed – even just some of them – the pyramid will fall. Hence the intervention needs to focus on removing those pillars of support. You need to ask yourself: “Why do those who function in those pillars do as they do? Why is the adversary the way s/he is?”

<sup>10</sup> IFOR Honorary Presidents and nonviolent activists.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

What are her/his positive points? How can I reach out to her/him?”

**Step 2 involves finding allies**

- Step two can be illustrated by a model consisting of concentric circles that represent the different levels of allies, with at the center those few individuals or small groups who are now working together to address the injustice. The next circle consists of those who are already close to us, e.g. the base communities. The next level involves people in the pillars who could be won over and who should be relatively easy to win as allies. The next circle includes those who will take more work to draw in, but whose support would be important.

**Step 3 involves building the alternative**

- It is not enough to work at removing the injustice. Work also needs to be done to put something else in its place. Even while engaged in the struggle to remove the pillars, the group should be clear as to its goal and the different steps (actions) needed to achieve it, from the bottom up.
- Groups can choose to do the three different steps (1-3) in reverse, starting with their vision. In any case, the analysis needs to be constantly re-examined and updated in the light of experience.

**2. Recommendations for ways forward**

Overall, five groups were created according to the core problem areas identified, and they were asked to develop both local and international strategies and short-term and long-term responses. The problem areas included:

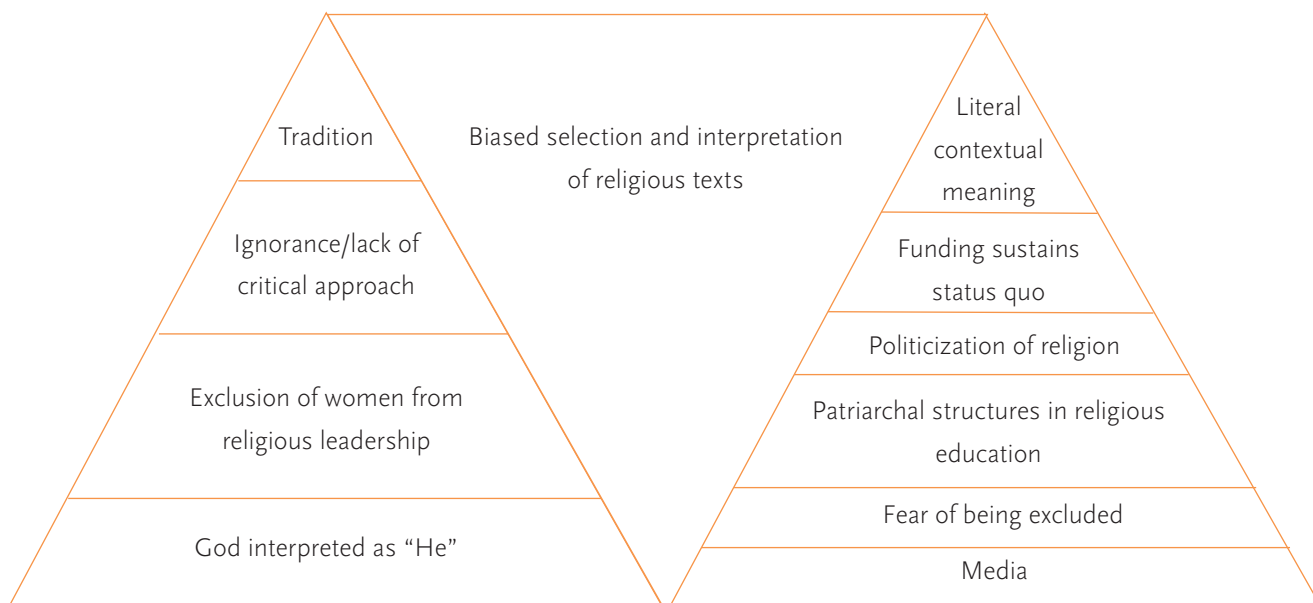
- 1 the male control of/male interpretation and selection of religious texts;
- 2 isolation: the lack of space, recognition, and support for women;
- 3 the need for mainstreaming of peace education with a gender perspective in formal and informal education systems;
- 4 the lack of integration of UNSCR 1325 in faith-based peacebuilding;
- 5 the difficulty of communicating about issues of gender equality and women’s rights within religious contexts/ settings.

**Group 1: Male control of/male interpretation and selection of religious texts**

The core problem reviewed by the group concerned the “biased selection and interpretation of religious texts”. The *key pillars* upholding this problem are specified in the triangle model above.



**Male control of/male interpretation and selection of religious texts**



The group defined “Gender-sensitive religious interpretations at the basis of religious practice” as a main goal. As strategies to reach that goal, the group proposed:

- investing in religious texts written by women, including translating them into local languages and making them widely available;
- enabling interfaith meetings between feminist theologians;
- working closely with religious leaders and identifying key change agents within religious structures;
- creating and disseminating educational materials based on progressive religious interpretations;
- supporting/funding alternative media to communicate progressive religious interpretations, especially in oppressive societies;
- developing a communication strategy as women peace-makers in faith-based settings;
- investing in building interfaith solidarity among progressive religious actors (including also non-religious actors and networks);
- applying a gender, peace, and human rights analytical framework to religious texts;
- mapping out and highlighting existing religious texts/statements that support peace; and connecting to existing groups that are working on this already.

### Group 2: Isolation: The lack of space, recognition, and support for women

Group 2 described how all of the five major world religions exclude women from equal power-sharing and create obstacles in terms of the implementation of women’s rights. That contributes to sustaining the disadvantaged position of women in society. Christian fundamentalism is a big problem in the US, for example, where women activists regularly have clashes with fundamentalists at the UN level. Although some religions have female goddesses, as in the case of Hinduism for example, that does not guarantee respect for women’s rights. One participant from India shared how the Hindu rituals often serve to keep the women busy instead of empowering them, as women become so engrossed in daily religious rituals that they hardly have time for anything else.

A participant from Kashmir shared how women’s voices have no space at all in the Kashmir conflict, and the conflict has really pushed back the issue of women’s rights. Women suffer in so many ways: they are raped, tortured, mutilated, and forced into marriages with the security forces. There is a lot of social stigma in this very conservative community, which originates from religion. Those who

harm women usually get away with it, as it is extremely difficult for women to talk about what is happening to them; their community and family often blames the women for it (e.g. women are accused of shaming the family). As a consequence, many women suffer in silence, and because nobody talks about it, the community does not realize and recognize what is happening to women. A participant from Nepal shared how she worked through religious leaders to raise awareness about violence against women (VAW). She did not mention “gender equality” to them, but rather asked Buddhist monks and Hindu priests to start speaking about the need to improve women’s lives. That worked out very well, so she suggested approaching religious leaders more and telling them about women’s lives and the problems they face. She concluded: “Many religious leaders are not aware of what is happening in women’s lives; they live so isolated from that reality.”

A participant from Madagascar mentioned how difficult it was for women activists to involve the Church during the conflict, since religious leaders were also split along party lines. A lot of hate groups were inciting people, making use of the media to set people up against each other. As the religious leaders were losing their credibility, the women started looking for women with charisma to stand up as leaders. She recounted: “As women from Christian and Muslim backgrounds, we came together to put out a different message – a message of peace – and for that we drew from our religious backgrounds. We made it very clear to the people that our religious and human values were at the foundation of our peace work. We also used the media to put our message out there, using the Internet and radio to give a counterweight to the hate speech. We made it clear that it was not our ambition to solve the crisis, as we realized the depth of the conflict, but we emphasized that we as people will have to live together and that we therefore needed to focus on what we can do to live together. We really worked on people’s state of mind. It moved the whole debate from thinking in terms of opposition to looking for common ground and shared needs.”

She stressed that the women chose to take up their own role as peacebuilders, and not simply to rely on others, such as the United Nations. She felt actually condemned by the international community, as if Madagascar were just a rough country led by militants. This also made her feel more connected to other countries that were facing problems. She had experienced how easy it is to internalize a feeling of victimhood. She stated: “In that sense, we can be our own worst obstacle... I am tired of accepting these systems and internalizing their way of looking at the

world, leaving many of us thinking that we first need to study this and that and then spend years building up skills before we are “capable enough” to take action against the injustices that are happening. By doing that, you just fit yourself into the oppressive system...”

As *strategies*, the group proposed:

- *raising awareness about women’s rights* within the different religions (e.g. through publications);
- *highlighting female role models* within each religious tradition, as those will serve as a source of inspiration to women;
- *reinterpreting religious texts* in favor of women;
- *involving the media in your peace work* and working with them in terms of spreading alternative messages that focus on co-existence and human values;
- *making use of the Internet to spread information and mobilize people* (e.g. by creating an urgent action network);
- *securing support from (male) religious allies* in the struggle for gender equality and women’s rights, since those will have a lot of influence on the moral values;
- *creating women-only spaces* so women can be empowered through the sharing of experiences and by defining their own peacebuilding approaches and religious interpretations;
- *creating a group statement* and disseminating that widely in the framework of awareness-raising.

### Group 3: The need for mainstreaming of peace education with a gender perspective in formal and informal education systems

As *core challenges*, the group identified:

- the prevalence of *gender violence* (domestic violence, rape) in society;
- the occurrence of *religion-based violence* in many societies.

As a main goal to work towards, the group defined “the integration of peace education with a gender perspective in formal and informal education systems”.

As *strategies* for achieving that goal, the group *suggested*:

- *lobbying at the government level* for the integration of peace education with a gender perspective within mainstream education;
- *training teachers* on how to integrate peace education with a gender perspective in their teaching;

- (in terms of lobbying and advocacy) *finding key allies at different levels*: government, schools, student associations, religious institutions, etc.;
- investing in the *integration of peace education within women studies*;
- *promoting gender-sensitive peace training programs* in regional and local contexts, including sessions on “who is the other” to address stereotyping and us/them thinking;
- investing in the *online sharing of resources* and the *creation of a global gender-sensitive peace curriculum* that can be localized by group members (there are a lot of interfaith curricula out there: make use of them and include a gender perspective!);
- *involving theologians and religious leaders in peace education projects* and making sure to include a gender perspective in that work.

### Group 4: The lack of integration of UNSCR 1325 in faith-based peacebuilding

The *main problem* that the group identified was this: “Women are involved in conflict prevention and resolution processes within faith-based settings, but they are not operating at the higher decision-making levels.”

As short-term strategies for dealing with that problem, the group proposed:

- promoting UNSCR 1325 further at the grassroots level in an *accessible manner*;
- *raising awareness and educating* people further with regard to the topic and reaching out to NGOs/media/religious leaders;
- *involving religious leaders and communities* in women’s peace activities in order to generate their support;
- creating a *support network* under the banner of “faithful friends of 1325”;
- designing a *lobbying and advocacy strategy* to put this topic on the agenda, for example by linking up with UN representatives on the issue of faith and religion or approaching the highest religious leaders (e.g. the Dalai Lama) for support and speaking out on the matter;
- creating a *mailing list* for those working on the topic as a means for sharing experiences and information.



### Group 5: The difficulty of communicating about issues of gender equality and women's rights within religious contexts/settings

As *main problem* the group identified “the lack of a shared language and of productive communication styles with regard to issues of gender equality and women's rights within religious contexts.”

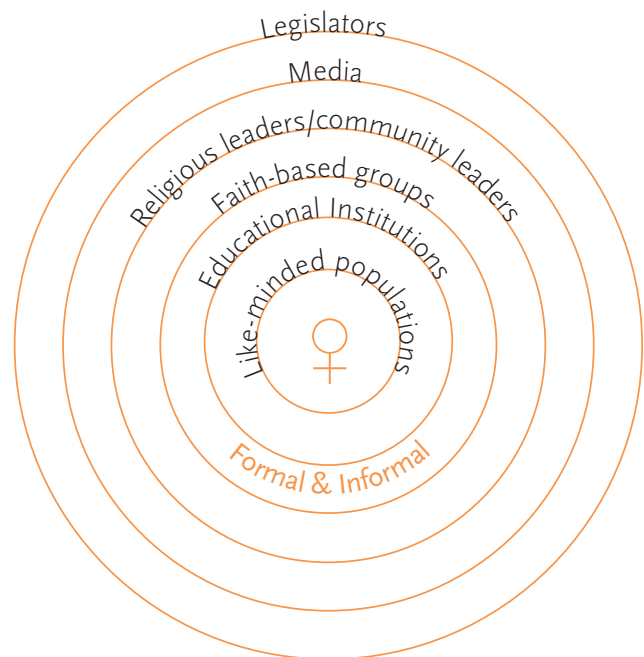
As *pillars supporting* this problem, the group defined:

- *conceptual confusion and the lack of shared definitions*, resulting in different interpretations and thus undermining the chances of reaching a common vision;
- *the lack of listening skills* and the use of violent and belligerent language;
- *the fact that some people may experience feminist jargon* as being exclusive, which can contribute to further separation;
- *cultural differences*;
- *gender inequality* in communications (e.g. men dominating discussions);
- *the fear of speaking up* and challenging discriminating religious interpretations;
- *the lack of information/knowledge/publications* on the topic of gender, religion, and peacebuilding;
- *the biased media* (leading to sensationalism and misinterpretations).

As *action steps*, the group proposed:

- investing in *education and training* on gender awareness within religious structures;
- developing *inclusive communication strategies* and language;
- investing in *conceptual clarity and shared definitions*;
- *including (gender-sensitive) men* in the re-interpretation of religious texts so as to make sure it is inclusive for them as well (a holistic approach to gender);
- identifying *key change agents*;
- *identifying resources* for this kind of work.

In terms of *allies*, the group identified the following types, listed here using the model of concentric circles discussed above (Step 2):



### 3. Afternoon session: Workshops

After the morning presentations, the group divided itself into two groups to attend the two afternoon workshops, both of which were facilitated by participants.

#### Workshop on LGBT people within the context of religion

The facilitator explained that the idea behind organizing a workshop on LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people came from wanting to address the many human-rights violations being committed against LGBT people in the transnational context. Those violations are often driven by religious motives. She felt it was important to talk about this issue within a safe space for women of faith. As she put it: “It feels like the time is right to brave the moral terrain where homophobia wrestles with God’s call to love one another.” She continued by providing some statistics:

It is estimated that 600 million people in the world are homosexual, which is 10% of the population worldwide. The percentage rises to 20% when one includes people with a bi-sexual orientation. Many religions perceive homosexuality as an anomaly and homosexuals as subhuman. In 77 countries in the world it is considered illegal to engage in a homosexual act; in eight countries, homosexuals face the death penalty. All over the world, LGBT people are threatened, raped, tortured, and murdered.



The workshop was structured as a dialogue/group process on how the sensitive subject of LGBT human rights relates to religion. Religious arguments have been and continue to be one of the main justifications used for the persecution of LGBT people. The workshop focused on how women as interfaith peacemakers can understand and even identify with the gendered oppression that LGBT people suffer.

The goal of the workshop was for the group to discuss if it is possible to be women of faith and to support and advocate on behalf of LGBT people. As the facilitator expressed it: “This session is not about asking for or seeking approval for the ‘lifestyle’ so many religions are intolerant of. It is about lifting up the LGBT’s right to exist.”

During the session it became clear that participants represented a variety of opinions, experiences, and backgrounds. There was discussion, there was some contention, and there were emotions. But through it all, there was a deep curiosity, but also respect and acceptance. That some of the participants were hardly familiar with the issue became evident from questions like: Who are “homosexuals?” “What are their relationships like?” “How do they, you know, come together?” There was discussion of morality, with one participant stating that she had a strong feeling against “homosexuality” and wanted to ask more questions about it. She later had breakfast with the facilitator and shared her feelings then in more detail.

Overall the workshop concluded with an openness toward supporting LGBT rights and people. It was a transformative workshop where the lives of LGBTs were brought forth as a subject for understanding and validation. In the end, some women shared about their vulnerabilities and how they identified with the LGBT struggle. Religions were also explored for their ability to offer love and sanctuary to LGBT people. The majority of the workshop participants were open to promoting more tolerance and acceptance of LGBT people, and indicated that they valued the opportunity to have an open, spiritually-oriented discussion about and analysis of it, using a human-rights perspective.

### An Hour of Dialogue

The other participant-led workshop on the second day revolved around interfaith dialogue. The workshop was led by a participant who works as a youth-program coordinator at a regional NGO in the Middle East that promotes interfaith dialogue, peacebuilding and provides capacity building for agents of change. She discussed its annual

International Work & Study Camp that brings together youths (aged 18-30) from all over the world to learn about and practice interfaith dialogue. The camp is designed to bring together young people from Islamic and Christian backgrounds in the East and the West to learn more about the cultures of the world and to discover the many bonds that link us together as humans.

The camp’s aim is to promote – through an interactive and multidisciplinary training workshop – enlightened, respectful, and peaceful forms of dialogue and interaction and to create an understanding of human rights as well as of their application in daily life.

### Dialogue

The word dialogue comes from the Greek word *dia-logos* and means “through words” or “two words”, meaning two people exchanging words. The opposite of dialogue would typically be a monologue, where only one person speaks. In a world where people are far more often engaged in “group monologues”, which are often exacerbated by digital technology, the need to re-introduce and re-affirm genuine dialogue is key for local and international development and peacebuilding.

This workshop explored the three different types of dialogue: dialogue with the head, dialogue with hands and feet, and dialogue with the heart. The first is a dialogue of the *intellect*, the second dialogue is practice by *doing* (as opposed to speaking and listening), and the third is a more personal, being *from the heart*. All are interconnected; ideally, we should engage in dialogue holistically.

The participants were divided into groups of three and practiced interfaith dialogue by sharing their journeys with their faith. They engaged in deep listening and deep sharing from the core. While one shared, the second actively listened, and the third observed the listener’s skills. After the exercise, each group shared their experience with the rest of the participants.

The workshop concluded with a comparison of a person with a house that has many rooms. Those rooms include the relationships that we have in our lives. The focus was on how those relationships are also part of the dialogue that we engage ourselves in. All our relationships have affected us and have created a room inside of us, and when we engage in new dialogues and relationships, those old relationships will affect the way we approach new people and the way we listen to new people. Perhaps the best



step to take, based on all this, is to become aware of our relationships and how they have affected us, to become aware of our thoughts and whether they are indeed our own or some else's, and to become aware of where we are speaking and listening from: the mind, the heart, or the hands and feet.

After the workshops, participants gathered for a last round of reflections on the Consultation.

#### 4. Concluding recommendations

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

During the last session of the Consultation, participants formulated a set of recommendations for activists and policy makers in regard to supporting the involvement of women in faith-based and interfaith peacebuilding.

##### Support and sustainability

- Religious interpretations and cultural practices have become closely intertwined, with patriarchal values infusing religious interpretations and practices at the expense of women's equality and rights. In order to challenge these practices, it is crucial to *support and invest in progressive religious scholars*, theologians and activists who are reinterpreting religious texts from a women's perspective. In that regard, education and capacity building – both of religious leaders and of the general public – are important areas of focus.
- *To sustain each other*, it is important to create a network so as to be able to express support for each other's work, exchange experiences, and support strong female religious leaders within the different faith traditions.

##### Building bridges

- *Involving progressive male religious leaders* as allies in the work for more gender-sensitive, faith-based peacebuilding is crucial, as is actively co-operating with and including progressive men's groups within each of the different faith traditions. The participants stressed that men are not the problem; rather, it is the patriarchal system that manifests itself in discriminatory and fundamentalist religious thinking. It is important to show-

case examples of how men also become victims of fundamentalist interpretations and how women also contribute to sustaining this patriarchal system. An inclusive gender analysis is crucial if men are to understand and recognize their stake in the work for gender justice.

- As *religious leaders* are important role models in society, their position on gender equality is crucial, since it will significantly impact public opinion. It is therefore important to *include them* in women's peace work and get them “on board” in terms of raising the public's awareness about gender issues.
- *Faith-based peacebuilding work should not take place in isolation from secular peacebuilding initiatives*. Women of faith often create their own spaces, also because they may not feel understood or accepted by more secular (women's) NGOs, which tend to perceive religion mainly as a source of oppression for women. It is important to get away from the “either/or” way of thinking, which pits religion against women's rights. Placing the multitude of problems that women face within such a narrow framework will not help to address them effectively and can form an obstacle in terms of ensuring that gender is on the agenda of faith-based peacebuilding. Many women peacemakers do not want to choose between religion and women's rights when working for peace and gender equality in their community, country or region. *It is therefore important that both faith-based and secular women activists engage with one another in their work for gender justice and gender-sensitive peacebuilding*. Work needs to be done in terms of *claiming the right to redefine religion*, bringing out its positive and empowering aspects in women's lives while strategizing against harmful and discriminatory practices that are justified on the basis of religion.

##### Creating awareness and further education

- Considering that ten years of UNSCR 1325 have yet to bring forth the results hoped for, it is crucial to “*translate*” *UNSCR 1325 and related resolutions into the local realities and contexts*, so that they will make sense to the local (religious) communities and people will be more apt to internalize them.
- As the issues of women's rights/religion/peacebuilding are complex, it is important to *educate donors, policy makers, religious institutions, and civil society on how interfaith and faith-based peacebuilding impacts on women's lives*. It is important to recognize that religion



can also be a driving force that leads women to engage in peacebuilding and other activist work. Likewise, it is crucial to acknowledge that religious leaders have an important voice in communities (with the potential to obstruct as well as to promote gender equality). Hence, religious leaders should not be ignored as stakeholders by those working for women's rights and gender justice.

- *Creativity* is important! (During the Consultation days, several participants shared inspiring and creative examples of how they managed to get religious leaders on board in their work for women's rights.)

**“As the issues of women's rights/religion/peacebuilding are complex, it is important to educate donors, policy makers, religious institutions, and civil society on how interfaith and faith-based peacebuilding impacts on women's lives.”**

## 5. Final reflections

During the last session, the Consultation was evaluated on two levels: by means of a group reflection exercise facilitated by Diana Francis, and by means of a questionnaire that participants could fill out anonymously.

The *group reflection* revealed that participants regretted that the Consultation lasted only three days; as the group was rather large, the participants did not manage to get to know all of the others and hear about each other's work and experiences.

The participants particularly appreciated the participatory methodology used during the three days together. They felt it had really been a consultation: an exchange during which they had been “consulted and could consult others”. As such, the Consultation had brought them new insights that could be used directly in their work at home: “This forum gave me rich resources and ideas that I can take home and pass on.” The opportunity to discuss with others from different countries made many realize they were not alone in the problems they faced. Some participants lived and worked in extremely difficult situations and particularly appreciated the opportunity to be together with other women in a safe space and to discover the many similarities between them. This made the Consultation an empowering experience for many: “My world has grown

by coming here,” as one participant summarized her experience. “We are a council of wise women,” another activist concluded, stating: “I have learned more from three days of people's real-life experiences than from any book I could have read on the topic.” In particular, the idea of creating a “Faithful Friends for 1325” network generated a lot of enthusiasm within the group.

Besides feeling supported and having gained new ideas, some participants also went home feeling more hopeful and encouraged. Working for change within religious traditions can be very challenging, and hearing about others' creative solutions had inspired them to not give up: “My expectations have been more than fulfilled. I realize now that I need to work more with religious leaders. Before I came here, I had kind of given up on religion to some extent.”

Participants underlined the importance of having the Consultation not be a one-off event: “I want this Consultation to be extended; this gathering should be seen as only the beginning.” For many, going home meant going back into a challenging environment. As one participant expressed it: “These three days together have created a good foundation, yet today, now that I am going home, I realize I face the challenge of integrating what I have learned here into my daily reality.” Remaining in touch with one another and having a channel to continue joint reflection when back home was considered crucial. It was agreed that a Google group would be created by the WPP team so as to respond to that need.

The answers to the *questionnaire* revealed that, overall, the Consultation was evaluated very positively, with an average rating of 8.9 out of 10. Two-thirds of the participants specified that they had gained a lot more insight in terms of current (best) practices in relation to religion, peacebuilding and gender. Sixty-nine percent of the participants felt that the Consultation had made them a lot more knowledgeable on the nexus between gender, religion and peacebuilding, and an impressive 89% of the participants said that they felt very confident about sharing and discussing this topic with others. Asked about whether they planned to integrate their insights from the Consultation into their current work, 82% of the participants indicated they would integrate a lot of what they had learned directly into their work at home.

The answers to the questionnaire also revealed that some of the most meaningful experiences the women had during the Consultation were on a personal level. For exam-



ple, several women shared how the Consultation made them realize that other women share similar experiences even though they live in different countries or even on different continents. The group discussions, stories and strategy-sharing within an all-women setting were mentioned by most of the participants as the most valuable part of the Consultation. In terms of recommendations, some participants indicated that they would have liked to learn more about shared spiritual values underpinning a culture of peace and to have more practical examples of interfaith peacebuilding. They also suggested including men in any follow-up work.

Overall, the group-reflection exercise and the feedback from the questionnaire revealed that the Consultation had been successful in terms of providing a space where the women could bring their doubts, worries, and frustrations, but also draw lessons from others, share hopes, voice dreams, and find inspiration. It was amazing to see how this large group of people, being able to spend just three days together, had been able to connect with each other on a very deep level.

In relation to the *anticipated results*, the Consultation produced the following:

- An analysis of the current practices and obstacles in relation to integrating a gender perspective in faith-based peacebuilding.
- A preliminary inventory of *best practices* from the field and *strategies used* to overcome obstacles.
- Several *publications*, including:
  - an *article* on the Consultation in the IFOR/WPP newsletter *Cross the Lines* (issue no. 41), which was disseminated to in five different languages among approximately 3,500 recipients;
  - several *articles* on the Consultation on Open Democracy ([www.opendemocracy.net.org](http://www.opendemocracy.net.org));
  - documentation of the Consultation proceedings in a *report*, which will be sent to all Consultation stakeholders for wider distribution (several of the participants are part of world-wide networks), as well as be made available for downloading from the WPP's website;
  - the *2011 May 24 Action Pack*, which will focus on the Consultation's theme. This publication will contain a list of relevant networks/institutions/organizations in relation to the theme.

- The distribution of the Consultation findings at *national and international meetings*, such as the “1325 plus 10” events in New York (October 2010).
- The establishment of an *online community of practitioners* (a Google group) to ensure the continuity of the network after the Consultation. Upon returning home, participants continued to connect by way of the Google group in the framework of sharing experiences and ideas:

“I am eager to build on the energy which came out of Cyprus but to focus on modest and concrete steps which would be meaningful and strategic and which would also build on the WPP's vision for their Consultation.

“I am provisionally thinking of building on Cyprus and our Conference last year to bring a group of women peacebuilders – again from two regions: the Western Balkans and the Middle East – whose faith constitutes their motive and calling as peace activists. I have not attempted to define the content (it is very much at an idea level), but when I was hill-walking at the weekend several ideas came to me, bringing together this and the input from the flip charts which identified specific issues. Building also into this simple storytelling, as we heard from Israel and Palestine in Cyprus, of women from different religious backgrounds – which I found very moving and tangible – who have worked together for the common good of their community; of the barriers placed before them, particularly those of a religious nature, and how these have been creatively overcome (or not); of scripture that encourages their participation and activism; of scripture whose traditional interpretation has hindered their participation; of identifying and dismantling barriers (or at least looking at the options that are open to us) that are based in religious tradition but not in scripture – this would be empowering examples of successful practices which could perhaps be multiplied elsewhere...”





