



# RELIGION AND THE 'WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA'

CARE. ACT. SHARE. LIKE CORDAID.

Photo SAW Afghanistan

**HARNESSING THE POTENTIAL OF RELIGION  
TO IMPROVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN  
IN THE MOST FRAGILE CONTEXTS**

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# INTRODUCTION

While religion constitutes one of the most important factors in the daily lives of 85% of the world's population<sup>1</sup>, religion's links to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda are not often discussed, particularly in terms of opportunities. The societal debate around religion, and the perception of harmful practices that stem from (patriarchal) religious institutions, problematize the role of religion within the WPS agenda. Many perceive religion as an obstacle for gender equality, arguing that religious actors often block interventions aimed at enhancing the position of women and upholding harmful patriarchal structures.

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. This policy paper highlights the importance of engaging broadly with religion and outlines good practices and key recommendations to benefit this engagement in the context of WPS. In doing so, the paper examines different case studies that 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.

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*“We need to recognize that religion is really powerful, it is a fantastic opportunity to mobilize large numbers of people.”*

**Fionna**, participant expert meeting and Head of Humanitarian Policy, Advocacy and Campaigns at Oxfam

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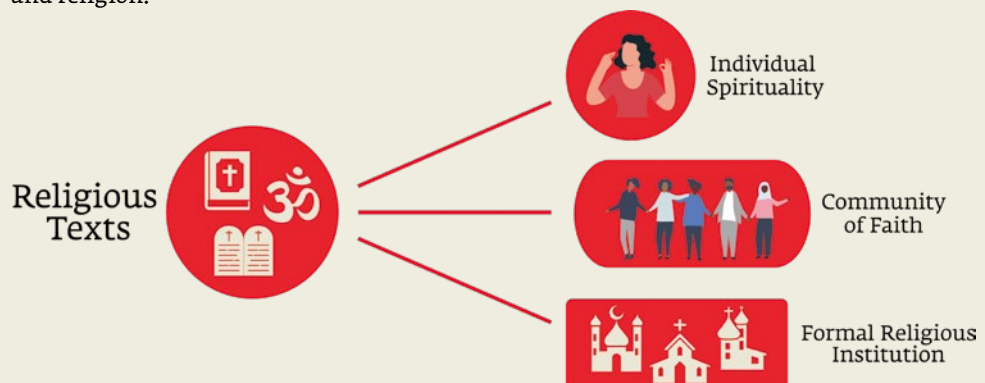
In sum, this paper will demonstrate that religion can positively contribute to the WPS agenda, given the right conditions for engagement. Firstly, the paper will provide context on the nexus between religion and the WPS agenda, followed by three case studies that illustrate different realities of the interaction between the WPS agenda and religion as a (positive) factor. Secondly, this paper will identify good practices and recommendations, collected by means of interviewing different stakeholders in the WPS and religion space, ranging from academics to practitioners.

It is important to acknowledge that there are many actors involved, and multiple perspectives shape the subject. This paper therefore illuminates a few different viewpoints and provides an overview of relevant stakeholders engaged in the topic of religion in the WPS agenda.

## Religion in daily life

### Box 1 Religion

Religion as a concept has many meanings and therefore it needs some conceptual clarifications. In this paper, we distinguish between different forms of religion. Firstly, religion is not the same as spirituality. An individual practicing faith can be seen as spirituality, whereas that person can be part of a faith community, also often defined as a religious community. Religion also often refers to the official institution of religion, the authority of religion. Finally, religions of the book (for example the Quran or the Bible) base their religious tradition upon their religious book. The book therefore has a major role in defining religion as well. To discuss the topic of women within religion, it is important to distinguish between these different forms of religion, because each form relates differently to the topic of WPS and religion.



### Box 2 Relation culture and religion

The connection between culture and religion is a complex relation and is in need of conceptual clarification. In this paper, culture and religion are seen as interwoven with each other. Although it might be conceptually possible to distinguish between the two, in practice differentiating between the two is hardly possible. In practice, religion is integral part of culture, and culture integral part of religion.

This means that in practice, the two are inseparable and should be treated as integral part of each other.

*“Religion is part of my life,  
it helps me to redefine who I am.”*

**Florence**, Participant of expert meeting and women's rights activist

For the majority of the world's population, religion shapes their daily reality and signifies a determining factor of everyday life. When thinking about solutions to global issues, the religious dimension of these issues is often neglected despite its significance and the potential in that religion might provide.<sup>2</sup> For the WPS agenda, although religion might form an obstacle in some cases to enhancing women's peace and security, it is nevertheless of importance to take religion into account for a holistic approach to improving security. Many women identify religion as a vital source of inspiration, for example motivating peace and empowerment work. Take, for example the work of the organization Sundjata<sup>3</sup>. Sundjata is a member organization of the Platform Vrouwen & Duurzame Vrede (PVDV), that initiated the program 'Peace, Religion and Female Leadership'<sup>4</sup>. Sundjata works with small women's organizations in conflict areas, such as the Great Lake region. Many of the women involved in these organizations emphasize the inspiration and hope they find in their faith.

The Bible or the Qur'an, as well as other religious texts, are, for many of these women, the sources of inspiration that undergird their determination to make positive change. "It is easy to find calls and promises of peace from these religious books, and it is paramount that many women in conflict areas find inspiration, hope and the urge for action within their faith. They can also find inspiration for their role as female leaders, when pointed out feminist interpretations of specific paragraphs in the religious books"<sup>5</sup>

By learning about the role of faith as a source of inspiration for these women, Sundjata and the Platform VDV developed a program in which they collaborated with progressive<sup>6</sup> (feminist) theologians to amplify a message of female leadership, peace and reconciliation work, gender justice and inter-faith dialogue. Contrary to recurrent arguments about the obstacles religion raises against women's rights/positions, religion is often not *inherently* good or bad for the position of women in society, nor does it always adversely impact progress towards satisfying women's peace and security needs. However, the danger lies in some (popular) interpretations of religion, which may engender norms and values that impede fulfilling women's specific peace and security needs. Consequently, it is essential to examine how to engage with religion in a positive way to advance gender equality, women's rights and the WPS agenda. It is important to look at varying interpretations of religion, to understand cultural contexts, and especially to listen closely to women's voices to understand what inspires them in their work for peace, security and justice.

### **Women's positions in religious institutions**

Men commonly shape religious institutions<sup>7</sup>. Within religious institutions, there is often a gendered divide as to the 'voice' of a religious institution, which is often male dominated. In other words, religious institutions often convey a patriarchal message, excluding women from leadership positions. Men occupy position<sup>8</sup> of authority and power within religious institutions and thereby shape the 'voice' of that religious institution. Men often play central roles within these institutions, acting as religious teachers or imams, priests, pastors, etc. By contrast, women often fulfill the facilitating roles by fulfilling administrative and organizational<sup>9</sup> tasks. Interestingly, women tend to be the largest constituency within religious institutions, fulfilling roles as being audience, collecting money, facilitating the religious services and other serving tasks. This means that women are of great importance for religious institutions, even though they often are excluded from the leadership positions and authority of the institutions. Women of faith therefore tend to be overlooked or invisible while the work they do is<sup>10</sup> significant. Besides, the cultural context of religious institutions impacts strongly how gender roles and expectations are shaped. In many of the contexts where Cordaid works, patriarchal cultures shape the gendered role division and thereby also the role division within religious institutions. Religion and culture must be considered as two separate, though intertwined, facets of daily life that shape gendered power relations and gender roles in society.

### **Bridging perspectives and frameworks of a diverse array of stakeholders**

To study the possibilities of engaging with religion to advance the WPS agenda, we must firstly identify the different perspectives that populate this intersection. Often, the discrepancy between stakeholders and their divergent perspectives complicate the subject more. On the one hand, women's rights and gender equality within the international institutional environment are viewed from a secular, human rights perspective<sup>11</sup>. Such a perspective does not always accord with the day-to-day reality of local women's rights organizations, which may or may not be religious. In order to bridge the gap between the international institutional framework and the realities of local women's rights organizations and their work, it is necessary to bring together – or perhaps even reconcile – religious and secular actors. Religious actors have a strong position in their community and can either hinder or promote gender equality and women's rights. They are actors that cannot be ignored.

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*“The religious constituency is so big. Within the institutions, but also in the communities religion is such an important factor”*

**Anne-Floor**, participant expert meeting and Program Manager Gender, Peace and Security at WO=MEN:

Cordaid sees opportunities to bridge this gap by establishing unconventional alliances between religious leaders, or to align with religious structures, thereby linking an (I)NGO with local structures and institutions that enjoy authority and legitimacy on a local level. In doing so, Cordaid tries to fill a gap, deviating from the pervasive distinction between religious and secular, and the common binary opposition between women's rights and religious beliefs.

### **The other way around: the European context that might impede positive engagement with religion**

The current configuration of religious institutions and identities in Europe has resulted from context-specific historical developments, and is now mostly regarded as a private, individual affair. However, in other contexts, especially in the countries Cordaid works in, religion plays a completely different role, commonly one that is more present in society and everyday life. Seeing religion as impeding the WPS agenda and other women's rights is a belief that some European organizations see as self-evident, while that belief is generally not widely shared in the countries in which Cordaid works. European perspectives on WPS and religion may differ greatly from local perspectives on that relationship.

In accordance, a way to consider this distance between perspectives is to acknowledge that two normative contexts converge on this subject. Marie Juul Petersen, senior researcher at the Danish Institute for Human Rights, provides an interesting theoretical approach.<sup>12</sup> She writes about these two conflicting normative contexts: the local and the international context. Essentially, her theory accounts for the differences between international and local perspectives. An example might be the distance between the 1325 agenda as international framework and local interpretations of the gender justice. Her theoretical insights can be applied to differences between understandings of the role of religion in daily life, and a subsequent gap between different understandings. Similarly, her theory can account for the consequences of considering the role of religion in the WPS agenda as a means of bridging between different perspectives in this context. In this conflicting situation of normative contexts, faith-based actors might provide opportunity and chance for the alignment between unexpected allies, in order to bridge these gaps between different actors working in the sector of women, peace and security.

## CASE STUDIES



Below we will discuss three cases that illustrate that religion can positively contribute to the WPS agenda.

### **What are examples of the significance of religion for the WPS agenda?**

#### **LIBYA**

Libya has been in a constant state of conflict, especially since the ousting of Qadhafi in 2011. Since then, attempts have been made to transition and rebuild the state, however conflict fault lines across ethnic, tribal, religious and political difference make this extremely complicated, making Libyan society extremely polarized and divided. Furthermore, the presence of armed groups made the situation even more volatile. Nowadays, the country is extremely divided, with three governments and little central authority. The situation in Libya is dangerous, especially for women. Although the country experienced some optimism in the period between 2012-2014, is the conflict situation heavily affecting women's and girl's rights and security.<sup>33</sup> It is however important to note that women and girls in Libya are not a homogenous group, and neither are their interests and security situations. Considering this nexus of religion and WPS/gender in the case of Libya and any other country therefore needs to be done sensitively.

Religion in the context of the conflict in Libya has become extremely politicized and a tool for polarization. Although religion thus is complex and complicated in the Libya, it constitutes an important factor in the daily life of many Libyans, and is believed to be an important factor for rebuilding Libya<sup>34</sup>. However, in the context of Libya, it is of great importance to acknowledge there is a careful context analysis needed to grasp the endless nuances in terms of different religious affiliations, the embeddedness in the cultural context and the power structures at play. The consequences for women should be taken into account constantly. Bringing women to, for example the negotiation table with religious leaders, should not only be an idea, but should be thoroughly and sensitively implemented.

*“I have to engage with scripture, with the hadith, it gives me knowledge on how to respond, it provides me with arguments. When women are excluded from peace processes, it is often based on a text from the hadith – we need a counterargument – to be able to answer this exclusion, you have to have knowledge on religion and religious texts – any woman getting in this field should know this and to be able to discuss this”*

**Asma Khalifa**, Libyan women's rights and peace activist and researcher

When thinking about religion in Libya, and potential for women in their peace and security needs, it is important to understand that religion is also often used as a reason to exclude women from meaningfully participate in decision-making and peace-building processes. Also, the religious space tends to be dominated by men, resulting in men having the control over interpretations of religion. This means that religion often provides challenges for women to address their peace and security needs. Consequently, it is even more important for women in Libya to be knowledgeable about religion to be able to counter messages of exclusion based on religious scripture/texts. By enhancing women's knowledge on religious texts/scripture, it might become possible to forward alternative interpretations, which might focus on gender justice instead of the exclusion of women. It is important to ensure and acknowledge that women's inclusion in peace talks or other mediation efforts should be based upon their role and position in society and not only because of their gender or religious background. By acknowledging women and their role you create an equal standing with other stakeholders.

One of the challenges is finding women who dare to speak out. In an often very patriarchal environment. Speaking out is often already considered breaking with existing role patterns. Still, women in Libya can be strong leaders. An example is the organization 'The Voice of Libyan Women', and specifically their project 'the purple hijab day' which provides an interesting example for the purpose of this policy paper. The Voice of Libyan Women was founded in 2011, to support women to participate in diverse realms of society, like in politics and economics. The organization firstly tried to improve women's participation by using 'proven international models' to try to address violence against women. They noticed this method did not reach women and men in Libya, and they decided to use religious texts from the Qur'an and other religious sources, to spread a message of gender justice. The project of the Purple Hijab Day aimed to bring attention to domestic violence and the ways in which religion can be misused and misinterpreted to legitimize domestic violence. The project took off and together with Imams, scholars, teachers and doctors the Voice of Libyan Women conveyed a message of gender justice, derived from Islam.<sup>15</sup> Several imams throughout the country gave attention to the issue of domestic violence in their Friday prayers, emphasizing a respectful message towards women, condemning violence, inspired from Islam. The purple hijab initiative resulted in many billboards, flyers, radio shows and other media broadcasting this message, supported by many (religious) actors throughout the country. This case is an example in which engagement with religion enhanced the successfulness of the intended project. By aligning with local religious actors, the message of gender justice in Islam was able to spread across the country.

This example indicates potential for using religion to advance women's peace and security situations. In this instance, the organization was able to cooperate with religious leaders to convey a positive message of gender justice. It is important to keep in mind that only empowering religious leaders like this will not necessarily lead to meaningfully include women, because religious institutions tend to be highly patriarchal. Therefore, it is highly recommended to be aware of patriarchal structures within religion – to be sensitive towards gendered stereotypes that might be perpetuated within religious texts. Religion, as this example shows, could have potential for advancing women's peace and security needs. However, religion not only possesses potential, but also might challenge the position of women significantly. This only enhances the importance of women to be knowledgeable about religion and religious texts, in order to counter an exclusionary understanding/interpretation of religion for women with a message of reconciliation and gender justice. Looking into Islamic feminist theories could be particularly interesting and helpful for this topic as well. Further engagement and exploration is needed to



look at other ways in which in the context of Libya, the encounter between religion and the WPS agenda can have potential for enhancing the peace and security needs of women.

### AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan is a complex country, and conflict has been part of the daily reality for decades. The security situation has become even more complex since the 2001 presence by the United States and NATO, with the resurgence of the Taliban and local warlords capitalizing on the poverty, lack of infrastructure and corruption. Especially for women, the situation in Afghanistan has greatly affected their peace and security needs. For decades now, women in Afghanistan are heavily affected by the conflict situation which already lasts for four decades. (S)GBV, domestic violence and economic, psychological, economic and social abuse form part of women's daily reality.<sup>16</sup> Despite these hardships, Afghan women have worked very hard not only to improve their security and peace situations by fighting (S)GBV and pushing for inclusive decision-making and an inclusive peace process, but also for the advancement of democracy and fair governance.<sup>17</sup>

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*“Equality and the right to live is part of my belief. I think all concepts working for women's rights have a lot of overlapping with Islam. In the Holy Quran Allah Says “I have created you in different tribes and with different gender (women and men) just for your identification, there is no one superior to other, but the one with the best character”. Islam teaches us equality between tribes and gender, and you can be superior to other not based on your gender or race, but if you have the best character. I count myself a Muslim human right defender, who strongly believes that man is not superior to women.”*

**Quote Hameed, Program Director**

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Daulatzai argues how Afghanistan tends to be understood through certain discourses that ‘occupy’ the understanding of women in Afghanistan. In these understandings, some aspects of women's lives are taken as a given, which makes the understanding of these women oversimplified. By asserting a fixed meaning to aspects like gender, religion and culture, framing these aspects as determining the experiences of women and women's lives, a superficial understanding emerges, anchored in a colonial understanding of ‘women in Afghanistan’<sup>18</sup>.

After the ousting of the Taliban in 2001, there have been made significant steps by and for women for the improvement of their position in society. Thus, Afghan women have advocated strongly for gender justice, and have made some significant progress, despite hardships that remain part of their daily reality. More women were able to pursue an education and many women are involved in advocating for gender justice and inclusive decision-making and peace-building processes.

However, the deal between the US and the Taliban, made in February 2020, is especially worrisome for Afghan women and for prospects as to gender justice. Women have much to fear from this deal, because a return of Taliban in governmental structures without commitment to keep and improve the achievements made in Human rights and Women Rights, most likely will impact the progress they have made the past years.<sup>19</sup> “Women, who had most to fear from the Taliban during their rule from 1996 to 2001 and most to lose, given the progress they made in their struggle for gender equity after the Taliban were removed”<sup>20</sup>. We would argue that especially this deal between the U.S. and the Taliban makes the consideration of religion in WPS interventions even more relevant and significant to counter conservative religious actors with progressive religious actors. To aim to confront religious conservatism with progressive understandings of gender justice within an Islamic framework. This would indicate that working together with Moderate religious allies might provide potential. Could there for example be a bridge-building role for religious women?

Women are believed to have merit in the countering of Taliban influence.<sup>21</sup> Especially religious

women, with religious arguments, are believed to be of potential for the countering and confrontation of conservative religious standpoints with progressive messages of gender justice within an Islamic framework.<sup>22</sup>

Also a project implemented by Oxfam is an interesting example to consider.<sup>23</sup> This project aimed at engaging with local religious leaders by focusing on local members of the Ulema (Islamic scholars). These Ulema have key positions within the local Shuras (councils) and by engaging with moderate Ulema, Oxfam advocated for more women's participation and a message of gender justice in the shura's. By identifying these Ulema as influential champions within communities, the project created an enabling environment in which new roles could be identified, both for Ulema themselves, as for women and their participation. Despite some challenges, the project had success to a certain extent.<sup>24</sup> Moreover this project highlights the important role of religious leaders (scholars) and the potential they could provide for advancing women's and girl's rights. However, including more women in shura's can lead to 'only' representation, and not yet towards true meaningful participation. It is important to keep in mind that only representation is not sufficient for meaningful transformation.

Religious knowledge is of the utmost importance in the specific context of Afghanistan for women and men pursuing gender justice<sup>25</sup>. As the example of Oxfam and other research shows, the role of religious actors in Afghanistan often is very important within society. Also, there is a variety amongst religious actors, some are more moderate and others more conservative. This makes it even more important to conduct an extensive context analysis and to identify such forces, either progressive forces that can be potential allies and more conservative allies which can prove difficult with regard to women, peace and security and the WPS agenda.

### **SOUTH SUDAN**

South Sudan has been in a state of crisis ever since it became an independent state in 2011. However, the region was already plagued by violence before the independence. After a violent civil war, in 2015 a peace deal was reached, partly by virtue of the involvement of the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC). This SSCC is a collaboration between different churches in South Sudan and was established on the basis of common experiences of hardship. Despite differences in religious beliefs between different movements within the church, the council has been successful in establishing a common voice and uniting based on an ecumenical vision. The SSCC has been influential, for example when South Sudan gained its independence in July 2011, the SSCC played a major role in achieving this independence.

The role of religion in South Sudan is important to understand the conflict situation. The country has a Christian majority, and minorities of African traditional religions and a (very) small Muslim minority<sup>26</sup>. The conflict that erupted in 2013 is often framed as a religious conflict, while the fault lines of the conflict reveal ethnic differences, divides and clashes. There are multiple different tribal affiliations that clash, and religion is hereby often arbitrarily used to frame the conflict. The burden of this crisis has especially been to the detriment of women. (Sexual) and gender-based violence has been wide-spread and women bear a heavy burden regarding insecurity (Cordaid report of WPS Barometer)<sup>27</sup>. Within this state of crisis, religion proves to be of great importance in South Sudan<sup>28</sup>. A study by USIP<sup>29</sup> shows how religious actors are believed to be the most important actors with regards to peace and security. Religious structures in South Sudan prove to be the most stable structure in these times of crisis. This study also indicates how religious women, albeit not always at the forefront, play leading roles within communities regarding peace and security. This means that the topic of religion within the WPS agenda is of great significance for the case of South Sudan. From the experience of working in the fragile setting of South Sudan, Cordaid acknowledges this.

An interesting example of working with religion for the advantage of women's and girls' rights is the 'Faith for positive change for children initiative'<sup>30</sup>. This initiative by UNICEF aims at engaging with progressive religious leaders to raise awareness for harmful practices like child marriage. The religious leaders work to educate parents about the negative impact of these practices and work within communities for the protection, support and empowerment of girls in South Sudan. Their central positions provide them with the opportunity to work for positive change, and to reach out to parents with legitimacy. The project had a positive result, by improving education for some girls and creating awareness amongst many parents about the consequences of certain practices. In the project, around twenty religious leaders spoke out about the detrimental effects

of child marriages. Because of these outcomes, UNICEF identified working with faith-based organizations as crucially important and expressed their willingness to work with faith-based organizations and religious leaders in the future.<sup>31</sup> Important to keep in mind, besides the positive outcome of this project, is that although the protection pillar of the WPS agenda is well reflected in this initiative, participation is very important as well. To keep projects women-led, bottom-up and inclusive is of importance to address both pillars of the WPS agenda and to ensure meaningful participation and not just representation.

Religion is and always will be a challenging subject, but it is a subject that, when engaged in a sensitive manner, might have potential to advance the WPS agenda in specific contexts. Caution and a constant checks and balances are required, however, there are good practices that can be used.

## BEST PRACTICES

Based on various interviews<sup>32</sup>, desk research, and an expert meeting with practitioners working in various contexts, the following good practices may improve the work of organizations working on the intersection Women, Peace and Security and religion:

- **Work with Faith-Based (I)NGO's** – Faith-Based Organizations (FBO's) may have an advantage when talking about the intersection of WPS and religion. FBO's can typically act from a religious vision and understanding of the world, which connects better with local stakeholders because this enables a perception of more legitimacy and better understanding.
- **Include/engage with religion in an early stage** – When working with religious actors or structures, it is important to define the problem or the goal of an alliance together, and thereby engage the religious actor in an early stage. This enables the basis for an alliance in which the religious actor might feel engaged and included from the start which might enhance the legitimacy and credibility of such an alliance in the eyes of many stakeholders involved.
- **Transforming masculinities and femininities** – Develop awareness sessions and/or workshops about alternative masculinities and femininities derived from religious sources. In combination with the following good practice, workshops about the interpretation of religious texts regarding masculinities and femininities might prove a powerful tool in advancing women's position and their specific peace and security needs.
- **Progressive (feminist) (female) theologians** – Find them, engage with them. Despite the presence of many conservative theologians and religious actors, there are also many progressive religious actors. These progressive theologians can be powerful allies in amplifying a message of gender justice.
- **Choose your allies wisely** – Connecting to the above good practice, is it important to choose the right allies that can amplify progressive and positive messages. Relationships and dialogue are the most important tools to build alliances with progressive powers to counter conservative actors.
- **Formulate message in accordance with religious leaders/religious language** – Find a balance in which language that might trigger negative responses is avoided. For example, the words gender equality might sometimes complicate interventions while gender justice often turned out to be more appropriate in the local context.
- **Use a holistic approach** – Consider all actors involved, and all perspectives involved. Also consider the concept of intersectionality in interventions. This means that 'religion' and 'gender' are not isolated concepts that shape daily reality, concepts like gender, race, ethnicity, religion and class intersect and shape in this interconnectedness daily reality. Thus, it is important to consider them not in silos but within the intersection.
- **Look beyond only hegemonic religions** – Indigenous religions might provide important and interesting examples of capitalizing on spirituality for advancing human and women's rights. The three hegemonic religions tend to occupy the discourse on religion, while other local/indigenous religions are worthwhile to take into consideration and to engage with.
- **Focus on spirituality rather than the institutions of religion** – the more institutionalized, the more complex religious actors might prove because of complex institutions, institutionalized power relations and conservative powerful actors. By focusing on faith or spirituality as a source of inspiration and basis for action for many individuals, it is easier to create dialogue, to mobilize stakeholders and to achieve change.
- **Work with youth as an important stakeholder and ally** – Youth activists can be powerful agents of change. often, the role of youth is emphasized because of the potential they provide, being a new generation and having the ability to bridge between multiple stakeholders. Also, within the nexus of the WPS agenda and religion, youth can play a bridging role, by reaching out to religious leaders or by advocating a progressive message of gender justice.
- **Use dialogue** – One of the most important lessons this research provided, although already known as a good practice, is that it is of the utmost importance to aim at constructive dialogue in order to avoid misunderstandings, create mutual respect and comprehension and to look at commonalities and opportunities for the advancement of women's peace and security needs which are in line with different understandings of gender justice.

- **Listen to strategies of women in conflict-settings themselves** – listen to their strategies to cope with patriarchy or conflict situations, often they are (without knowing) already dealing with religious actors on a daily basis to advance their agenda.
- **Religion can be a unifying force over conflict differences** – it can bind people together and move beyond ethnic or other differences. Although religion is often seen as a source of conflict, it can bind people together too. With peaceful interpretations of religious texts, people from different religious affiliations can be brought together and move beyond conflict lines and differences.
- **Take the time** – Religion such a large part of society, cannot be ignored. It also is one of the most contested subjects, especially within the WPS agenda, and therefore it is of the utmost importance to be patient, to take time and to wisely engage with religious actors, structures and institutions.
- **Knowledge is key** – There is a lot of misunderstanding regarding the role of religious women, UNFPA designates this the 'Bermuda Triangle' in which the understanding of religious women often gets lost. Vice versa is religious knowledge of alternative femininities and masculinities also paramount in changing gendered understandings. Different readings of for example the Qur'an or the Bible might provide for different visions on the role of men and women, which might provide the basis for the enhancement of women's peace and security needs.
- **Bring a moderate religious leader** - Find a moderate religious leader and invite this person to women's group meetings. These religious leaders can remind attendees, during these meetings, about the peaceful aim of the meeting and spread a peaceful message about religion. Because of the key positions of religious leaders, they often have influence when spreading such a message.

# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Several key recommendations emerged from the case studies and the interviews conducted for this research which highlight the importance of considering religion in the context of the WPS agenda and how to do so.



**1. Start by making a good context analysis of enabling and restricting factors with regard to the WPS agenda.** Every context is different and especially religion is subject to interpretation and local traditions. This means that analyzing the context in which an intervention is planned is of great importance. Multiple good practices mentioned in this policy paper also reflect that: finding out which religious actors are more progressive, which are more traditional, which would provide for potential allies. All these questions can be answered by means of a context analysis.



**2. Keep the programs and responses bottom-up.** By engaging with local actors and local religious structures, at the grassroots/local level, it is easier to build relationships, reach out to communities and affect change. When adopting a bottom-up approach, make sure to listen to women's own strategies to confront/fight/counter patriarchy and align with women's and men's own efforts to be as transformative and legitimate as possible.



**3. Keep the programs women-driven – led by women themselves.** If you want to really make sure programs are transformative, make sure that programs are led by local (religious) men and women themselves. In this way legitimacy can be enhanced and interventions can be really aligned with the local circumstances.



**4. Recognize that a focus on obstacles posed by religion to the WPS agenda, and reservations about religion, are informed by 'your' background.** These reservations might be traced back to specific elements, developments and backgrounds of European societies. This focus (and potential problematic consequences of such a focus) can be situated within the European background of actors involved in enhancing the WPS agenda rather than being a problem within the local context. It is important to make sure to be aware of the roots of such reservations and also acknowledge this in the specific context of Europe.



**5. Find allies.** Alliances with progressive (moderate) stakeholders are of great importance to counter conservative and restrictive understandings of gender justice.



**6. Enhance our own understanding, as (I)NGOs, vis-à-vis religion.** Religious literacy (learning about religion and religious texts, understanding religion) is not only important in local contexts to counter very conservative and restrictive understandings with progressive understandings of religion and religious texts. Also, religious understandings within the international context where policy is being made is of great importance. Misunderstanding and stereotyping are still of significant influence in the international context (within policy circles) when the topic of religion and gender justice is discussed. This can be countered by deepening the knowledge and understanding of religion in this context as well.



**7. Balance protection and participation within the WPS agenda.** Within the nexus between religion and the WPS agenda, there is a difference between the protection pillar and the participation pillar of the WPS agenda. Engaging religion and mobilizing religious leaders for the protection of women, for example against (S)GBV or CRSV is more easily accomplished, than doing the same for the participation of women in decision-making processes on a local and a national level. It is of great importance to keep trying for a transformative agenda in which both the pillars are respected, and at the same time pursuing a balance in cooperation with local religious structures and leaders.

There are multiple different stakeholders at play in the intersection between religion and the WPS agenda. Being aware of the positions of different stakeholders will create an enabling environment for dialogue and cooperation. Knowledge about religion, and specifically faith literacy, is important for all stakeholders because a lack of knowledge about religions, religious texts and religious institutions remains an obstacle within both the international and the local level.

## CONCLUSION

Religion constitutes a significant part of the daily lives of people worldwide. While religion may throw up challenges and obstacles in pursuit of the WPS agenda, there are plenty of opportunities to engage religion towards achieving the agenda. The case studies and interviews above show that religion has potential to advance the WPS agenda by localizing it and by enabling adaptation to local circumstances. Working alongside religious actors and within religious frameworks might enhance how we listen to women's own sources of inspiration, generate better strategies to cope with exclusion based on religious arguments, and encourage understandings of peace and security from a faith perspective.

The most important lesson from this paper is that religion, in its many forms, is not inherently good or bad for the position of women and their peace and security needs. While religious interpretations and institutions may be patriarchal and form the basis for excluding women from decision-making, power and leadership, this is not always the case. This makes it all the more relevant for all stakeholders to gain an understanding of religion, and to provide counter arguments to obstacles and exclusionary practices. Moreover, it is of crucial importance to listen to women's own strategies of dealing with patriarchal structures within religion, which may inspire new ways of working within specific contexts towards the goals of the WPS agenda.

Engaging with religion and religious leaders may build bridges between those pursuing the goals of the WPS agenda, like between an (I)NGO and local religious actors. This is crucial because of the knowledge and experience exchange that can happen to improve WPS interventions. By building bridges between unexpected allies, opportunities arise that grapple better with local circumstances and incorporate understanding of what is really needed from a broad range of local and legitimate perspectives.

This paper collects good practices and recommendations received from various experts in the field. We noticed the abundance of knowledge and expertise that is out there, and the value of knowledge exchanges between various perspectives. This experience and knowledge in the field is extremely valuable for constructively thinking about new ways to further the WPS agenda. It is of great value to exchange these experiences and expertise, and to keep discussing the vital importance of religion in these efforts.

While we must acknowledge the limitations and obstacles to involving religion, its very potential to offer new perspectives, access and opportunities indicates there is room for careful exploration and discussion on the topic. Cordaid will continue to explore these opportunities for the WPS agenda, and to look for ways to engage with religion and religious actors in the many fragile contexts we work in – all the more because religion constitutes an immutable element of daily life for the majority of the world.

Closing our eyes for the role of religion in the WPS agenda because of the obstacles religion might present might result in missed opportunities to advance the WPS agenda.

# ENDNOTES

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- 6 In this paper, the terms 'progressive', 'moderate' and 'conservative' are used when talking about different religious scholars and other religious actors, and their vision on gender norms and women's roles. The distinction between these terms is made based on the specific context of the specific case. Because the contexts of the case studies differ, different terms might be applicable. Specifically in the context of Afghanistan, the term progressive might be problematic, and therefore the term moderate is chosen to indicate a (more) positive attitude towards the position of women within society, derived from religious beliefs.
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- 32 For the purpose of this paper, the authors conducted several interviews with experts within and outside Cordaid, working on either WPS, religion, or human rights/development more broadly. The authors also organized an expert meeting with 5 experts from various NGO's working in the field and having significant experience with working on WPS interventions. The experiences, recommendations and good practices these different experts shared, form the basis of this part of the policy paper.



## ABOUT CORDAID

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