

Voices of Dissent

Azza Karam on the implications of binary framings for western actors

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Plus Ça Change...? Reflections from a Policy Scape



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“Religion must support gender equality and women's empowerment. The agenda of creating a planet 50-50, an equal world for men and women will not and cannot come true if religion, religious leaders and faith actors remain outside the conversation on achieving gender equality and women's empowerment.”

The above words come from a speech, made by a senior UN official, in 2017, during an event at the UN Commission on the Status of Women. There are many interesting features of the above quote. The following is an attempt to unpack some of these, while narrating, and raising questions, based on the personal experiences and interactions of a policy practitioner cum scholar.

“Religion must support...”

But which religion? One should ask. Or is it that all religions of the world, to which over 80 percent of the world's peoples adhere, are essentialised into the one "religion"?

The presumption of "religion must..." is also striking. The wording presumes that "religion" can be ordered, used, or positioned to perform in a certain way.

Arguably, the statement can be seen as condescending to women's (so-called) 'empowerment' itself to describe the gamut of "religion, religious leaders and faith actors" – a broad swath by any stretch of the imagination – as remaining outside "*the conversation on achieving gender equality and women's empowerment*". For here, it would appear that there is but one such "conversation" taking place at any time anywhere in the world.

"...the conversation on achieving gender equality and women's empowerment..."

But what of the multiple struggles for women's basic rights and dignity in almost every single corner of the world – i.e. beyond the one conversation? And what becomes of the diversity of women's, and men's, and indeed other genders' myriad journeys towards what they may consider to be their own sense of dignity and self-worth? Indeed, what of the multiple face-offs which take place, within diverse religious institutions – let alone between different religious traditions – which involve women, and yet argue against what are considered 'givens' from western feminist perspectives? Put differently, what of the collusion between women and

men inside the same religious tradition (be it Catholic, myriad forms of Protestant, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist) which stand by the fact that women's unique 'calling' is to serve as loyal wife and mother, and balk at any notion of "gender" let alone of "gender equality"?

Is it so black and white a matter that religion should just waltz into 'the conversation' on achieving gender equality? Are all the complexities of religions – institutions, manifestations, narratives, epistemologies, jurisprudence, histories, to note but a few, simply waiting to be invited to the conversation? Or perhaps they are all envisioned to be laboring under some minor misapprehensions, and now that the international community calls upon them, they will feel chagrined enough to 'see the truth'. Once this happens, the presumption goes, they shall join forces to work together for women's empowerment and gender equality.

The above features are to be further nuanced by two emerging myths among some western policy actors – including some feminists. One is that religious women's organisations working on/for/with women's issues somehow are all alike. The ability to distinguish between them is, at best, still to be learned. When these are positive perceptions, they tend to be informed largely by a few encounters with a small group of 'feminist theologians' – themselves based mostly in the western hemisphere. When the perceptions of religious women are less rose-tinted, they are influenced by the stereotypical understandings of religious women as 'fundamentalists'.

Another myth is that "religious women's organisations, or groups" somehow work differently than secular women's rights organisations. The perception is that "religious women" (another essentialised category)

somehow, are more calm, less argumentative, and more likely to “make reasonable compromises with their religious leaders” – more so than their secular counterparts - ostensibly because their faith renders them magically more ‘zen’, or something to that effect. Needless to say, just as women differ, their organisations – religious or not – also differ. And widely so.

Apart from the worldview underlined by the speech, what is even more interesting was to observe how many of the so-called “religious actors” – men and women - reacted to the speech, and to similar discourses. But here I must qualify that the audience were largely divided between international civil servants, as well as women and men working with and within international faith-based development, humanitarian and advocacy NGOs (FBOs), and some (ordained) religious leaders.

I fully expected some sense of discomfort among the so-called ‘faith-based’ actors. Instead, there was a palpable sense of celebration among many. Upon enquiring about this immediately after the event was over, I was told that the religious leaders and FBOs present, were “very pleased that [the European and North American governments and the UN] representatives on the panel, were finally acknowledging how important it was to involve ‘religion’ in policy making ...and gender equality”.

“So you did not notice any condescension, essentialisation or even plain arrogance in the manner in which your own religious communities and the diversity of religions was portrayed”? I asked. Apparently not. Instead, some FBO members argued that this “marked a turning point, a response to the prayers, and decades of efforts, by FBOs to be recognized by secular policy makers”.

The above speech was written, and read out in public, by women who tend to work along a worldview which often risks essentialising the vast realms of 'religion' while also seeking to "use" religious actors to affirm specific strategies and ends. As noted by the lines of the speech above, far from appreciating that the realms of religion are complex, heterogenous and hard to categorise, this is the same mindset which, when requested to include the 'religious domains' into civil society, will ask for "one NGO that represents religion".

But does it not take two hands to clap? Some of the 'religious actors' who work with some of these western governments, and are pleased to be "recognized", are they not - either wittingly or unwittingly - part of the essentialisation and instrumentalization inherent in the emerging metanarrative of 'religion is good'?

Fast forward to 2 years later, when another UN official addresses a similar audience of FBOs, some of whom were in the room hearing the above speech. This time, the UN official is articulating a concern with the fact that some western governments appear to be instrumentalising FBOs for their respective national security concerns, rather than efforts towards realization of the human rights agendas. Indeed, the UN official warns that the scale up of certain government interests (not the UN/multilateral but specific governmental ones), in "working with" religious leaders on conflict and peace, is at once securitizing religious engagement, while also jeopardizing the women's rights agenda.

Why? Because by doing the due diligence of gathering religious leaders from different religions under one umbrella (ostensibly to mobilise them

for the sake of “global peace”), per definition, will mean seeking “common ground” between them. The fact is, however, that gender equality and women’s empowerment, as defined clearly by the Sustainable Development Goals signed unto by 193 governments, are not common ground among diverse religious leaders. In fact, many aspects of gender equality and women’s empowerment, particularly around the realm of sexual and reproductive health and rights, are precisely – and historically - where religious leaders break rank. Not only that however, but in the current geopolitical context of rising nationalism and right wing populism, even some governing regimes in the western hemisphere are breaking rank with legislation and practice meant to guarantee women’s sexual and reproductive rights.

This the UN official notes, and in a rare moment of public self-criticism, the official laments the fact that while the UN raised the flag of the value of engagement with religious actors around the Sustainable Development Goals, the same UN may be unable to protect its religious civil society partners from being instrumentalised by certain governments with overriding security concerns.

Interestingly, the same FBOs who, a couple of years earlier were pleased that the governments and the UN were “finally” recognising their worth, turned around to decry “the paternalistic attitude” of the UN presenter. “We are adults... we do not need UN protection”, some said with barely concealed disdain.

A reality check?

Most policy makers often operate with relatively short-term trajectories reflecting the politically appointed - or elected - leadership of their respective governments or intergovernmental institutions. Moreover, governmental funding of development, humanitarian, and peace and security-related work is the oil that keeps the machines of both governmental as well as intergovernmental organisations running. At the same time, religious institutions have, historically, always played a role in the political landscapes – either colluding with or opposing ruling regimes. As such, the realms of the religious domains are not ‘safe’ or politically neutral spaces. Far from it. Assuming that any woman stands outside of the above currents in some miraculous virginal policy or academic space, is unrealistic and unwise.

As long as these are realities we continue to contend with, the politics of certain interests will override the needs and concerns of ordinary citizens, especially the most ‘vulnerable’ individuals - including the poor, the destitute, the refugees, the internally displaced, and those marginalized because we may be the ‘wrong’ race/ethnicity/gender/religion/persona/etc.. There was a time when I thought that engaging with religious actors for common human rights objectives could be a formula to change business as usual for some western policy makers. I assumed that this engagement might encourage us to think in more self-reflexive ways – to question our inherited Enlightenment influenced colonial generalisations, to rid ourselves of the yokes of oppression leveraged by religious institutions, and to embolden all (women’s) human rights defenders to speak truth to power. Now I find myself still struggling ... to believe.

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