

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

On 30-31 May 2013, the Women Peacemakers Program (WPP) organized a Consultation on Gender, Religion, and Peace. Building upon recommendations formulated by women activists from 21 countries during the 2010 WPP Cyprus Consultation *“(Inter)faith-based Peacebuilding: The Need for a Gender Perspective”*, this meeting looked at current trends and developments at play, as to define areas for further cooperation and action.

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## Policy Brief

# Gender, Religion, Peace

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

### Gender, religion and peace: two sides

All over the world, women activists find inspiration in the values that are present in many religions, such as love and the respect for human dignity, to work for peace and build bridges amongst divided communities. It is the experience of WPP that many women activists find moral support in their religious beliefs and spirituality, which often sustain them to continue their challenging and dangerous work for peace and women’s rights.



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

### Rising challenges and the need to address them

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

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

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

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

Progressive religious women and theologians often face much opposition in their respective religious institutions and communities. They often work in isolation and struggle to translate their progressive theology into community activism. In addition, there is a disconnection between secular feminist organizing and the organizing of progressive women working within religious settings. Both movements tend to dissociate themselves from respectively feminism or religion.

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

#### Recommendations:

- To address religious fundamentalism, **support and invest, through education and capacity building, in activist spaces for progressive religious scholars, theologians and women activists** working in religious settings, and raise awareness of messages of peace, security, women’s rights and gender equality from a religious perspective.
- Women need to be **motivated and enabled to publically voice their ideas** about gender, religion, & peace on grassroots and national level, confirming this activism within the context of movement building and creating a sustainable momentum.
- Faith-based peacebuilding should not be isolated; **bridges need to be built between (inter)faith-based women activists and between secular women activists** to work together for gender justice and gender-sensitive peacebuilding.
- With religious fundamentalism being a global phenomenon, secular and faith-based **civil society needs to organize on all political levels (International, regional and local)** to address the undermining of human and in particular women’s rights.
- To counter the hijacking of the human rights discourse and to address religious hate speech, civil society should **invest in using the language of peace - e.g. thought nonviolent communication - to counter fundamentalist claims and arguments.**
- **It is important to involve and support progressive male religious leaders as allies** in women’s work for gender justice and gender-sensitive peacebuilding; their views are influential in the community, and they can act as role models to other men.