

UN WOMEN

Topic 3: Facing the consequences of cultural and religious impositions on women's rights

Research Report by Emma Comaschi

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1. Definition of Key Terms

Women's rights: all around the world, women should be recognised the same rights. The right to live a life free from violence and slavery; the right to be educated; the right to earn a fair and equal wage; the right to own property; the right to expression and the freedom to vote.

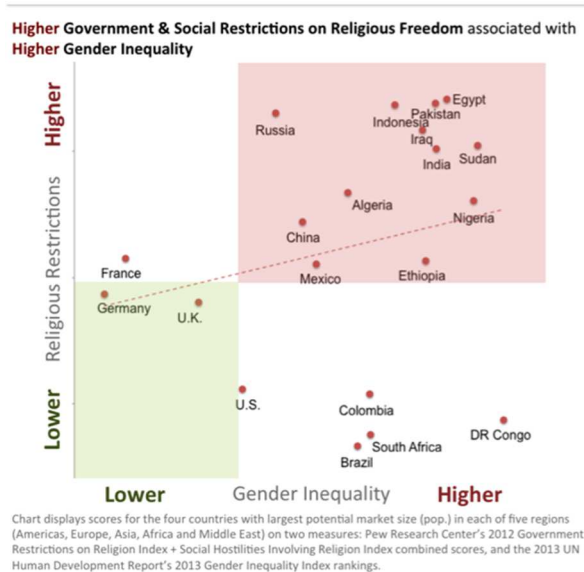
Feminism: the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. Although largely originating in the West, feminism is manifested worldwide and is represented by various institutions committed to activity on behalf of women's rights and interests.

Gender equality: when people of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities. Everyone is affected by gender inequality - women, men, trans and gender-diverse people, children and families. It impacts people of all ages and backgrounds. We need gender equality urgently and this is the reason why it is one of the SDGs.

Theocracy: government by divine guidance or by officials who are regarded as divinely guided. In many theocracies, government leaders are members of the clergy, and the state's legal system is based on religious law.

2. Introduction

From the mid-20th century, feminists started to criticize the conventional gender roles that religions, such as Christianity and Islam imposed. Women wanted to have lives and opportunities outside of being considered homemakers, so religious beliefs and activities were no longer a source of comfort.



Radical feminists claimed that Christianity, Judaism, Islam and many other religions evolved in patriarchal societies, where men used religious texts and dogmas to justify their superior status in society. Some feminists argue that all religions have been flawed from the very beginning. Others believe that some religions were originally women-focused, but men have managed to twist the doctrines, using religion for their own advantage throughout history.

Different feminists have different explanations for women's role in religion and offer different solutions to fulfil one's spiritual needs. UN Women collaborated with the World YWCA to convene a discussion on religion and gender equality at the 60th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

Led by UN Women Executive Director, Phumzile MlamboNgcuka, and moderated by the General Secretary of the World YWCA, Nyaradzai Gumbonzvanda, the discussion, building on the important work being done by faith actors and feminist faith organizations, sought to identify: entry points for narratives of faith that foster the realization of gender equality; strategies for building coalitions on faith and gender equality; and ways to accelerate the implementation of Agenda 2030.

3. Background Information

Considerations of women's human rights in the context of religion and secularization cannot afford to underestimate the complexity of the subject, for religion plays a diversity of roles in different societies, and indeed, has played different roles within the same society at different times. Such a consideration also involves trying to get beyond the colonial discourse on religion and secularization, as well as attempting to articulate the rights of women, particularly those from "the other side of the line."

However, whether this line is geostrategic or mental, from this perspective, religion may also perform many different functions, and questions concerning secularization tend to be raised in ways that challenge Eurocentric mental schemata. As was said at the beginning, the question of the rights of women offers a privileged vantage point for studying the limits and potential of discourses about secularization and human rights. Feminist pronouncements about women's rights from "the other side of the line" (in which women are the protagonists rather than the object(s) of the discourse) may offer a privileged site for examining one of the foundation stones of the real and/or imaginary construct that is Western secularism: the dichotomy between the public and private, particularly as regards the relegation of religion and its impact both secular feminists in Islamic countries and Islamic feminists recognise that religion may be used to legitimize the subjection of women.

As an example of the former, we might recall, for example, the work of Mernissi (1987, 2001), one of the pioneers in the analysis of the bias in the interpretation of the Koran, who denounced the political use of the sacred texts and the Hadith for female subjection. The latter may be illustrated with the work of Barlas, who holds that "the Koran is not a patriarchal text" and that it "opens up the space for Muslims to develop a theory and practice of sexual equality".

4. Timeline of events

1975: Fatima Mernissi's first book, *Beyond the Veil*, was published, and it was considered revolutionary. Mernissi broke down the ethnocentric stereotypes Western society had developed towards Islam, especially Muslim women.

The 1990s: The emergence of Islamic female emancipation movements

2005: France has banned overt religious symbols, including many religious head-coverings, in public schools and government buildings.

20 March 2017: Global Platform on Gender Equality and Religion launched by UN Women

7 May 2022: the Taliban made a law requiring all women to wear a burqa or niqab, despite that the law was never really enforced and most Afghan women choose to ignore it.

5. Major parties involved

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is the only country in the world where girls are banned from going to high school and effectively barred from political participation, as the Taliban has an all-male cabinet and there is no Ministry of Women's Affairs. Afghan women are now mostly restricted from working outside the home, they must cover their faces in public, and they have to be accompanied by a male chaperone when they travel. Furthermore, they continue to be subjected to multiple forms of gender-based violence.

Iran

United Nations member states have removed Iran from a key UN women's rights group just months after it joined. The unusual reversal comes as Iran is rattled by an ongoing protest movement sparked by the death of a young woman in the custody of the country's so-called "morality police"

Ethiopia

According to the national census conducted in 2017, 98% of Ethiopians say they belong to a certain faith or religion. As a country that prides itself on having a long history of both Christianity and Muslim practices, religion plays an important role in peoples' lives and Ethiopian society in general. According to some members of the 'Women of Faith' groups, the issue of sexual abuse was among the subjects considered taboo in their respective religious organizations.

6. UN Involvement

Building on the growing recognition that the role of faith-based organizations in addressing the needs of women and girls is critical, a global Platform on "Gender Equality and Religion" was launched on 15 March at the ongoing UN Commission on the Status of Women.

The Permanent Mission of Canada hosted the event, with UN Women, UNFPA, DFID and International Partnership for Religion and Sustainable Development, collaborating on this new initiative.

UN Women is currently developing its own strategy on "The Role of Religion in Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment", which is founded on the belief that faith actors are critical in dismantling structures and practices that promote inequality. The strategy aims to provide a deeper understanding of faith-based actors and expand the engagement of faith organizations and institutions at all levels of UN Women's work--normative, programmatic and advocacy--to achieve gender equality and empowerment.

This newly launched Platform synchronizes with UN Women's faith-based work. With a religious lens, this Platform plans to create a unique approach by combining gender equality and faith-based principles to accelerate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, ranging from eradicating poverty to promoting health, peace and security. It will convene faith-based organizations and civil society groups, bringing together religious leaders and development experts to find ways to effectively pursue the gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

7. Official documents and treaties about the issue

- Report on the impact of fundamentalism and extremism on the cultural rights of women, Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, 17 July 201

<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N17/216/94/PDF/N1721694.pdf?OpenElement>

- The Role of Faith-Based Organizations, Institutions and Actors in Achieving Gender Equality Through the Implementation of Agenda 2030

https://www.partner-religion-development.org/fileadmin/Dateien/Resources/Knowledge_Center/Religion_and_Gender_Equality_UNWOMEN.pdf

8. Impact of the issue

Today, a growing number of feminist faith activists are leading the way in re-examining religious teachings and laws and advocating for women's rightful participation in the interpretation of religious doctrine. They are generating new narratives about the role of religion and faith in achieving full equality. UN Women is strategically positioned to facilitate and strengthen the role and contribution of these feminist faith-based actors in the gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In collaboration with the UN system and other stakeholders, UN Women is committed to expanding opportunities for feminist faith-based organizations, institutions and actors to become an integral voice in the social justice movement to achieve gender equality.

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