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# CHRISTIAN - MUSLIM WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING - BREAKING CYCLES OF VIOLENCE

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## Introduction

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, in her search towards an embodied theology of just peace, claims that “there are so many deeply embedded forces in Western religion and culture that ensure that the War on Women, and war itself, will rage on. This does not mean these forces cannot be identified and impacted at the root. They can, but it is naive in the extreme to think they can be eliminated.”<sup>1</sup> This paper aims to draw attention to the power of the feminine in terms of women’s actions and voices in religious peacebuilding<sup>2</sup> towards peaceful theologies and societies, and critically re-examine structural violence against

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Women’s Bodies as Battlefield, Christian Theology and the Global War on Women* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 167.

<sup>2</sup> The term peacebuilding thus is used increasingly to define the broad, complex, and sustained process of creating, securing, protecting, and consolidating a peaceful order – work that goes far beyond the formal negotiations that seek to end armed conflicts. Peacebuilding overlaps with development and good governance in the greater effort to build successful, prosperous, and resilient societies. It also reaches into social realms where religious institutions hold sway. It affects and is affected by the role of women in society generally and in creating peace specifically. Gender expectations and norms, the socially constructed roles and behaviours that societies often attribute to, or define as appropriate to, men and women – are shaped by culture, law, nationalism, and other aspects of societies, including religious beliefs and religious institutions. (See Susan Hayward, “Religious Women’s Invisibility,” in *Women, Religion and Peacebuilding: Illuminating the Unseen*, eds. Susan Hayward and Katherine Marshall (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2015), 3.)

women “which is so ubiquitous and yet so hidden.”<sup>3</sup> While elaborating this claim, the paper takes upon the assertion that the “violence against women is the largest and longest global war”<sup>4</sup>. Peacebuilding is understood in its broadest meaning, in terms of women’s active participation in building liberating theologies and societies. The latter could be understood in the words of Rosemary Radford Ruether, one of the pioneers of Christian feminist thought and interreligious dialogue, - it is about “the promotion of the full humanity of women”<sup>5</sup>.

Just peacemaking is very much an interfaith and inter-religious work and should be placed as a crucial starting point of the urge for transformation of “violent” theologies and living every-day praxis.

While women have been marginalized from peacebuilding generally, the emerging field of religious peacebuilding has been particularly challenging for women. With formal religious authority primarily vested in men in most major religious traditions throughout the world, those women seeking to work through religious institutions or to shape pro-peace religious attitudes often struggle to find spaces to lead efforts or exert influence. Despite these challenges, many women of faith pursue peace actively both within and outside religious institutions. These efforts are exemplified by women such as the late Dekha Ibrahim Abdi of Kenya, Venerable Mae Chee Sansanee Sthirasuta of Thailand, and Sister Mary-Bernard Alima Mbalula of the Democratic Republic of Congo...<sup>6</sup> To some degree, women’s marginalisation from the top tier of institutional religious and political leadership suits them for this sort of cross-boundary work. Less visible and less constrained by institutional commitments, they are freer to make moves that would otherwise be considered politically or socially risky.<sup>7</sup> For many of the women involved in this work, the relationships they build are crucial and transformative. Indeed, many note that women’s work for peace is often very relational,

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<sup>3</sup> Thistlethwaite, *Women’s Bodies as Battlefield*, 168.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>5</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and Godtalk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> Susan Hayward, “Women, Religion, and Peacebuilding,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict and Peacebuilding*, eds. Atalia Omen, R. Scott Appleby, and David Little (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 312–313.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

that is, focused on building and deepening interpersonal relationships that can be both individually and socially transformative. The opposite of “war” is not peace but rather creativity. Creativity in the form of empowered embodied experiences of women stepping from the passive invisible backstage role to the forefront of everyday life, decision-making and visible spaces. Or as Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian political, human rights activist, lawyer, former judge and Nobel Peace Prize Winner has put it: “It’s not just about hope and ideas. It’s about action.”<sup>8</sup> The liberating question of this paper is illumination of the ambivalence of invisibility and marginality of women in religious peacebuilding, good practices and future issues.

### Women of Faith Transforming Negative Gender Stereotypes and Restoring Peace

At this point it is important to consider that peacebuilding has its traps and shadows. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite claims: “Many whom I have met in the peace movement seem blind to the fact that both peace-making and war making in the West are products of the same male-dominant culture.”<sup>9,10</sup> She further elaborates this statement with the thought that it is important to continuously recognise that a Western culture of misogyny is so pervasive that it structures even the best efforts at resisting violence, including movements for peace. This misogyny has elements of the heroic, the erotic, and the identification of femaleness with weakness and subordination. But these structural legacies of both Western philosophy and Christian theology are well disguised in peace traditions.<sup>11</sup> So, it is crucial for peace work to be effective today in ad-

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<sup>8</sup> Shirin Ebadi, “Quotes,” Quotetab, accessed January 19, 2018, <https://www.quotetab.com/quote/by-shirin-ebadi/its-not-just-about-hope-and-ideas-its-about-action>.

<sup>9</sup> Thistlethwaite, *Women’s Bodies as Battlefield*, 148.

<sup>10</sup> Also worth mentioning here is the transfer of the elitist and Eurocentric view, which in Western culture is strongly influenced by the perception of the other, the different. (See Maja Bjelica, “The Turkish Alevi: In Search of an Identity,” *Poligrafi* 22, no. 87/88 (2017): *Religions and Dialogue*, eds. Helena Motoh and Lenart Škof, <http://ojs.zrs-kp.si/index.php/poligrafi/issue/view/32/16>, 94.

<sup>11</sup> Thistlethwaite, *Women’s Bodies as Battlefield*, 148..

addressing the “war on women,” to identify the ways in which patriarchy has affected even the most creative of peace paradigms.

Religious beliefs and institutions create undeniable barriers to women’s peacebuilding, as gender norms, prejudices, and negative gender stereotypes marginalizing women in political, economic, and social life are often grounded in particular religious teachings and understandings. Negative gender stereotypes are a real danger, especially if marginality, invisibility, and the absence of voice are somehow seen as women’s special virtues and gifts. Women as well as men must be power brokers, senior mediators, and religious prophetesses within their own religious traditions. Here we return to Rosemary Radford Ruether’s call for “the promotion of the full humanity of women.” She elaborated this principle in the following way:

Whatever denies, diminishes or distorts the full humanity of woman is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive. Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or community of redemption. This negative principle implies the positive principle: what does promote the full humanity of women is the Holy, it does reflect true relation to the divine, it is the true nature of things, the authentic message of redemption and the mission of the redemptive community.<sup>12</sup>

Although this critical principle of feminist theology has been negated within the history of Christianity, and patriarchy and consequent subjugation of women have shaped both the sources and Christianity, the Christian tradition has not lacked critical principles that are useful for feminist theological development. However, religious actors, particularly male clergy, but also conservative laywomen and men, obstruct women’s leadership or participation in peacebuilding and peacemaking efforts, or refuse to address women’s priorities. They may resist efforts to advance women’s rights and gender equality, arguing that these efforts contradict fundamental religious teachings and positions. They may stigmatise women survivors of sexual violence, such as women who become pregnant and give birth after rape, etc. Yet, for many women

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<sup>12</sup> Radford Ruether, *Sexism and Godtalk*, 19.

facing persistent violence and suffering, their religion is also a source of support and empowerment.

Working invisibly and at the margins has clear drawbacks for religious women peacebuilders, as it hampers their ability to be role models to new generations of women, attract funding or support for their work, or ensure progress toward gender equality in society at large. But there is another side to this story. Many religious women involved in peacebuilding cite their very invisibility and marginality as helpful in ensuring their safety and the safety of those with whom they are working, or the effectiveness of their work. Precisely because women are not at the heads of religious institutions, they are afforded more flexibility and the ability to erect and mobilise effective informal networks outside traditional power structures. They are not preoccupied with institutional bureaucratic management, which offers them more time to operate on the ground and build closer connections to local communities. Susan Hayward's field research results state that in Northern Ireland from the 1970s to the 1990s the nuns became much more radical than many of the priests. The nuns were freer to offer their services in ways that the priests could not. So, you saw some of them doing interfaith work, or getting involved in other issues where the priests were absent.<sup>13</sup> Similarly there is the observation of the founder of the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN):

For a long time the women of FOMWAN have spoken on behalf of Muslims when there was some issue the government wanted to address, because it was easier to work with us than with the men's organizations, where there is so much bureaucracy they can't respond promptly. The men do not have a rapid response like we have, so the government has turned to us to speak for Muslims. The male leaders are under the Supreme Council, the highest Islamic body. The group is led by the Sultan, the emirs, the clerics. Bureaucracy has made them not as effective as they ought to be, and they don't seem to be implementing projects in their communities.<sup>14</sup>

Speaking about moving beyond stereotypes S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orelana warns how stereotypes distort understandings of Muslim women's

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<sup>13</sup> Hayward, "Religious Women's Invisibility," 15.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

work for peace. Especially in the USA and Europe, the common image of the passive, veiled Muslim women, in need of rescue and redemption, needs to be debunked, because it obscures a far more complex and diverse reality. Shirin Ebadi also states that “whenever Muslim women protest and ask for their rights, they are silenced with the argument that the laws are justified under Islam. It is an unfounded argument. It is not Islam at fault, but rather the patriarchal culture that uses its own interpretations to justify whatever it wants.”<sup>15</sup>

The stereotype of a Muslim woman as the oppressed victim of Islam is often grounded, consciously or not, in an assumption that Islam is an oppressive and violent religion that undermines the rights of women. S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana states that:

There is certainly some truth to the argument that Muslim woman in some contexts are oppressed and constrained by particular interpretations of their tradition. However, when offered as a broad and unqualified generalization, such images obscure the diverse and complex experiences of women over fourteen centuries and across many continents. They fail to account for the roles countless Muslim women have played as proactive agents of change, who are both inspired and empowered by Islam to work toward more peaceful and just societies.<sup>16</sup>

Increasingly, Muslim women are also becoming more active in civil society and adopting Islamic frameworks and texts to create space in public areas. For some activists, wearing Islamic dress and covering their hair helps them negotiate more active roles. Derived from core Islamic principles and values, Muslim women’s peacebuilding efforts take different forms in different areas of operation. They include advocacy, being intermediaries, observation, education, transnational justice, and interfaith and intrafaith dialogue.

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<sup>15</sup> MG (Muslim Girl). “Shirin Ebadi: First Muslim Woman Nobel Peace Prize Winner,” *MG* (blog), January 19, 2019, <https://muslimgirl.com/shirin-ebadi-first-muslim-woman-nobel-peace-prize-winner/>.

<sup>16</sup> S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana, “Muslim Women’s Peacebuilding Initiatives,” in *Women, Religion and Peacebuilding: Illuminating the Unseen*, eds. Susan Hayward and Katherine Marshall (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2015), 72.

## Breaking the Boundaries

Most Muslim women's roles include advocacy peacebuilding efforts. Razan Zaittounch of Syria, Tawakkul Karman of Yemen, Shirin Ebadi of Iran (Iranian lawyer and human rights activist, the first Iranian and Muslim woman to receive the Nobel Prize, in 2003); and Asmaa Mahfouz of Egypt advocate for peace, justice, and equality in their societies. As advocates, they attempt to empower the weaker parties in conflict situations, restructure relationships, and transform unjust social and religious structures. Their activities often aim at strengthening the representativeness and inclusiveness of governance.

The significant achievements of the Muslim women leaders described above were not easily won; each faced and met challenges in advancing their work. Tawakkul Karman of Yemen (called "the Mother of the Yemeni Revolution" and "the Queen of Peace") was threatened seriously and arrested many times. Yet threats to her life only seemed to strengthen her determination to struggle for a more peaceful society. She continued to forcefully criticise the widespread corruption and killing of innocent people and, as a journalist, continued to report human rights abuses in her country. Like Karman, Asmaa Mahfouz of Egypt also paid a high price for her activities: she faced arrest and at one point was forced into hiding after the government accused her of being a foreign agent. Shirin Ebadi of Iran, the first female judge in the history of Iranian justice, had to step down from her position, and since 2009 she has been in exile in the UK.<sup>17</sup>

Political oppression is not the only challenge that Muslim women face. The modern era has brought new challenges for the Muslim world in general and Muslim women in particular. Traditional and modern sociocultural structures alike often limit women's participation in the public domain and curb their opportunities to participate fully in the social, political, and cultural development of their societies. They are often excluded from official decision-making mechanisms at national and local levels. They suffer from discrimination, notably in education and health care. Some are forced to marry at a very early age or become

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 73.

victims of honour killings. In the midst of violent conflicts women are deliberately targeted to defile the honour of their nations and families. The images and realities of discrimination and (structural) violence in the form of child marriage, restrictions on employment and political participation, and violence and honour killings are contexts that are vital to understand the importance of the active work of women in relation to conflict and peace. These challenges can be fully understood by stepping back to explore the broader historical and global factors that have contributed to their emergence. Among them are the linked legacies of colonial regimes (identified with Westernization) and orientalism (a pattern of images of Muslims as other and less worthy), self-orientalism, globalisation, feminist movements, patriarchal structures, and religious and cultural sources of legitimacy. Rosemary Radford Ruether, while affirming the importance of different expressions of religious and interreligious feminisms, also acknowledges the postcolonial critique of liberal feminism and the ways in which it has been abused in the interest of vested power. Ruether elaborates the complexity of relations between the above listed systems:

But the relations of western feminism and colonialism are more complex than westerners dominating third world societies and western feminists reading them through the lens of ignorant paternalism. There are also cases where the leaders of a third world country entered into colonial relations with the west and became advocates of western feminism in order to dominate their own society. A fascinating example of this is Iran, whose shifting history in relation to both colonialism and feminism is traced by Iranian historian Nima Naghibi in her 2007 book, *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran*.<sup>18</sup>

Zayn Kassam discusses the way in which Muslim women have become the target of both Islamophobia and reactionary ideologies within Islam. She exposes three myths (negative stereotypes and prejudices) about Muslim women that are prevalent in the West: that the war in Afghanistan will lead to a liberation of Muslim women, that capital-

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<sup>18</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Women and Interfaith Relations: Toward a Transnational Feminism," in *Women and Interreligious Dialogue*, eds. Catherine Cornille and Jillian Maxey (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013), 21.



ism will improve life for Muslim women, and that Islam is essentially misogynist and the liberation of Muslim women will require secularism. Each of these myths points to the ways in which feminist ideals have been co-opted by a broad anti-Islamic rhetoric of fear in the West. Kassam argues that the only affirmative and just path to change for Muslim women will have to emerge from within, from Muslim women engaging their own religious resources and participating in the public and political sphere.<sup>19</sup> This emphasis on particularity and difference, not only between but also within religions has come to characterise postmodern feminism, thus rendering the dialogue between women of different religions even more complex, but also more authentic.

Interreligious work is often misunderstood as finding the religious “lowest common denominator.” It is not. It is bringing the best of one’s own religious tradition to the table, while also accounting for one’s own faith and its legacies in violence and conflict. From this standpoint women’s interreligious dialogue remains mainly personal and interpersonal and rarely affects or changes the religions to which it belongs. However, dialogue “from below,” as we could call women’s engagement in interreligious dialogue, often yields important insights and experiences which could be highly instructive and inspiring for the broader tradition, and genuine dialogue can profit from the participation of all voices. It could also be seen as a venue for women’s religious peacebuilding.

## Conclusion

Because religions have so often marginalised the “Other,” who is seen as different and inferior, dialogue becomes a way of seeing them as human and faithful. Dialogue can therefore lead to the mending of difficult, even utterly broken, relationships. That is why the so called “religious awakening” of the individual is needed. Today, key religious elements are influencing most major conflicts and misunderstandings

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<sup>19</sup> Zayn Kassam, “Constructive Interreligious Dialogue Concerning Muslim Women,” in *Women and Interreligious Dialogue*, eds. Catherine Cornille and Jillian Maxey (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013), 109–127.

between peoples and nations around the world; therefore, the importance of new religious awakening in terms of interreligious, just peacemaking in which women have a crucial role. The power of the feminine in the form of women's voices or actions in interreligious dialogue and religious peacebuilding are fundamentally prone to the practicality and personal character and they touch "the untouchable" and see the "hidden, invisible"; still they witness the ubiquitous traces and forms of violence. Contrary to stereotypical assumptions, many Christian and Muslim women have played and continue to play diverse roles in peacebuilding in their communities, and contexts and challenges that they face contribute to some of their strengths. Since women have had limited access to official and direct peacebuilding efforts at the top level, they have developed skills to work effectively at the grassroots level through informal channels. Their power often lies in their relationships. They have been particularly effective in building relationships, encouraging empathy, and bringing diverse groups together. Rather than accepting roles as passive victims behind the curtains, they become active leaders of their own stories and societies. Rather than being limited or oppressed by their religious texts, they find and lift up in Christianity and Islam a set of values and norms that oppose patriarchal structures and affirm their efforts to resolve conflict and build sustainable peace.

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