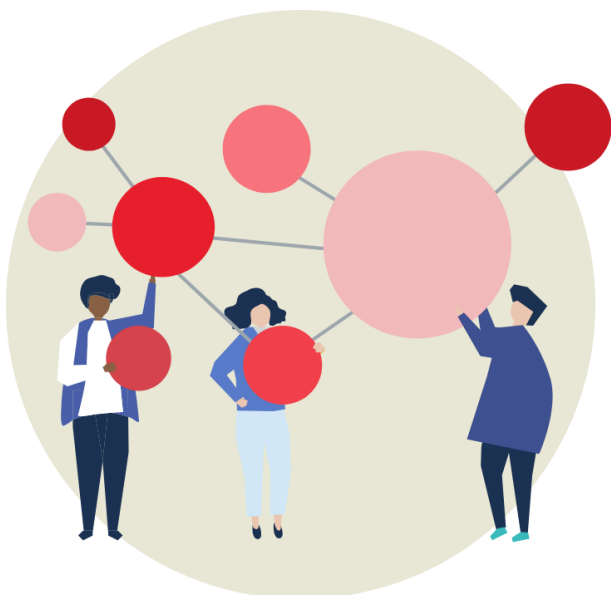




RELIGION AND THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA

HARNESSING RELIGION'S POTENTIAL TO IMPROVE THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS EVENT REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

This report looks back at the kick off for the Community of Practice on “WPS & Religion” that Cordaid organized with the support of the Knowledge Management Fund. The initial idea to host an in-person event on 1 October that would form an interactive kick off for the CoP was disrupted due to COVID-19 implications. In response, the event was transformed into a series of online expert sessions followed up by various interactive sessions.

Why this Community of Practice?

Religion and the WPS agenda are often considered in their separate silos, while research done by Cordaid indicates that there is great potential in exploring this nexus. While the topic can be controversial, it is quite relevant to look at religion not as something inherently good or bad for women’s rights, but rather to find best practices, recommendations and experiences that focus on interpretations and examples that positively engage with religion for the advancement of the WPS agenda. By doing so, the agenda might potentially gain legitimacy by considering the local context, in which religion often forms a significant aspect of daily life. Furthermore, the world-wide religious constituency is enormous, which means that there is potential in finding unexpected alliances with progressive or moderate religious leaders to amplify a message of gender justice.

The kick off of the Community of practice organized by Cordaid, with support of the Knowledge Management Fund, aimed to harness this potential. By facilitating dialogue on the positive role religion can play for enhancing the WPS agenda, building on recommendations and observations from research done by Cordaid, the event aspired to illuminate positive perspectives on this complex topic. Cordaid’s research indicates that the religion-WPS nexus is a complex yet promising topic, in need of further exploration.

Although religion might be seen as a cause for gender injustice, based on specific conservative interpretations, there is a need to see the issue from a different perspective. By highlighting local perspectives of moderate or progressive religious interpretations, we are looking for perspectives that might strengthen understandings of women’s rights and gender equality. This kick off aimed to bring together a diverse array of actors working on the WPS agenda, both faith-based or secular, to encourage dialogue on the nexus between religion and the WPS agenda, and by providing concrete examples from their various experiences and backgrounds. Because this nexus is still somewhat underexposed, it is important to start this dialogue and to think of ways to engage with religion for advancing the WPS agenda.

From its work in fragile and (post)-conflict settings, Cordaid acknowledges that religion is highly important to successful interventions in these settings, and consequently sees religion as a factor of significance in pursuit of the WPS agenda. Although it is important to acknowledge the prevalence of negative or harmful effects caused by religion and religious institutions, Cordaid believes that there is value in looking at possibilities to engage with religious actors, communities and institutions to further the WPS Agenda.

How?

This kick Off reinforced the importance of engaging broadly with religion and outlined good practices and key recommendations to benefit this engagement in the context of WPS. The discussions during the different sessions of the event reflect the role of religion and its relation to improvement of opportunities for advancing women’s peace and security situations in the most fragile contexts. In sum, these sessions

demonstrated that religion can positively contribute to the WPS agenda, given the right conditions for engagement.

In this report, we will look back at the various expert sessions and online exchange sessions, and discuss the key recommendations, good practices and concrete examples that were discussed during the different sessions. Furthermore, we will provide the input for the Community of Practice that was kick-started by the event.

Participants

Afghan Women Network, Atria, CARE Nederland, Cordaid, Christian Aid, Dutch Ministry of Defence, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The European Centre for Development Policy, Human Rights Consultancy, IDH Sustainable Trade Initiative, Initiatives of Change, International Alert, Islamic Relief, Knowledge Platform, Mensen met een Missie, The Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, Norwegian Church Aid, PAX for peace, Religions for Peace, Radboud University Nijmegen, Stichting ZOA, Support Trust for African Development, Tear Foundation, The Broker Online, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, WIPC, WO=MEN, Women's Initiatives Network

Moderator Reflections

Religion means many different things to people: faith, truth, tradition, rituals, ethics, lifestyle, identity, community, politics, rules, something from the past, patriarchy, etc. Fact is that most people in the world, including women, consider themselves religious, and act upon that. Religion often evokes strong emotions and statements, from families to states. It can be both a unifying and peacemaking force, as well as an instrument for conflict and war. In other words, religion can make or break the WPS agenda. Yet, rather than seeing both notions as 'opposites' that need to be 'bridged', it is more fruitful to discover their common ground. That might be through shared concepts or lived experiences. Furthermore, it is crucial to focus on religious actors, and the various roles that they play within communities, including the profane roles. Further, we need to include new voices in defining what religion prescribes, especially women. And lastly, the creation of safe platforms for open discussions is key in bridging actors' diverse understandings. In the end, this serves to promote a sense of shared humanity, which is the basis of both religion and WPS. This event is a promising kick-off for such a journey.

These reflections were submitted by Laila al-Zwaini, the moderator of the expert sessions.

EXPERT SESSIONS

Keynote Speech – Azza Karam

As the first expert session of the event, this keynote speech by Azza Karam, Secretary General of Religions for Peace and Professor of Religion and Development at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, accentuates the relevance of discussing religion in the context of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Azza shares her experiences of working “on and with religion” within the United Nations (UN) system. In particular, she mentions her previous involvement with the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development, an initiative that was born out of the idea that more and better engagement with religion was required within the UN system. At the same time, Azza also mentions challenges that working with religion brings to the fore; this can involve such power dynamics as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) “dictating the terms of their engagement” or some religious partners invoking conditionality. Still, Azza urges to work around these challenges, because one way or another, religion is important to so many actors and communities around the world. According to Azza, incorporating religion could be a “very positive force for change” as



Face-to-face discussion – Kaouthar Darmoni & Jos Douma

In the second expert session, Laila al-Zwaini moderates a discussion between Jos Douma, Special Envoy for Religion and Belief at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Kaouthar Darmoni, CEO Atria. In this discussion, both Kaouthar and Jos refer to the historical backgrounds of religious traditions and some of the ways in which these continue to inform the lives of people in, for instance, Dutch society. This goes beyond people openly and consciously identifying themselves with a particular religious tradition. In this light, Kaouthar and Jos make a distinction between religion and culture, and stress that the two are connected. The values that are related to religious traditions often play a part in identity formation, and through a better understanding of religious traditions and the ways in which they influence our value systems, we can learn to better understand what the drivers of people are in a variety of settings around the world. Kaouthar and Jos stress that a variety of interpretations around religion exist and that these interpretations intersect with culture, politics and power relations, leading to the creation of many layers of meaning around religion. This influence of religion reaffirms the relevance of stirring the discussion around religion, thereby including a diverse range of voices, stimulating engagement with religion and religious interpretations, and questioning what is taken for granted.

Following this session, Atria and Cordaid will be looking into further collaboration on the subject.

Panel discussion – Florence Andrew, Janneke Stegeman, Mary Akrami and Rick van der Woud

In the third and final expert session, Laila al-Zwaini moderates a panel discussion between Florence Andrews, Chairperson of Support Trust for African Development (STAD), Janneke Stegeman, theologian and program director at Mensen met een Missie, Mary Akrami, Director of the Afghan Women's Network, and Rick van der Woud, Director of Mensen met een Missie. In this discussion, there are a couple of recurring themes. Firstly, the panel members mention the existence of a large variety of interpretations of religious texts in relation to different settings across space and time, as well as the existence of different narratives with purposes of inclusion and exclusion. Secondly, the influence of power dynamics in religious traditions comes forward; some religious interpretations and some actors are more dominant than others. As a final recurring theme, attention for the aforementioned power dynamics leads the panel members to suggest a few focus points. As such, they point out that it is important to focus on the communities and the people behind religious institutions, and to empower people through education to engage with their religious traditions. The latter means that people can take an active stance towards religion by interrogating what it means for them personally, rather than this being set in stone with the interpretations of dominant actors or institutions. After all, religion is incredibly diverse and can have different meanings to different people.

Like the other two expert sessions, this panel discussion shows that the linkage between religion and the WPS agenda involves challenges, but also bears potential for strengthening the agenda by making it more inclusive and diverse. The challenges do not negate this potential; rather, they make the case for better engagement with not only religion, religious leaders and religious institutions, but also (or even all the more) with the people behind the institutions.

Online sessions

During our online exchange sessions, we further explored the conversation about religion and the WPS agenda by discussing challenges, opportunities, thoughts and ideas in smaller groups. The turnout was promising, and the invaluable input that we gathered in these online sessions will be instrumental in taking this initiative forward, serving as a foundation for the creation of the Community of Practice, which we elaborate on in the section 'next steps'.

Several discussion statements functioned as conversation starters in the online sessions. By means of a MentiMeter, we collected reflections on these statements online. One of the statements was: 'religion matters in my (field of) work', with the option to reply 'yes', 'no', or 'sometimes'. Interestingly, most

participants answered with 'yes' to this statement, demonstrating the urgency of this topic. In the discussions, it became clear that in many contexts in which the participants work, religion plays a significant role, reiterating the importance of discussing this topic and furthering an understanding of the role of religion in different contexts. Also, the participants mentioned that often the inherent value systems within (I)NGOs or other organizations are important, impacting the ways in which one can professionally engage with religion.

Another statement, 'there is a difference between personal experience of religion and professional engagement with religion', was unanimously answered with 'agree', although participants reflected that the two can often be intertwined. The participants indicated that it is of importance to have knowledge and an understanding of how people interact with different beliefs systems. With the statement 'Religion and feminism cannot go together', most participants disagreed, while some participants referred to this being impacted by the specific interpretations that are given to both religion and feminism. Progressive or moderate interpretations of religion allow more space for feminism to coexist with religion. Conservative interpretations of religious texts can be restrictive as to the role of women within society, and thereby are difficult to bring together with feminism.

We invited our participants to share their thoughts on the question: 'what would you need for more/better engagement with religion in your daily work?'. The answers indicated that an open attitude and awareness of one's own blind spots are important. Furthermore, participants expressed that a better understanding of religion is needed, including an understanding of religion 'on the ground', which refers to the ways in which religion informs people's daily lives. This is also related to the influence of religion on identity formation, both in an individual and a group respect. . From a development sector point of view, such an understanding of religion could contribute to a better adaptation to local contexts and ,open the way for better engagement with religion and its potential opportunities for WPS.

During the sessions, the participants provided many examples that dive into the dilemmas and successes regarding the nexus between religion and WPS. A recurrent example was the engagement of men in different programs. Some participants shared success stories from initiatives working on 'transforming masculinities'. There was a consensus that engaging men is of great importance for the nexus. During the sessions several recommendations were shared, drawn from the diverse backgrounds and the vast expertise of the participants. We collected these recommendations in the list below. Furthermore, we collected a list of recurrent themes that participants identified as important for building on this topic. We aim to use this list of recommendations and themes as the basis for the Community of Practice and the way forward for enhancing the dialogue on religion and the WPS agenda.



recommendations

- Consider different ways of engaging with masculinities (e.g. Male Champions of Change (MCC) strategy);
- Be aware of the the role of different value systems ;
- Understand the context from a gender perspective, understand how people deal with existing structures and belief systems;
- Ensure people in your organizations understand what religion means (e.g. difference between religious institutions and personal understandings of religion), facilitate exchanges of ideas about this;
- Ensure that organizations (governmental, non-governmental and military) recognize the role of religion, instead of ignoring it in line with secular thinking;
- Work with feminist theologians to analyse religious texts and norms flowing from them, and contribute to a discussion on the interpretation of texts and the impact of particular norms on women and men;
- Create safe spaces for women and men to discuss these subjects;
- Take time to build trust with leaders and communities;
- Keep in mind that there are prenotions and perceptions on religions that may differ from ones that you are familiar with.

themes

- Masculinities – how to engage with them and promote positive masculinities;
- Resistance from religious actors – why does this happen and how do you approach this;
- Religion at the grassroots level;
- Conservative religious actors at the international level;
- Religious mediators;
- The link between education and religion – how to stir thinking and discussion about religion and religious interpretations;
- Religious texts from a feminist perspective;
- History of cultures (slavery, decolonization) and religion;
- Non-Western lenses to feminism;
- Power relations and religion – the essence of the WPS agenda;
- Intersectionality and religion;
- Family structures/dynamics and the WPS agenda.

NEXT STEPS

The idea behind this event was to kick-start a Community of Practice on the topic of religion and the WPS agenda. During the organization (and reorganization due to COVID-19) of the kick off, we noticed strong enthusiasm and interest in this topic. The contributions of both the speakers and the participants confirmed our suspicion that there is a gap with regard to discussing this topic in a safe space, and exchanging ideas, recommendations and practices. We aim to bridge this gap by facilitating the start of a Community of Practice on this topic.

During the online sessions, participants shared their needs for and potential contributions to the Community of Practice:

What do participants need from the CoP?

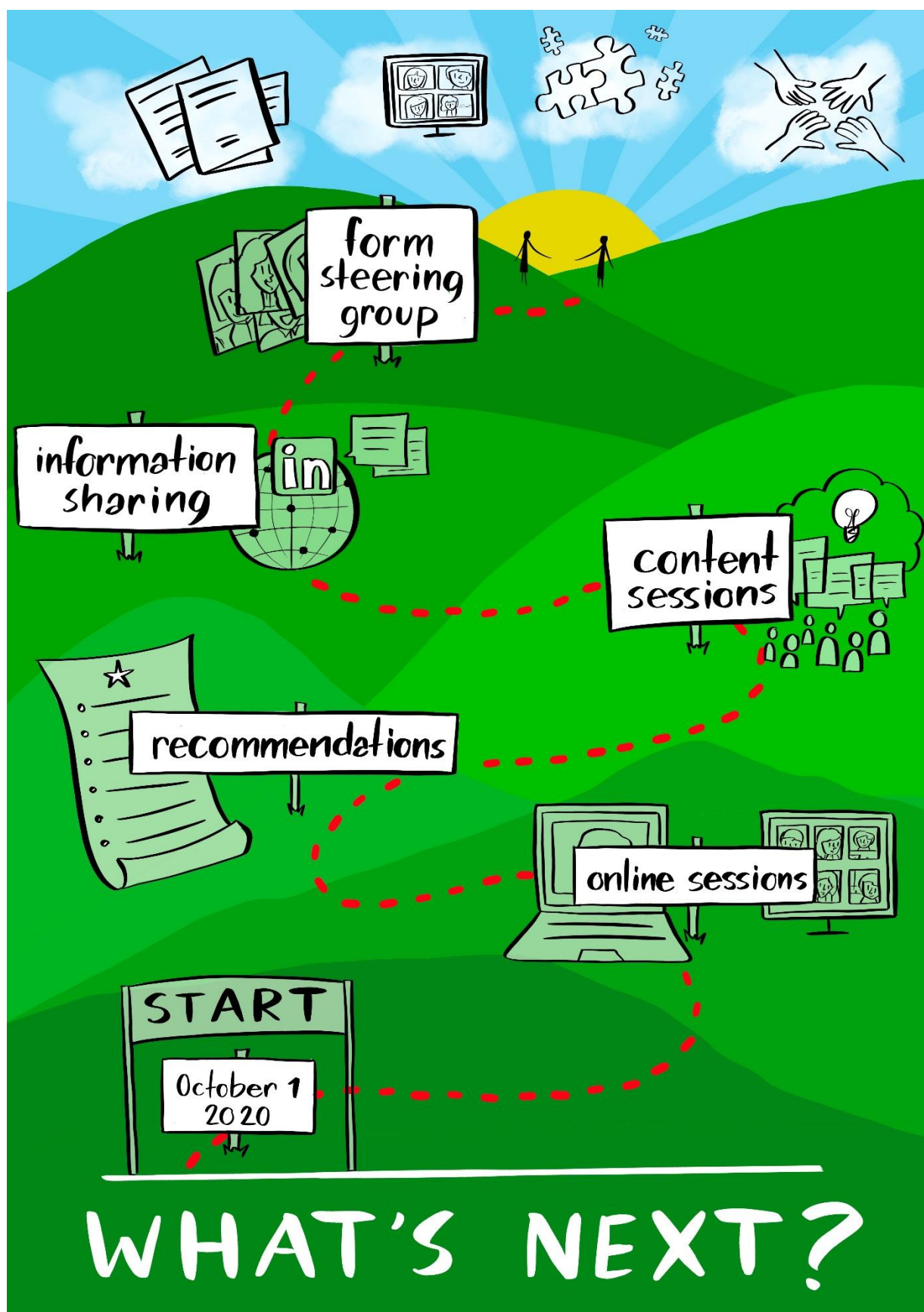
- Sharing knowledge, information and recommendations;
- Joint action plan/guidelines;
- Break out of the various bubbles we work in;
- Collaboration amongst pro-women's rights leaders;
- Thinking about the relation between working on a local level on this topic and instigating change at a more institutional level.

What can participants bring to the CoP?

- Examples from countries we work in;
- Network (on WPS);
- Expertise and experience (engaging with the issues in practice in conflict affected states) --> tips and tricks;
- Possible connections to related CoPs (e.g. a CoP on social norms) and learning hubs (e.g. Joint Learning Initiative (JLI) and Sexual violence research initiative (SVRI);
- A small amount of time and a large amount of enthusiasm.

We envision the following Roadmap, continuing for now on content and information sharing, and slowly professionalizing our work as a Community of Practice. The online sessions provided a range of topics worthy of further exploration. In thematic content sessions, we can continue the discussion on these separate topics. A session on, for example, masculinities could be organized, where a scholar provides an academic perspective on masculinities, affording CoP participants the opportunity to share experiences from the field and exchange best practices. Beyond these content sessions, our LinkedIn group for the CoP provides an online space where we can publish reports on the content sessions, share relevant further material and get in touch with fellow CoP participants.

In early 2021, we want to follow up with the CoP to inquire which topics participants would like to focus on in the initial stage of the CoP. We will contact everyone through our mailing list and set up a meeting date and a survey to decide upon initial focus areas. This document provides the starting point for that discussion. Over time, we have the ambition to form a steering group that will bring the CoP to the next level, facilitate cooperation amongst CoP participants and contribute to further stirring the debate around religion and WPS, also beyond this CoP.



WORD OF THANKS

Organizing an event and starting a Community of Practice during a global pandemic is, to say the least, challenging. A successful community of practice can only be established with sufficient faith, commitment and enthusiasm from its members. Establishing this through online interactions is, consequently, more challenging than through a face to face event.

However, with the support of amazing and committed experts we managed to create an interactive, stimulating and inspiring series of sessions and discussions, which served as the kick off for this Community of Practice.

We would also like to express our gratitude to the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law for their support of this initiative under the Knowledge Management Fund.

We want to use this opportunity to thank all our speakers: Jos Douma, Azza Karam, Kaouthar Darmoni, Florence Andrew, Janneke Stegeman, Mary Akrami and Rick van der Woud for being so flexible on short notice, and believing in this Community of Practice.

Last but not least, we want to thank Laila Al-Zwaini, for being flexible, creative and willing to facilitate these sessions in difficult circumstances.

We look forward to the next steps of the Community of Practice!



ABOUT CORDAID

Cordaid works to end poverty and exclusion. We do this in the world's most fragile and conflict-affected areas as well as in the Netherlands. We engage communities to rebuild trust and resilience and increase people's self-reliance.

Our professionals provide humanitarian assistance and create opportunities to improve security, health care and education and stimulate inclusive economic growth. We are supported by nearly 300,000 private donors in the Netherlands and by a worldwide partner network. Cordaid is a founding member of Caritas Internationalis and CIDSE.

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