RELIGION AND GENDER –
TEXT, PRAXIS AND DEVELOPMENT CONTESTATIONS

Position Paper Round Table 14 June 2019

INTRODUCTION

The Pew Research Center carried out international surveys of the general population in 84 countries conducted between 2008 and 2015. Based on these wide-ranging datasets,

[The] study finds that, globally, women are more devout than men by several standard measures of religious commitment. But the study also reveals a more complex relationship between religion and gender than has been commonly assumed. While women generally are more religious, men display higher levels of religious commitment in some countries and religious groups. And in other contexts, there are few, if any, discernable gender differences in religion.

The above quote highlights one of the many interesting facets in intersections between religions and gender. But what hard data and surveys have yet to show is that when it comes to the work of religious actors (religious institutions, religious clergy/ leaders, and religious NGOs) in the broad domain of development – from nutrition and sanitation to health, education, climate change and peace building – is that religious men are the majority of those speaking and advocating about the value of religious inputs, while the actual delivery of services, is largely carried out by women.

Thanks to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as Agenda 2030, formulated and agreed to by 193 governments, an entire SDG is devoted to gender equality and women's

empowerment (SDG 5). In spite of setting this as a global goal to which all governments are meant to hold themselves accountable, the 2018 Progress Report on the SDGs, submitted by the United Nations Secretary General to the 193 governments of the UN, stated that:

While some forms of discrimination against women and girls are diminishing, gender inequality continues to hold women back and deprives them of basic rights and opportunities. Empowering women requires addressing structural issues such as unfair social norms and attitudes as well as developing progressive legal frameworks that promote equality between women and men.

A clear fact is that the road to gender equality remains a long one to traverse. An equally clear reality is that social norms and attitudes remain among the most critical challenges. We know that religious actors are among the strongest social and cultural gatekeepers in most parts of the world, and many religious discourses still uphold patriarchal dynamics. Indeed, some would say that religious institutions and landscapes remain, by and large, the strongest bastions of patriarchy in modern times.

At the same time, given the existence of a global goal on gender equality signed on to by 193 governments, it is no longer 'acceptable' in many circles, to appear to be advocating against women's rights. In fact, even conservative religious actors speak of the value of "supporting women and girls's rights" even while decrying human rights' based policies which ostensibly "rid women of their dignity by insisting they use contraception and access abortion" (as was the gist of some of the presentations hosted by the Holy See at the 2019 UN Commission on the Status of Women, for example).

In other words, as countless conferences, research work and reports by now indicate, women's rights are 'acceptable' to advocate for, as long as they do not challenge the quintessential patriarchal status quo. Women's ordination in the Catholic Church, their leadership (as Imams) of men in Muslim prayers, matters of sexuality (including gender identities, contraception abortion and sexuality education) are in the basket of undesirables as far as many religious actors are concerned.

At the same time, there is a clearer realisation of the growing momentum and cacophony around religion and development, religion and foreign policy, religion and environment, religion and peacebuilding, etc., all the way to religion and agriculture. Yet, it would seem that the majority of the so-called "religious" voices emerging today and being provided with multiple platforms, are male dominated. And rarely, in the male dominated spectrum, do we see or hear or the role of women of faith, nor do we see or hear the range of human rights issues which are fundamental to social tension

While there have been several academic and policy conferences and discussions around religion, gender and development, few have dared to host the 'difficult conversations ' or questions around the "taboo issues", which are rooted in theology and praxis. And none have convened diverse religions (including those that affiliate to patriarchal institutions), together with faith-based NGOs, secular human rights NGOs, academics, and government representatives.

The Roundtable will bring together academics, secular policy makers (inside governmental and intergovernmental spaces) as well as the faith-based organisations most active in engaging around these issues on a daily basis. The Roundtable is structured to serve as one of the needed 'open and protected spaces' for reflection and open critical debate, which can inform the diversity of interlocutors engaged in dealing with the intersectionalities between religion and public life.

In that regard, therefore, the objectives of the discussions will include the following:

1. Harvesting the respective knowledge and experiences of bridging theology and praxis, human rights and religious jurisprudence in the nexus of religion-gender-development.
2. Reviewing concrete examples of how religious actors are themselves engaged in working on and around gender equality and women's empowerment issues – with a view to these contestations
3. Suggesting concrete recommendations for academia, governmental actors and multilaterals.

As a prelude to the above objectives, the following sections provide some insight into the diverse intersectionalities mentioned.

The first section, drafted by Professor Peter Ben Smit, seeks to assess how historical research on religious sources, such as canonical texts, can shed on constructions of gender. The question Professor Smit seeks to answer is whether such research confirms 'the "default" of hegemonic masculine dominance at the expense of other genders, or, he asks, is the picture more diverse and challenging? Smit concludes by noting how scholarship on religion

and gender, far from remaining in the realm of theory or study, may actually contribute towards the realization of Sustainable Development Goal number 5, which is focused on gender equality and women's empowerment.

The second part moves from text to national context, literally narrating two stories, in an attempt to understand how a broader range of faith-based NGOs (FBOs) - particularly churches and other faith communities with less 'progressive', and relatively more patriarchal perspectives - can actually be engaged in gender justice issues. The author, Corrie van der Ven, herself a development practitioner working in a faith-based NGO, also seeks to highlight why working with relatively more 'deliberative' FBOs, needs to be understood as an opportunity for transformative collaboration.

The third section, shared by Marieke van der Linden based on an internship with the UNFPA, presents a quick and brief snapshot from the global advocacy context - the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Marieke notes the two sides of the religion and gender coin, as was manifest during the myriad CSW debates: the pro-women's rights aspects, as well as the patriarchal readings.

RELIGIOUS SOURCES

CHALLENGING GENDER IN RELIGIOUS SOURCES – BY PETER BEN SMIT

Constructions of gender and religious traditions reciprocally influence each other. Religious traditions tend to legitimize and marginalize certain forms of gender, whereas particular embodied performances of gender by members of a religious tradition also shape what the actual content of such a tradition is. The evaluation of such interactions naturally depends on one's own positionality and determines one's stance regarding which kind of interaction between religion and gender one finds troubling, or which one helpfully troubles problematic gender constructions

When it comes to the SDGs, religion and gender, SDG 5 is clear in its focus: promoting an end of discrimination against and furthering the emancipation of women and girls globally. For theologians and other scholars of religion, this invites a two-sided question, of which both sides should be taken into account equally: what resources do religious traditions offer in terms of furthering these goals and to what extent do they contain obstacles? Such a question goes beyond framing religious traditions solely as obstacles, given that the current state of research simply does not warrant this (in Jewish tradition the subversive widow Judith in the biblical book of the same name is a good example; in Asian Christian the 'revolutionary' Filipino representation of Mary, Birhen Balintawak, is an example). Addressing the matter in this way also prevents too romantic a view of religious traditions when it comes to their role in furthering women's emancipation, given that that weight of the evidence certainly would not support that either. These two perspectives would also cover much of the scope of feminist

Yet, the study of religion also gives reason to go somewhat beyond the way in which gender is presented in SDG 5. Here, at least rhetorically and at first sight, gender is narrowed down to having to do 'women and girls' only and by consequence makes other genders invisible. Religious sources are frequently quite clear that each issue having to do with the position and understanding of women also always has to do with the manner in which other genders are understood, notably men (when thinking in terms of a gender binary, which is problematic as such

Bron foto: PixaBay

– many religious traditions do not assume such a binary). A collection of religious texts such as the 'Christian Bible' (i.e. 'Old' and 'New' Testaments) is replete with texts, in which the deity puts men in their place when it comes to their treatment of women or their 'naturally dominant' role – of course, this corpus of texts also contains more problematic texts. The young field of 'religion and masculinity,' which, to be sure, is 'created out of Eve's rib,' given its indebtedness to feminist research, can make a significant contribution here.

Scholarship in religion and gender can, therefore, contribute to furthering SDG 5 in three specific ways:

- Identifying discriminatory traditions (texts, doctrines, symbols, rites, practices, etc.) or traditions that have been interpreted in such a manner and critically discussing them.
- Identifying and highlighting traditions with emancipatory potential for women (and other marginal genders), especially when these have been marginalized or forgotten.
- Identifying and highlighting traditions that question problematic forms of gender, notably toxic forms of masculinity, as a resource for contemporary reconstructions of the same.

In doing to, such scholarship remains close to the religious traditions involved, which is important for how such traditions and the people embodying them, can themselves become agents of emancipation. In other words, it is, in the end, the voice of the traditions themselves which can make a contribution, and in doing so further their own transformation, given that the relationship between religion and gender remains a reciprocal one.

NARRATIVES FROM PRACTICE

TELLING THE STORIES, HIGHLIGHTING THE OPPORTUNITIES – BY CORRIE VAN DER VEN

We need legislation that protects women, girls, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual (LGBT) people, we need religious actors with a sound understanding of human rights and contextual interpretations of holy scriptures. But we also need to go out of the comfort zone of 'progressiveness' and diversify partnerships with FBOs in order to leave no one behind, and to strengthen a holistic type of development.

In the following paragraphs, I share two stories which are based on actual engagement between and within FBOs and communities. I then also reflect on some of the opportunities presented through these and myriad other, practices.

TWO STORIES

In the rural areas of Zambia, bible study groups offer a socially acceptable opportunity for poor women to organise themselves, given their husbands are less likely to object to bible studies. The 'Tamar Campaign approach' helps women (re) read bible stories, connect them to their own life trajectories, and seek for changes in their lives. Bible stories like the rape of Tamar, Shifra and Puah who stood up to the pharaoh, Jesus' conversation with an outcast Samaritan woman, tend to be the are starting points of conversations about gender-based violence, and the power of women. The outcome of these bible studies are not determined beforehand. Much depends on the facilitator and on the women themselves. And who knows, perhaps the Holy Spirit.

There are no quick wins in these sorts of processes, and sometimes no 'wins' at all. Nevertheless, such bible study groups sow the seeds and provide for opportunities by providing an 'infrastructure' of thought and form, built on and with what is ultimately, for the people of these communities, a language of the heart.

Another story comes from the Protestant Church (PKN) of the Netherlands, which is a result of the merger of three protestant churches in 2004. The differences of opinions, especially on sensitive issues like the rights of Palestinians or LGBT people between the communities, were greater than they had been in the individual congregations.

Frequently, some of these sensitive issues emerge, thereby leading to regular discussions about LGBT - fortunately including LGBT people themselves. The results of these discussions, however, can sometimes leave much to be desired – especially on the part of those who believe that God is a liberating and loving God.

Ignoring those who have other ideas about God, can be very tempting. But as long as dialogue is possible, it is worth staying together. Splitting up means also means giving up open and protected spaces (for difficult conversations and for dissent) on LGBT, which is unlikely to advance the desired social change. Far better, then, to maintain the open and protected spaces

Bron foto: https://www.werkgroepgh.nl/index.php/achtergronden/kerk-homoseksualiteit

where various interpretations of the bible are shared, and where LGBT people themselves can actively partake of sharing their experiences and beliefs - including with people who normally do not (want to) meet them.

Again, the outcome of these dialogues are not predetermined - otherwise they cannot be called dialogues. And again, there are no quick gains but rather, long processes. Still, the inclusive dialogues present opportunities to influence thinking, seek to normalise 'the Other', and at the very least, prevent the temptation which exclusion and lack of engagement may point to: radicalisation of opinions.

TWO OPPORTUNITIES

The ways FBOs deal with gendered contestations vary. Some FBOs avoid the difficult issues altogether. Others do what other NGOs do: they are progressive and use the same methodology. If and when governmental agencies in democratic contexts work with FBOs, the likelihood is that they would work with the latter type of FBOs.

But there are also other FBOs, for ease of reference let us name them the more 'deliberative' ones, which are using a qualitatively different approach, wherein the language of faith is central, and open and protected spaces are deliberately created and nurtured. Such approaches entail longer timespans, allowing for ongoing conversations, encounters and alternative narratives. Per definition, such processes are longer and yield – sometimes - relatively less quantifiable targets.

I maintain that such 'deliberative' FBOs, which do not avoid difficult issues but deal with them in a different way, offer an opportunity. Partnerships with such FBOs gradually enable broader and deeper reach into community behaviour, attitudes, and lived realities.

Indeed, partnering with such FBOs offers a further opportunity. In discussions about religion and development, it is often said that the secular concept of development should be challenged, for the sake of locally grounded development. Yet, this is unlikely to take place, when we partner with FBOs that are using the same language and operating in the same manner, as other NGOs. But working with the relatively 'slower' FBOs, can be far more illustrative about different notions of development. Furthermore, they can diversify the base of stakeholders involved, and enable a wider recognition of definitions of success, failure, health, resilience, as well as other ways of measurement.

In other words partnering on gender justice with the 'more deliberative' FBOs might lead -in the longer run - to reaching a bigger amount of people in a more sustainable, and holistic way.

FROM THE GRASSROOTS TO THE GLOBAL ADVOCACY TABLES: THE UN COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN (CSW), BY MARIEKE VAN DER LINDEN

As noted earlier, the road to gender equality remains a long one to traverse. Especially in Europe, we often think that we have already achieved a lot concerning women's rights and protection. However women are still vulnerable to injustice, such as human trafficking and modern slavery, even here in the ''safe Western world''. Right now, the world faces the largest refugee crisis since world war two. Among people on the move, women are especially vulnerable, including to modern slavery, exploitation, abuse and human trafficking. The biggest social injustices, as the Salvation army noted (at their event during the 2019 United Nations Commission on the Status of Women- CSW) is that ''we see it in other places, but not in our own''.

As the UN Population Fund documentation since 2008 shows, the roles played by FBOs are increasingly recognized by governments, other NGO's as well as international organizations. Many local faith based organisations (FBOs), such as churches, mosques, temples and affiliated NGO entities, operate at the grassroots level of communities, which makes them able to detect the often unseen struggles women are facing.

However, the increasing influence of more patriarchal religious actors is equally, if not more clearly, evident. As was apparent at the UN Commission of the Status of Women this year, patriarchal religious organisations were also able to express their views, and undertake campaigns taking positions against abortion, contraception and gender orientation. In fact, some of their campaigns were stringent enough to even lead to some governmental delegates complaining of being "harassed" by them.

Initiatives of positive change by FBOs, also shared at the CSW, include examples shared by the Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Tanzania, as well as in Palestine.

In Tanzania, menstruation and related issues for women has been a taboo topic, especially among men, as these issues are often not well understood. All the more notable then when different religious leaders came together with the government, to address this issue. Not only did the government withdraw taxes on menstrual hygiene products only two weeks after the national consultation, but the religious leaders set a noteworthy example, and precedent, by the mere act of talking about these issues, instead of ignoring and perpetuating the taboo.

In Palestine, because of their relative autonomy, religious groups are allowed to make their own laws. The Lutheran church seized upon this opportunity by introducing gender equality laws, such as raising the age of marriage to 18, and insisting on equal distribution of heritage among men and women, as well as the right to ask for divorce or separation.

Bron foto: PixaBay

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

THE GENDER LITMUS TEST BY AZZA KARAM

The above reflections show the diverse attempts to read, and to see, the narratives tying religion to gender – from textual to contextual. They bring to mind what the Egyptian-born Harvard University Professor, Leila Ahmed, noted in an interview in 2006, reflecting on her seminal work on women and Islam. Professor Ahmed said:

What we're living through right now is so startling to me in some ways, partly because it seems to repeat history in a very disturbing way. And what I mean is it was extraordinary for me to turn on the television during the Afghan war and see women throwing off the veil, or see endless programs on CNN on the veil, see Laura Bush speaking about women in Afghanistan and liberating them. And what was disturbing there was to see the replay of what the British Empire did in Egypt 100 years ago. {emphasis mine}

Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that the rejuvenation of interest in all things religion and development replicates some of the most problematic features of colonialism in the 18th and 19th Centuries. It is wise to be reminded that missionary work was, in many instances, a precursor to the full-blown political, economic and social colonization of nations, which in some cases lasted for centuries.

Religion is not new to development or foreign policy. In fact, it is the oldest matchmaker between politics and power.

Women's lived realities as linked to religion, have long been a tool of politically dominant foreign powers, attempting to rationalize their quintessentially 'civilizing mission' in the land of the Other. As Aspden notes in her review of Leila Ahmed's analysis of late 19th- and early 20th-century colonial officials…"traditional forms of veiling and seclusion were clear evidence of women's "degradation" by Islam, the religion's inferiority to Christianity, and the absolute necessity of western rule over the backward societies that followed it."

Having succeeded in securing the sign on by 193 governments to an entire Sustainable Development Goal (number 5) on gender equality and women's empowerment, in 2015, one would think there would be few actors in the public realm prepared to say that gender equality is not viable. And yet some FBOs do maintain that. Many of these FBOs uphold that women's empowerment is important, and indeed some even maintain that women's empowerment is in line with the overall direction of patriarchal religious institutions. These same FBOs balk at Gender equality, however.

Gender equality - in so far as it entails discussion of sexuality, sexual orientation, contraception, abortion and related dynamics – continues to be a telling reminder that more academic research, and more government-funded programmes

Bron foto: https://www.patheos.com/blogs/standingonmyhead/2016/03/should-women-preach-at-mass.html

and projects which acknowledge the importance of FBOs, are not necessarily a formula for positive social change. Gender equality remains the ultimate litmus test of the pro-human rights index of any and all FBOs. To forget that, or to ignore these contestations, or to focus exclusively on religion as 'the empowering alternative', is to risk undermining efforts related to addressing gender equality as necessary to sustainable development. Unless of course, such efforts are only meant to showcase fashionable foreign policy trends, rather than to secure the human rights and dignity of all people, at all times?

Religion and gender dynamics are more than topical discursive spaces, or a discourse analysis of texts intended to guide our studious narratives. As the stories shared above show, positions taken on these continuums will serve to distinguish those who are committed to challenging the whole of patriarchy (norms and institutions, texts and praxis), from those who simply wish to appear to be 'gender sensitive', or are merely riding the 'religion and development' waves as part of an emerging - and lucrative - business industry.

SELECT REFERENCES

- Ahmed, Leila. 1992. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.
- Alcoff, Linda Martin and John D. Caputo (eds.), 2011, *Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Anderson, Pamela Sue and Beverley Clack (eds.), 2004, *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Aspden, Rachel, 2011. A Quiet Revolution by Leila Ahmed: A Review, in *The Guardian*, May 20 - https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/may/20/quiet-revolution-leila-ahmed-review - accessed on June 1, 2019.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Richman, 1986, *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Coakley, Sarah, 2002, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Daly, Mary, 1973 [1985], *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press. Reprinted 1985.
- Donaldson, Laura E. and Kwok Pui-Lan (eds.), 2002, *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse*, New York: Routledge.
- Eilberg-Schwartz, Howard, 1994, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Jantzen, Grace M., 1999, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Johnson, Elizabeth J., 1992, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, New York: Crossroad.
- Karam. Azza. 2019. "Opinion: Religion & Development: An Enhanced Approach or a Transaction?" In *InterPress Service*. April. http://www.ipsnews.net/2019/04/religion-development-enhanced-approach-transaction/ - accessed on June 1, 2019
- Karam, Azza. 2017. *Realising the Faith Dividend: Gender, Religion, Peace and Security in Agenda 2030*. New York: United Nations Population Fund/UNFPA.
- Karam, Azza et al. 2015. "Controversies in Faith and Healthcare", in *The Lancet*, Vol. 386, October 31, (pp.1776-1785).
- Karam, Azza et al. 2014. "On Faith, Health and Tensions: An Overview from an inter-governmental perspective", in *The Heythrop Journal*, 11 August (pp. 1069-1079).
- Karam, Azza. 2012. *Religion, Development and the United Nations*. New York: Social Science Research Council.
- Karam, Azza, 2005. "Reclaiming God: ambiguity, religion, and faith", in Suzan A. Farrell and Victoria Ericsson (eds.) *Still believing: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women affirm their faith.* New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll.
- Karam, Azza. 1998. *Women, Islamisms and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt*. London: Palgrave.
- King, Ursula (ed.), 1995, Religion and Gender, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Mahmood, Saba, 2005, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, New York: Princeton University Press.
- McFague, Sallie, 1987, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Pui-lan, Kwok, 2005, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford, 1983 [1993], *Sexism and God-Talk*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- United Nations Population Fund/UNFPA, 2015. *Religion and Development Post 2015*. New York: UNFPA.
- UNFPA, 2016. *Religion, Women's Health and Rights: Points of Contention, Paths of Opportunity*. New York, UNFPA.