



## **Religion and Feminism: Is religion an obstacle or opportunity for women's empowerment?**

Religion is often seen as institutionalizing and perpetuating patriarchy; this frustrates many advocates for women's rights and equality. Often overlooked is a positive narrative; early feminist activities included religious voices, and faith organizations have worked with women and girls in various development activities for decades. To explore the complex intersections of religion and feminism, the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) and Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs organized a discussion (part of the 'parallel' events) at the sixtieth United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in New York. Katherine Marshall, WFDD executive director and senior fellow at the Berkley Center, and WFDD program manager Crystal Corman co-moderated a two-hour conversation with four panelists on March 19, 2016. The diverse panelists spanned religious traditions, geographic location, and disciplines. Full biographies are found in the annex.

- Ruth Messinger, president of American Jewish World Service (AJWS);
- Fulata Moyo, program executive for the World Council of Churches (WCC);
- Gina Messina-Dysert, professor at Ursuline College and cofounder of Feminism and Religion; and
- Zahra Vieneuve, program officer for the MENA region at the Global Fund for Women.

**Katherine Marshall** welcomed the audience and set the stage for the panel by situating the topic within the work of the World Faiths Development Dialogue, a non-profit housed in the Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, which focuses on the intersection of religion and development. Across the many topics that our research and policy exchange explores, the issue of gender arises with great regularity and is particularly sensitive.<sup>1</sup> Where are the safe spaces that allow for disagreements to be discussed constructively on this topic? Are there ways to move from avoidance and discord towards engagement and more focus on common purpose? **Crystal Corman** introduced the panelists, asking them to begin by offering their own definition of feminism and if or how it fits within their work.

### **Defining 'feminism'**

**Ruth Messinger** opened by declaring that yes, she is a feminist. "I have been active in a variety of feminist causes, which includes disagreeing with other feminists on some issues. To me being a feminist is recognizing the full equality and full humanity of women and men, understanding that the world will best advance if everyone's rights are equally respected." Feminism is one of several vehicles for advancing towards empathy and for empowerment, allowing engagement with people and their struggles, even if not directly related to gender. Importantly, it empowers people to pursue their own visions of justice.

The best definition **Fulata Moyo** has heard is that feminism is the radical notion that women are people (citing Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza). She recounted shocked reactions when she has introduced herself as a feminist as a World Council of Churches (WCC) staff. In response, she has asked her audience to describe what comes to their mind when they hear the word 'feminism' to which they often give the stereotype of

---

<sup>1</sup> For example <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/challenges-of-change-faith-gender-and-development>

burning bras. Yet women in the WCC, from its earliest days in 1948, were seeking ways for women to be equally part of the process of rebuilding the world post WWII. They envisioned more than equal participation because equality in opportunity and access is not always just due to the legacy of patriarchy/kyriarchy. The many remaining gaps require equitable measures that include positive discrimination for a period of time so that gender justice can be achieved. She quoted Jürgen Moltmann (1981) who observed that while religion did not create patriarchy, it has proved incapable of ending it.

**Gina Messina-Dysert** described feminism as a movement to end not only sexism but all oppression, wherever it exists. You cannot uproot one without uprooting all. This includes applying feminism to religion. She described herself as being a ‘faithful feminist’—a person who identifies with a religious tradition *and* feminism—and explained how that results in being doubly ‘othered’. Your religious community is unhappy with you because you make statements that are interpreted as problematic, and feminists are unhappy because if you’re engaged in this patriarchal tradition, then how can you be a real feminist? She is eager to have conversations that explore deeply how these oppressions intersect across the board and within religions.

**Zahra Vieneuve** is a proud Egyptian feminist who builds her definition of feminism from the writings, actions and practices of feminists in the global south and global north. Feminist analysis is key to Global Fund for Women’s approach that emphasizes the importance of sustaining, through grantmaking and advocacy, the sociopolitical movements to end sexist oppression all over the world by raising the voice and agency of women and girls.

### Where are there true divides between faith perspectives and development objectives?

Negative reactions to the word ‘feminism’ indicate that there is a problem, but it can’t be addressed until one understands why such reactions are so common. Some attribute this to perceptions that feminism is western and blind to cultural norms in other parts of the world or that feminists are hostile to men. This is most clearly seen in tension around debates for women’s rights, particularly in family codes, land rights, and divorce laws, including within development and humanitarian institutions. While many [male] religious leaders claim that they are the biggest supporters of women, the common perception within the development field is that religious institutions and systems are in fact the problem.

Ruth approached criticism of feminism by pointing to a trend of attributing blame, especially to the ‘West.’ She granted that a long history of colonialism justifies claims of liability in several areas, however she discredited claims that deny that gender rights or norms are only Western or that they are introduced to the developing world by foreigners. Some say LGBT persons did not exist in their country until western people came. Others claim local women never fought for their rights, including the right to no abuse, until outsiders brought in new ideas. This is nonsense. These are not Western issues.

AJWS works to uproot oppression wherever it exists, echoing Gina’s definition. Its work is based on the fundamental equality of all people. The organization is inspired by quintessential Jewish values, but Ruth does not hesitate to admit that there are gender issues within Judaism. What she is against is the use of religion to divide people or perpetuate oppression within her own faith but also anywhere in the world. AJWS works with local women, including feminists, who want to fight to improve their status anywhere on a wide range of issues. In agriculture, women are the farmers of the world, but they often lack land ownership rights. Women and girls lead work to end early and child marriage in four states in India, and at times this means contradicting their faith leaders. As much as they do not wish to give up their religious identity, they do not want to give up their rights over their body, education, and employment.

Fulata agreed that the word “feminism” is difficult especially in religious circles; working to achieve something such as ending patriarchy as a system of oppression may mean sacrificing use of the term. At the WCC she is

responsible for the Just Community for Women and Men program (which uses a gender binary given sensitivity from a number of the WCC's 345 member churches). While women in WCC may not call themselves feminists/womanists, many are doing great work to resist oppression and exclusion of women. From 1988-1998, WCC declared an ecumenical decade of churches in solidarity with women (EDCSW) as a response to the UN Decade of Women (1976-1985). Inspired by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (Argentina), the Women in Black movement (Israel), and the Black Sash (South Africa), WCC began its Thursdays in Black campaign<sup>2</sup> during EDCSW. Women and men who are tired of a culture of rape and violence wear black on Thursdays as a sign of resistance.

Fulata described her mother's story, noting that while she would not have described herself as a feminist or womanist, she embodied many of its ideals. Her mother was married at the age of 11 but decided to leave this marriage because of emotional abuse. This took great courage as the community called her "used" and judged her unsuitable for future marriage. At the age of 16, she decided to marry a man 23 years older than her, as his third wife, which came with oppression from the other wives. "I would call my mother a feminist, even though she did not know the word feminism. She resisted systems of oppression in her own way." As an African, she pointed out that black people's experiences of enslavement and racism were excluded from the definitions of the feminist agenda. Womanism became the expression of the women of color, which entails more than skin color.

Gina described her need to be strategic in conversations about feminism, especially in her context as a professor teaching at a conservative Catholic college for women. Moving beyond the liberation movement in the 1960s and '70s in the United States, today we need to push ourselves to redefine feminism and understand how the movement has grown to be more inclusive and intersectional. Just as rape culture<sup>3</sup> is manifested differently around the world—from female genital cutting to foot binding to date rape—so too, feminism is manifested differently globally. This requires feminists to honor a person's empowerment in recognizing his or her rights and in making choices for one's self. Gina illustrated this with several lessons she learned in the classroom, where she discovered the need to meet people where they are on this topic, rooting feminism within the challenges they face in their daily lives.

In the Middle East and North Africa, Zahra has found that collaboration between secular feminist groups and religious feminist groups offers the greatest opportunity for powerful impact, especially in terms of social mobilization potential. As the Global Fund for Women works in the region, they implicitly and explicitly engage with religion through the work of their grantee partners given the prominent role occupied by religious institutions there and the widespread religiosity within society. As an example, many of their partners across the region are challenging religion-based personal status laws or family laws, which states allow different religious groups to control to ensure the loyalty of religious institutions or at least avoid unnecessary tensions. These laws only serve to increase the oppression of women, the justification of violence against them and the control of their bodies.

### **Negotiating tough issues and building safe spaces**

In a world where men run most governments, make most decisions, and make up the majority of religious leaders, Ruth called for productive discomfort, often looking for it to come from the bottom. Top-down approaches forcing gender equality will not work. Nor will listening to the dominant voices, which are male, or women influenced by patriarchal norms or power. To illustrate what she means by change from below, she pointed to the collective advocacy work in India following particularly horrendous rapes and international

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/thursdays-in-black-zero-tolerance-for-violence-against-women>

<sup>3</sup> See various definitions at <http://www.wavaw.ca/what-is-rape-culture/>

attention. Grassroots organizations were able to seize this attention, use social media and the spread of information, and come together as a more cohesive group around the same goal to pressure for a stronger law.

Advocating for the rights of LGBT persons is challenging and especially when engaging religious leaders. Ruth described the work of AJWS's partner in Kenya where Christians and Muslims are fiercely anti-gay. The organization's strategy is to promote tolerance, and its work calls on both Muslim and Christian clergy to support greater tolerance and human rights. A group they supported met regularly with clergy to discuss inter-religious tolerance, racial and ethnic tolerance, and eventually homosexuality. The clergy rejected notions of tolerance of homosexuality but after weeks of meeting, the organizers identified themselves as gay. The clergy were initially in denial, spouting stereotypes, but came to appreciate and respect their counterparts. The strategy was to develop relationships before talking about sexuality, and in this spirit the group did see changes in attitudes. The organization works on the premise that religious groups are proponents of no violence against anyone for any reason and can adhere to that principle when anyone is threatened with violence, including based on sexual identity.

Within the WCC, Fulata observed, the most challenging issues are LGBT rights, sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), and also the language around these issues. The WCC consist of 345 churches that agree on protecting the dignity of every person and respecting and embracing every person as created in the image of God. However, when it comes to specific issues like LGBT rights, it is difficult to reach consensus. WCC has organized a reference group on human sexuality as an open space to talk about challenging issues where there is no clear consensus. They approach SRHR as a broader agenda, refusing to narrow the topic to only sexuality and abortion. Starting with individual member churches or regional organizations that have made progress, WCC pairs these groups with churches that are struggling with the issue. To make gender issues more accessible to members, last year they began training member churches to become conversant with CEDAW, the UPR process, and UNSCR 1325 by crafting documents that pointed to parallel Biblical verses.

Gina spoke with verve and honesty about the Catholic Church for which she cares deeply. The Catholic Church, and recently the Pope himself, continues to focus on complementarity: thus the idea that men and women have complementary roles. The Church reinforces the idea that women should be at home, as wives and mothers, and men are supporters of the family. If such views are the starting point, there is no need for political action around equal pay for women, paid parental leave, childcare issues, or reproductive justice. Instead, women are told it is their duty to be at home as a wife and to raise children. Gina relayed her own experience of a priest discouraging her from working—at the time she was training for work at a domestic violence shelter—because she was engaged and after marriage, her job was to be a wife and mother. Today she continues to encounter struggles, and see other women struggle, with the Catholic Church. Issues like complementarity, when supported by the Church, enhance or frame substructures within larger societal struggles we see today in the United States.

Numerous other gender issues—such as women's ordination, reproductive justice, and LGBT rights—arise within the Catholic Church. However, Gina described gender as a blind spot for Pope Francis. Oppressing women doesn't fit well, she argued, in a tradition that is built on liberation. In terms of abortion, the Vatican is calling people to confess their sins and has included abortion among them, stating that they will forgive all women who have had abortions if they are sorry. However, it is not clear that the Church has given any consideration to the circumstances that led a woman to have an abortion or the suffering she had dealt with as a result of the abortion. This, she believes, is problematic.

Because religiosity is so high in the MENA region it is not uncommon to find Muslims, Christians, Baha'is, or women of other religions in so-called secular feminist groups. They have decided to organize around other issues but are still people of faith. There is often tension between these groups and those that identify as

primarily religious, for example Muslim feminist, who are working to renegotiate or reinterpret shari'ah and Muslim principles in a way that is compatible to principles of women rights. Generalizing, Zahra described secular feminist groups as tending to avoid religion, not engaging with it directly, seeing it as too difficult and thorny. On the other hand, Muslim feminists, including those who do not use the label 'feminist', have been reluctant to work too closely with secular feminists in order to maintain their credibility; secular feminists are often viewed as "Western agents trying to destroy the family or culture". The 2011 social transformation and uprising led, Zahra argued, to a realization that partnership between the two is essential. The main common ground is freedom of expression: fundamentalist groups are attacking Islamic feminists and secular groups have always advocated for this. The large diverse group of civil society actors that have emerged since 2011 include many young women that may not use the labels 'secular' or 'religious'. Many of these young women have interacted indirectly or directly with the work of secular feminists but are also sympathetic to Muslim feminists. Our test, she said, is how well we can work together with all these women entering this space. She noted that rural areas are a weak point for feminist groups and in MENA, an area where patriarchal religious groups, formal or informal, have had the most success. With the chance to work with grassroots women in rural areas, Zahra sees an opportunity and necessity for groups working on women's rights to become strong and nimble. They must engage with issues of religion while truly following feminist principles.

### Engaging with the audience

Opening the discussion to the audience, the first question illustrated the tension between the need and practicality to engage with religion and doubts as to whether or not religion is compatible with feminist ideals. Katherine and Fulata emphasized that religion cannot be ignored in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in the U.S. and in any country. Fulata urged humility for practitioners; they must realize that after they leave a community the women and girls in their programs will interact daily with religious leaders and communities. This calls for commitment to ideals but also an openness to hear different views and patience in dialogue and engagement.

Another questioner sought examples of where adversary is absent and collaboration is easy. Ruth gave the example of Tostan's anti-FGC work in Senegal; early in their work a local imam agreed with Tostan's human rights arguments and began to spread their anti-FGC messages in his area, affirming that indeed it was not part of their religion. Specific questions focused on anti-FGC work and sexual pleasure, including working with women to see their body as their own. Zahra spoke of the complexity of FGC and different approaches to stop the practice in Egypt, Yemen, and part of Kurdistan. She and Ruth emphasized the need for "both-and" strategies that including working to change laws and working with local leaders. Zahra reiterated the need not to alienate women who are religious. Doing so risks talking only to ourselves and getting nowhere.

One man (among the small number who attended) asked if both sides (feminists and religious women) had enough knowledge about the other including formal education within women's and gender studies on religion and vice versa. Fulata challenged the notion that there is truly a clear division between these "worlds" and pointed to the founding mothers of feminism who operated within their religion, often using religious resources to define feminism and articulate processes of liberation. Gina concurred that for many, their feminism is rooted in their faith. Religion has come to be seen as anti-woman, so there is need for far more conversation to recognize and acknowledge this history and space.

An African woman critiqued the ontology of feminism used by the panel, noting her perspective, which has always been intersectional, and therefore asking for more examples of feminism interacting with religion in the West and North. Gina agreed that there is a need to shift how feminism is understood, especially in the United States, so it is more global.

## Final comments

Katherine commented that in her work she has found that issues around gender roles, women's roles, and sexuality are always significant and often controversial. They arise repeatedly and often for many development topics seemingly unrelated to gender. The actual and ideal roles of men and women inevitably arise as a focus. Therefore, religion cannot be ignored. The panelists provided various illustrations to show relational approaches that have met with often surprising success in building trust and deconstructing stereotypes. This can open spaces for collaboration. Scaling up efforts along these lines may be difficult and resource intensive but offer a path out of quagmires of tension and conflicting visions. Change happening within religious traditions, deliberate or responsive, was also illustrated and stressed, noting the importance and yet difficulty that feminists find in using religious resources to achieve gender justice. The event pointed to fault lines where more work is needed and the need for patience, persistence, imagination, and courage.

## Annex: Panelists' Biographies

**Ruth W. Messinger** is president of American Jewish World Service (AJWS), the world's leading Jewish organization working to end poverty and realize human rights in the developing world. After a remarkable 18-year presidency, Ruth will soon take on a new role as AJWS's first Global Ambassador, continuing her crucial work of engaging global leaders, activists, rabbis and interfaith leaders to speak out on behalf of oppressed and persecuted communities worldwide. Ruth joined AJWS in 1998, following a 20-year career in public service in New York City. As a leading activist for human rights around the globe, she lectures widely and holds leadership roles in the faith-based advocacy arena. She chairs the social justice committee of the State Department's Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group and is a member of the World Bank's Moral Imperative working group on extreme poverty. Ruth has been honored by many national Jewish organizations and has been named for the past decade among the "world's most influential Jews" and religious leaders by The Forward, The Jerusalem Post and The Huffington Post.

**Fulata L. Moyo** is programme executive for the World Council of Churches' "A Just Community of Women and Men" project. In this role, she coordinates wo/men's global work in liaison with the 349 WCC's member churches for awareness raising and policy making locally, regionally, and internationally. She was a guest editor for the International Review of Mission (April 2015), Ecumenical Review (October 2012), and she co-edited, *Women Writing Africa: Eastern African Region* (Feminist Press: 2007). Dr. Moyo is the outgoing General Coordinator of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. She received her doctorate from the School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, with additional study at Yale University's Divinity School and Department of Public Health. From February 1 to May 31, 2016 she is a research fellow at Harvard Divinity School, developing Christian Ethic of Care resources for churches confronted by human trafficking.

**Gina Messina-Dysert**, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Religion and Gender Studies at Ursuline College. She is also co-founder of Feminism and Religion, the global project that explores the "F-word" in religion and the intersection between scholarship, activism, and community; now with readers in 181 countries. As the author of multiple articles, the book *Rape Culture and Spiritual Violence* (Routledge, 2014), and co-editor of *Faithfully Feminist: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Feminists on Why We Stay* (White Cloud Press, 2015), and *Feminism and Religion in the 21st Century* (Routledge, 2014), Gina has given serious attention to issues faced by women in relation to religion and social justice. She earned her doctorate degree at Claremont Graduate University with a dual focus in women studies in religion and theology, ethics, and culture and completed a M.A. in religious studies at John Carroll University. She also earned a M.B.A. at the University of Findlay and completed her undergraduate degree at Cleveland State University.

**Zahra Vieneuve** is program officer for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) at the Global Fund for Women, one of the world's leading foundations for women human rights. Zahra is a feminist activist whose work on issues of gender equality, human rights, and interfaith peace has taken her to Switzerland, Kenya, Egypt, and most recently the USA. Prior to joining the Global Fund, Zahra collaborated with civil society organizations across MENA in her capacity as a human rights advocate and educator. Zahra holds two Masters degrees; the first in Political Science from the University of Geneva and the second in International and Comparative Education from the American University in Cairo. She was awarded the *25<sup>th</sup> of January Award for Scholarly Excellence* for her thesis on gender and religious diversity in Egyptian history textbooks.