

**Making and Unmaking Culture:  
Gender Experts, Faith, and the International Governance of Gender**

**Özlem Altan-Olcay**

Pre-Acceptance copy

This article explores the workings of gender expertise inside the institutions of the international governance system as it engages with faith-based actors. Utilizing narratives of gender experts, documentary analysis, and observation, I focus on their encounters regarding gender equality and women's rights with religious leaders, religious actors, and conservative governments. Focusing on episodes where the terms of cultural difference and religion are used synonymously, first, I suggest that these encounters between transnational actors contribute to hegemonic interpretations of these terms. Second, I explore how powerful actors can become even more authoritative in making claims of cultural difference or how the existing distribution of power may be disrupted. I contend that these power relations affect how gender equality is discussed. My goal is to contribute to feminist discussions by highlighting how these transnational interactions disrupt assumptions of Western versus Eastern. I propose to pay attention to these complex and ambiguous processes, in order to challenge ethnocentric and racist discourses *but also* not take claims of cultural difference at face value.

**Keywords:**

Gender experts, International Governance, Gender Equality, Faith, Cultural Difference

**Acknowledgements**

This research was conducted during my time as a visiting scholar at the Gender Centre of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in 2017-2018. The research was made possible by a Marie Curie IF grant (MSCA IF 746133) and sabbatical leave from Koç University.

At the end of February 2018, expert members of the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women convened for their 69<sup>th</sup> session to monitor state parties' progress

toward implementing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). During the sessions, the states, which had placed significant reservations on the convention, frequently brought up religious dictates to explain the lack of progress in areas such as restrictive dress codes for women, unequal rights in marriage, female genital mutilation, and public whipping. In turn, experts introduced examples of change from states with similar political structures or demographics, made public their own individual national origin to establish cultural proximity, and used shadow reports by civil society organizations from the same countries to suggest alternative perspectives. One government's representatives, in response to these encouragements, invoked several times the same explanation: that they needed time to establish social consensus in the country before they could revisit the reservations. In an unusual moment of public frustration, one expert asked: "How long does it take to establish social consensus? Surely it cannot be two decades?" The question went unanswered.

These discussions, wavering between contention, declarations of respect for difference, and exasperation, evoke fundamental questions. How do institutions of international governance participate in the complex relationship between arguments of cultural difference and women's rights? How do they interact with the world of faith and what are the possible consequences for our understanding of discourses of cultural difference? I discuss these questions through the narratives of gender experts situated within different agencies and organizations of the international governance system. Tracing their multilayered encounters with faith actors and national government representatives, I focus on episodes where religion and religious difference are used interchangeably with culture and cultural difference. I suggest that the ways faiths stabilize and position themselves with respect to demands for gender equality and women's rights

are informed by who is party to these transnational engagements and the alliances and contestations that are involved.

Within the realm of transnational feminist activism, there has always been a tension between the history of violence associated with colonialism and its liberal tenets, and rights advocacy, whose core demands are connected to this history (Collins, Falcon, Lodhia and Talcott, 2010). As Razavi and Jenichen (2010) show, the problem of transnational feminist activism has been twofold. On the one hand, those who fight against the history of colonial oppression and its contemporary ramifications are not always the same actors that stand for gender equality. In fact, nationalist or religious discourses waged against ‘the Western other’ have often attributed cultural and biological roles to women that preclude gender equality in law and practice (Jayawerdana, 1986). On the other hand, those demanding universal rights for women can also be complicit in waging imperial wars and imposing neoliberal economic policies (Abu Lughod, 2009; Riley, Mohanty and Pratt, 2008). The dilemma is then how to challenge essentialist gender roles and harmful practices toward women without reinforcing racist discourses or naturalizing neoliberalism (Rajan 2018). A further dilemma for feminist scholarship is how to study claims of cultural difference without taking them at face value, risking invisibilizing internal dissent and feminist rights-based advocacy, or solidifying blanket assumptions that their proponents have Western and/or elite origins (Arat 1999; Buğra 2014; Narayan 1998; Rajan 2018; Zia 2019).

These are important questions to think about today, when right-wing movements are increasingly audacious in thwarting feminist advocacies. Although this is a transnational backlash (Buss 1998; Friedman 2003; Graff, Kapur, Walters 2019), its actors speak in the name of nations or faith communities, framing their opposition to feminism through claims of ‘cultural imperialism’ and ‘Western gender ideologies’ (Case 2019; Gökarıksel, Neubert and Smith 2019;

Diaz 2019). Furthermore, these discourses are also gaining ground with more moderate actors (Graff, Kapur and Walters 2019).

One explanation for their success is the neoliberal cooptation of feminist discourses, which reduces discussions about the universal rights of women to orientalist assumptions about women in the East needing to be ‘saved’ from their own cultures through market participation (Olmsted 2004; Abu-Lughod, 2009). Equally important is the fact that reduction of issues of equality and empowerment to market participation ignores the double burden created by the lack of publicly available care provisioning (Bergeron 2003; Bedford, 2009; Chant and Sweetman, 2012; Peterson, 2012; Razavi, 2012). Often, neoconservative discourses fill the void left from the destruction of welfare states, asking women to ‘return’ to their families, because they are supposed to be caring ‘by nature’ and ‘better’ than their counterparts in the ‘liberal West’ (Buğra, 2013; Kandiyoti, 2014). The intersection of the instrumentalization of feminist goals and the blatant disregard for difference creates a space for demagogues to use discourses such as ‘gender ideology’ as a “symbolic glue” (Kováts, and Põim 2015).

I am wondering, however, if we can open up more space to think about the connection between claims of cultural difference and proposals for gender (in)equality; a way to add to and rework the general critique of the double damage of neoliberalism and universalist sounding (but actually ethnocentric) claims. To do this, I want to focus on a series of encounters where discourses of culture and religion become meshed in the work that international institutions conduct on gender. I am motivated by the fact that the actors working in institutions of international governance, despite the institutions’ possible hegemonic stances, are not a monolithic whole, nor do they possess homogenized ideological frameworks, whether neoliberal or Western imperialist.

This paper is based on research conducted in Geneva during 2017 and 2018 on the international governance of gender-related policies, the workings of gender expertise, and the experiences of gender experts. Thus, research had a broader objective than the focus of this paper. It was during this time I was in Geneva, I sat as an observer in CEDAW meetings under the auspices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) since 2008. In addition, my research encompassed observation of events on gender, development, and women's rights organized by various UN and Bretton Woods organizations and non-governmental organizations. I attended other events, including United Nations Research Institute for Development (UNRISD) conferences, World Trade Organization (WTO) events, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) gatherings, seminars where participants included a variety of UN and Bretton Woods institutions and several NGO meetings open to the public.

I also conducted a desk study, starting with publications by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UN Women), the World Bank, and the ILO, given their prolific work on gender and development. I canvassed their flagship reports and gender-relevant publications between 2006 and 2016. I then branched out to other organizations with mandates on international development and humanitarian relief. I coded the diverse terminology used in gender and development work and the discussions on norms. Additionally, I studied reports giving historical background to these policy and program making endeavors.

Finally, I conducted 40 interviews with gender experts. Beginning with people with experience in the UNDP, UN Women, and the World Bank, I then branched out to individuals in other UN agencies, Bretton Woods institutions, humanitarian relief organizations, CEDAW, and

participants of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) negotiations. While many had or used the titles of gender expert, gender advocate or focal point, there were a few, who did not, but I approached them because of their active involvement in relevant offices or activities in their agencies. I utilized multiple entry points into the field, followed by snowballing. Of the 40 interviewees, 20 were in Switzerland, 10 in the USA, and the rest in various cities in the Global North or South. While I interviewed 40 people, the interviewees' frequent circulation between positions in the international governance system, transnational civil society, and academia meant that I ended up talking with ten people with experience in UN Women, eight in the UNDP, seven in the ILO, three in the World Bank, five in the WTO and UNCTAD, six in United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) bodies, six in other specialized UN agencies, four in CEDAW, and five in humanitarian relief organizations. Ten interviewees had held academic positions and six had had national diplomatic experience. I identified 32 positions in various non-governmental organizations from their resumes. As a result, I was able to tap into a rich tapestry of narratives beyond interviewees' current workplaces. Furthermore, 20 interviewees were born and raised in countries of the Global South while thirteen came from Muslim majority countries. Many had previous positions in Southern feminist advocacy networks. The collective narrative, these personal biographies revealed, undid the cultural binaries of West versus non-West, liberal Western order and other orders elsewhere, the religious versus secular world.

In this paper, I especially focus on expert narratives whose work involves or involved interactions with faith-based actors. I asked the same set of questions to all interviewees, including their experiences with the content and implementation of agency initiatives, diverse operationalizations of gender-related terminology, their perceptions of connections between advocacy and the policy world, and contested meanings of culture and cultural difference. Mostly,

interviewees had more to share about encounters with faith-based actors if they had experience of UN conferences, including Beijing, CSW, and CEDAW meetings, or field office work for major UN agencies. Interviewees tended to be more outspoken on these issues if they originated in the non-West and had navigated the assumed binary with the West more often. In this sense, these narratives indicate patterns that emerged once juxtaposed onto the documentary material.

This essay is informed by feminist writing, which shows how gender expertise is contested at multiple levels in international governance: gender experts often need to simultaneously utilize, negotiate with, and challenge existing institutional logics as they strategize to establish authority (Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead, 2007; Çağlar, Prügl and Zwingel, 2013; Ferguson, 2015; Hudson and Goetz, 2014). De Jong argues that gender experts and advocates hold multiple subject-positions: they resist racialized hierarchies yet also occasionally reproduce them; they aim to challenge global inequalities but also continue to be a product of them; and they assert feminist advocacy while also having to work within bureaucratic frameworks (2017). I want to pay attention to these actors by recognizing these complex positionalities.

Abji, Korteweg, and Williams (2019) contend that we need to disentangle “culture talk”, the moves made to racialize and essentialize systemic problems, from culture as meaning-making. Decisions about what culture is, who speaks in its name, and which norms and practices are to survive in the name of difference are not processes that happen in a political vacuum. I suggest that one way in which we can grasp these political processes is by studying how actors in international governance contribute to making and unmaking hegemonic definitions of cultural difference. I therefore focus on how debates of culture happen through talk about religion and religious difference. This is not because I use these terms interchangeably, but rather because I am interested in instances where they become substitutes for one another. My goal is to explore how

powerful actors can become even more authoritative in making claims of faith-based exceptions when talking about gender equality and women's rights, and how the existing distribution of power and the hegemonic definition of the faith system in question may be disrupted. I want to study how gender work inside the international system becomes part of stabilizing or destabilizing widely accepted understandings of what religion and cultural difference entail.

I have another goal that relates to the conundrums of transnational feminist solidarities. Many have written on how the colonial and imperial projects of feminism have produced a binary whereby 'the East' ends up becoming a trope for 'the West,' thereby reducing women's diverse experiences and voices to stories of cultural deficiency and victimization for Western audiences (Mohanty 1984; Ahmed 1992; Spivak 2000). To rectify this, feminist scholarship has studied how Muslim women exercise agency within religious belief systems and emphasize that the individual choices 'the Westerner' does not understand are not necessarily exotic or problematic (Abu Lughod 2013; Mahmood 2004). Similarly, scholars have asserted that culturalizing the causes of violence against women in minority communities in Western Europe and North America serves political ends that have nothing to do with the women in question (Grewal 2013; Korteweg 2014).

While wholeheartedly agreeing with these arguments, I am also left with an unease. How can we keep our eyes on systemic power exertions across multiple scales and connect assertions of identity difference to them (Anthias 2002, Fraser 2000)? Abbas (2014) suggests that there is sometimes a tendency in the critical literature to acknowledge the wide varieties in women's subjectivities and relationships to Islam but then almost always study exclusively those who conform to orthodox interpretations of belief and community boundaries. What if we explored tense encounters between contradictory interpretations of belief and difference, without explaining these instances as markers of a so-called Western influence or emblematic of the act of

“Westernized compradors” (Abbas 2014)? A number of scholars are doing just that by focusing on actors who challenge the hegemonic interpretations of the very things that appear to mark the boundaries of culture (Abbas 2014; Auchter 2012; Rajan 2018; Zia 2019). Relevantly, I believe the work of gender experts in international governance is a good place to explore claims of cultural difference and quests for gender equality because of the multilayered encounters between the parties, the power inequalities between them, and their diverse positionalities that disrupt binary categories.

I discuss these encounters in reverse chronological order, parts of which I revisit in consecutive sections, as I weave engagements with different types of faith-based actors. I first study the recent move within the institutions of the UN and Bretton Woods system to involve religious leaders in transnational decision-making processes. I discuss how these arrangements can reduce the intention to build connections to giving voice to only the most powerful in faith communities, inadvertently creating the conditions for hegemonic interpretations to gain more ground. Second, I explore a longer history of interactions that reach out to a heterogeneity of faith-based actors. I locate in these the potential to contribute to the internal dynamism of any faith community and support more progressive interpretations. Finally, I reconsider the limits to framing the idea of engagement in terms of collaboration. I trace the broader history of UN conferences where gender experts and advocates have organized to resist the deference of women’s rights to faith-community interpretations. These contestational encounters also produce meanings of religion, faith, and cultural difference by denaturalizing their moral authority over how to define gender and women’s rights, regardless of their place on a spectrum of progressive-conservative values.

## **Engaging ‘the World of Faith’**

The way CEDAW experts have engaged with government officials represents a wind of change in the UN. International institutions of governance have been building visible channels of engagement with the world of religion. In this section, I explore these engagements with conservative nation-state representatives and religious leaders, and the political possibilities these produce.

In the UN system, one of the first such high-level encounters happened during the 1994 UN conference in Cairo on Population and Development, whose program of action recognized that “development cannot take place in isolation of people’s beliefs and cultures” (UNFPA, 2008). In the following decade, there was a palpable shift in UN General Assembly resolutions. From 1979 to 1999, versions of the resolution “Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance” was the only one that centralized faith-based issues. Since 2000, however, several more have appeared, such as “dialogue among civilizations,” “promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue,” “culture and development,” “culture and sustainable development,” “human rights and cultural diversity,” “promotion of religious and cultural understanding,” and “combating defamation of religions.”<sup>1</sup> What makes these different from the first resolution is not only their number but their more explicit approach to religion and/or culture as markers of communities, rather than belief systems to which individuals have rights.

Relevant initiatives have been taken across the UN system. The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) was established in 2005 in accordance with the recommendations of a high-level expert group, convened to counter “polarization between societies and cultures.”<sup>2</sup> At the 2007 General Assembly, a High-Level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace was organized (UNFPA, 2008). In 2010, a UN Inter-

Agency Task Force on Religion and Development was formed, following on the heels of an inter-agency consultation on faith-based organizations, steered by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2008).<sup>3</sup> During the process leading up to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), the Interfaith Alliance was included in consultations. By 2016, these engagements had become so commonplace that the 70<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly had over 20 side-events on themes of religion and faith (Karam, 2017). In 2017, the UN Secretary launched consultations with religious leaders, led and coordinated by the Special Advisor on Genocide Prevention, to prevent hate speech and the violence it can incite.<sup>4</sup>

These developments have been parallel to a series of agency-specific initiatives. Tasked with improving global availability of and access to sexual and reproductive health, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) is one of the few agencies in the UN system recognized for its experience in working with faith-based civil society actors and religious leaders. In fact, this long-term experience propelled the agency to a leadership position in the UN Task Force, despite its small size and resources compared to others in the UN system. In the early 2000s, UNFPA institutionalized its approach to culture and faith by setting up the Gender, Human Rights and Culture Branch (UNFPA, 2008). It also facilitated the establishment of a Global Interfaith Network for Population and Development and convened faith-based organizations from around the world in Istanbul in 2008. It endorsed the Women, Faith and Development Alliance (WFDA) (Karam, 2010b; UNFPA 2008). It convened consultations with religious leaders and faith-based organizations, leading up to the SDGs. In addition, UNAOC has coordinated events bringing together religious leaders; the UNDP has organized high level panels on interreligious dialogue and steered consultations with faith networks as part of planning the SDGs; the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has assigned a principal advisor to work with faith leaders; the

United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has launched video testimonials of religious leaders advocating for refugees; the World Bank has organized “The Moral Imperative,” a network of faith-based organizations; OHCHR has convened workshops bringing together faith leaders; and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) has assigned a focal point for its work with faith-based organizations and has collaborated with the World Health Organization (WHO) on this front.<sup>5</sup> These initiatives diverge from the observations of the critical literature, which problematizes the mainstream perception of communal cultures as impediments to development and orientalist assumptions about people’s (especially women’s) agencies in ‘the East’ (Olmsted, 2004; Abu-Lughod, 2009; Adely, 2009).

The documentation of this period emphasizes the importance of engaging religious leaderships to implement programs effectively and initiate norm change (Obaid, 2005). One of the voices that has long argued in favor of engaging the world of faith and facilitated several initiatives is Azza Karam, who was the senior advisor on culture and social development at the UNFPA at the time of this research (Karam, 2010a; 2010b). When I interviewed her,<sup>6</sup> she told me she was no longer sure about what was being done.

The argument I was making then was can we please realize that religion is a very important element for how we see the world and very [influential] in terms of how we end up delivering on whatever goals we set for ourselves as development actors or as humanitarian actors or as foreign policy actors. ... As this plea began to be heard, ... I began to realize that we were making a very serious mistake in our understanding of religion because we were overly focusing on religious leaders, at the expense of the vaster expanse of religious actors and realms. By doing so, we may be risking some of the very rights that we are trying to uphold and maintain.

At the time of the interview, she had already written on how the choice of who to engage with makes a difference (Karam, 2010b; Karam, 2016). When I asked her to describe the risks she saw, she told me that there was a difference between engaging with faith-based civil society organizations and religious leaders, and a further difference among organizations: between those

with a track record of rights-based approaches and the others. She observed, however, that the international governance system was increasingly opting to bring together only religious leaders, none of whom could be said to represent the diversity of norms that any religious tradition embodies. This choice, she said, risked confirming a male leadership system instead of opening the door to change.

This was a problem that other gender experts also noted. The danger here was that, first, the idea of being inclusive of cultural differences was being restricted to religious belief and institutions. This practice of inclusion was then further limited to religious leaders as representatives of the worlds of faith. Although the most recognized leaders of religious communities are not a homogeneous group and do not all necessarily endorse conservative values, they are still similar in terms of their rank in power hierarchies. The danger of attributing exclusive recognition and more power to them is that if they happen to endorse orthodox versions of their faiths then the outcome could easily exclude everyone else with divergent beliefs.

Karam also problematized attributing moral supremacy to religious leaders instead of perceiving them as just another part of the civil society spectrum:

We have spent hundreds of years fighting against the monopoly of morality by religious leaders and institutions. Are we trying to rebuild this exclusivity to moral righteousness? ... And then people get surprised that they come together and launch something called ‘The Alliance of Virtues’!<sup>7</sup> I think this is a result of us speaking this discourse of moral exclusivity for religious leaders.

The outcome that she refers to here is the 2018 conference convened by religious leaders in Washington DC, titled “The Alliance of Virtues for the Common Good,” which concluded with the Washington Declaration. Ironically, this network of leaders, facilitated by various UN agencies, was claiming an exclusive space for moral authority. To date, this network has produced a Declaration of Global Ethics, which does not use the term gender equality but discusses equality

between women and men, and then defines the latter in terms of freedom from sexual exploitation and true partnership in marriage and families. Thus, it negates all discussions of equality, sexuality, and the diverse forms that families can take.<sup>8</sup> The danger of this claim for monopoly over moral authority is that, if it is normalized, it also becomes easier to naturalize these actors' discourses that subsume discussions of rights and equality under community difference.

Those interviewees who had participated in the Commission on Population and Development (CPD) and the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) annual negotiations also shared stories of how similar rhetoric is churned by orthodox Christian and Muslim governments with support from the Vatican. One told me that these actors opposed ideas of sexual and reproductive rights because they are suspicious that this is the way that feminists will introduce LGBTI+ rights. Another argued that it was because of the perceived possibility of opening up demands for equality, including sexual rights. As a result, she continued, "when there is discussion of issues of women and women's rights, the conversation is invariably about women as victims". Yet another interviewee said she was disheartened to see during the last day of CSW in 2018 an increase in government representatives openly using the cultural difference card in their talks. Another participant in this meeting talked about the impact of the current political context:

The Catholic Church allies with those states where the religion-state separation is not clear. And, given the high level of political conservatism today, they also align themselves with, let's say, a conservative United States, a Bush-led United States or Trump-led United States, less so when it's a democratic United States, depending on the specific issues we're dealing with.

This interviewee was expressing frustration at a visible right-turn in politics globally. Studies on the rise of faith-based organizations point first to Cold War history, when Christian and Muslim missionary activities and conservative actors were empowered in the war against 'the Communist threat' (Ghodsee 2007; Kandiyoti 2007). The reach of these organizations has expanded since the

1980s, filling the void of social provisioning left by the dismantling of welfare states (Bornstein 2003; Ghodsee 2007). This is also one reason why development and humanitarian actors in international governance are paying them increased attention. Concomitantly, there is evidence that this growing reach translates into more power to consolidate conservative public norms (Ghodsee 2007).

Perhaps, this interviewee's words can be contextualized as part of this conflicted history. The choices that actors in international institutions of governance make to engage with faith-leaderships are located within a history of the rising power of faith-based initiatives. Identifying exclusively religious leadership as representatives, and reducing diversity within belief systems to the inclusion of those who already have disproportionate power, is a political decision, regardless of the differences in degrees of progressiveness or conservatism. These moves reveal one way in which religion and culture is constructed through interactions at the international governance level, interlinked with questions of gender equality and women's rights.

### **Worlds of Faith beyond Leaders**

One interviewee asked in response to my question about her experiences with religious organizations, "Are we talking about the Vatican? Are we talking about the Catholic Nuns Association? Are we talking about Al-Azhar? [The answer] really depends on who you are talking about." This request for clarification indicates that religious leaderships are not a homogenized whole and also introduces a wide range of actors beyond leaderships. In this section, I revisit the longer history of interaction with these more diverse faith-based civil society actors.

Who gets to define cultural differences, including binaries of 'the West' and 'the East'? The louder the claims made in the name of culture, the greater the need to pay attention to who is speaking and who is given a platform to speak (Altan-Olcay, 2015; Arat, 2008; Kandiyoti, 2014;

Song, 2005). In response to the debate on cultural rights versus women's rights, Arat suggests the need to think about differences in interpretations of culture within groups and the political possibilities that could open up if interpretations that stand closer to gender equality and women's rights are supported (2008). Furthermore, cultures are not static, so hegemonic norms in any context stand alongside others challenging and reinterpreting them (Ackerly, 2001; Benhabib, 2002). Perhaps we can also look at the making of culture and religion in international governance from this vantage point.

Various parts of the international governance system and gender experts within them also engage with faith-based civil society organizations, whose interpretation of religious dictates do not always coincide with their respective leaderships. Examples include UNFPA field offices, whose work with local faith-based organizations goes back to the 1970s. In UNFPA annual reports of the last five years, these collaborations have included raising awareness about sexual and reproductive health issues, including prevention of teenage pregnancy, improving women's access to health clinics, ending son preference, raising awareness of, counseling on, and ending domestic violence, and preventing child marriage, female genital mutilation, and stigmatization of the survivors of sexual violence.<sup>9</sup> UNAIDS and the World Health Organization (WHO) have their own networks of collaborations involving local faith-based organizations, especially in programs on the HIV/AIDS epidemic and family planning.<sup>10</sup> UNICEF's partnerships with faith-based organizations include initiatives to widen the reach of early education, encourage communities to send daughters to schools, and improve HIV prevention, treatment, care, and support.<sup>11</sup>

When these came up in the interviews, one interviewee told me of a program where mosque imams were given training on family planning, which they then culturally adapted. Their translation emphasized how Islam asks believers – men, specifically – to be able to provide for

their families, making the size of the family a crucial issue. Another, after noting her reluctance for high-level collaborations, acknowledged that “it would be absolutely foolish not to have as much engagement as possible with religious institutions. In my experience they are incredibly valuable in peace processes ... or even in things as simple as vaccination drives.” A few interviewees told me that, when based on careful deliberations, getting community leaders, including religious clergy, on board often gave legitimacy to programs, which could transform deeply held norms.

These examples reflect the possibility of engaging with faith-based actors in ways that gradually unmake the power of orthodox interpretations. They affirm research on faith-based actors at the UN, which documents the increasing disagreement between progressive and conservative faith-based actors (Bob 2010). The competition to influence international policymaking through the UN is fiercest on ‘contentious issues,’ which include sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender equality in general (Haynes 2013). As a result, initiatives such as the ones documented above can be instances of remaking what religion is, or what any cultural norm is, when agencies choose to partner with more progressive faith-based actors, thereby contributing to their recognition as moral authorities.

These political choices have critical consequences for women’s rights and gender equality. Among my interviewees were experts who had been present during the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development and the 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women, which resulted respectively in the Program of Action for Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action. As mentioned earlier, the 1994 Conference is known for the visible alliances made between the Vatican and some Catholic and Muslim-majority country representatives (Corredor 2019). The Vatican actively attempted to obstruct debates on abortion, limit the

language used in the definition of the family, and worked with other conservative forces to block the idea of sexual and reproductive rights. Several conservative delegations were able to place individual reservations with claims framed in terms of national and/or religious laws and/or cultures. As a result, the final document made no reference to sexual rights, referring instead to “sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights” while explicitly limiting the implementation of the program in line with the “religious and ethical values” of any country (ICPD, 1994). In Beijing, the Vatican insistently opposed the concept of gender (Beattie, 2014). One interviewee who had participated in these conferences asserted that they needed local involvement against these conservative alliances:

A lot of people didn't fully understand why the final debates were all about abortion and reproductive and sexual rights. I understood where they were coming from because people weren't part of the process leading up to it. So, it was a handful of feminists who were part of the negotiations, and while they certainly did try to do the work at home, they were overwhelmed with the kind of questions and discomfort with this when we all descended on Cairo. I think that kind of work to address cultural norms and the work to ground this within each society – so it's not seen as being imported and so on – is the long-term work of feminist groups.

Here, she was telling me how the political work that goes into constructing and changing hegemonic norms is long-term and contentious. This involves a balance between respecting cultural difference and challenging the red lines that define a culture. Organizations like Women Living Under Muslim Laws and Sisters in Islam, which defy orthodox interpretations of Islam, attest to this (Foley 2004; Moghadam 2005; Ong 2006). Although these actors are part of religious traditions that conservative actors claim monopoly over, they have different ideas about how to interpret their tenets. One interviewee remembered the alliances that cut across nationalities, religions, and institutional positions:

We did get a lot of what we demanded into the Beijing document because the people who were negotiating were a combination of our close allies and feminists inside governments. They picked up the language more readily, and I remember clearly

reading from the caucus documents inside the rooms and how these documents directly made it into the negotiated text.

These narratives of cross-national and cross-sectoral alliances show that there is no purity of positions – Western versus Eastern, one religious tradition versus another versus secularism – through which to evaluate degrees of inclusiveness or diversity. Instead, there are alliances *and* contestations that cut across assumed cultural boundaries on how to conceptualize gender, equality, and religious and cultural difference.

Another example is the CEDAW meetings, introduced at the beginning of this paper. In addition to vocalizing ‘best practices’ from similar religious contexts, experts in the meetings I attended also used shadow reports by women’s organizations. One expert told me of her own transformation in the process:

At the beginning, I was strictly secular. I was rigid: “Split the state from religion, let the state trump religion.” Then I realized, do I want to serve only a few privileged women [who are secular and who have the resources to protect themselves from extreme religious dictates]? Do we want to leave all the others in the hands of the extremists? I started listening more to those who have their faith, who want their faith to evolve, and who want to have their rights. This change happened for me with the multiple reports we have received from *Musawah*.<sup>12</sup>

Reflecting this sentiment, I witnessed how women’s NGOs – secular and religious – collaborated to challenge government reports, enabling experts to ask questions regarding the diverse interpretations of cultures and religion, thereby pushing for the implementation of CEDAW.

These encounters with less orthodox faith-based actors could occasionally open an avenue to change hegemonic norms, laying bare the political nature of any claims made in the name of culture, religion, or difference. The answer to the question posed at the beginning of this section – “Which religious organizations?” – matters, but not necessarily because there is a clear and undisputed distinction between a set of leaders, united in terms of their conservatism, and an array of faith-based actors, who challenge this conservatism. Acknowledging that different actors have

different interpretations of faith systems and possess unequal authorities for claiming authority affects who to engage with and how to build this engagement. This recognition therefore creates distinct political possibilities for remaking religious norms.

### **Ambivalences**

In this final section, I build on the complexities of engaging with the world of religion, this time by questioning how engagement is often defined in terms of collaboration. By revisiting the UN Decade for Women and the conferences that have become the bedrock of transnational feminism, I want to propose that engaging the world of religion and faith also includes confrontations to fend off the possibility that demands for rights and equality play second fiddle to orthodox values protected by claims of cultural difference.

In my interviews, the interviewees' autobiographical positionalities often became embroiled in their narratives. People switched from stories of engagement with religious leaders and organizations to ambivalences about these interactions. All endorsed the need to remove the shackles of Eurocentrism to become more inclusive of diverse worlds; yet they also had questions regarding who gets to define differences and who these definitions serve. Several, who came from Muslim majority countries, told me how their complex positionalities often got reduced to 'Western imperialist' agendas in some of these engagements, echoing scholarly suspicions that those who speak of rights in culturally different contexts must be Westernized elite compradors (Abbas 2014). Others told me that they felt reluctant to speak openly about another religion or culture, to speak to 'the other' as the 'white', 'Western' gender expert. There was always an undercurrent emphasizing the need for cultural sensitivity in these moments during the interviews,

talking with me, a researcher, with a national origin and assumed faith seen as part of the non-West.

These limitations produced complex outcomes. For instance, while women's empowerment and the right of women to be free from violence could be easily voiced, the idea of women's rights was not defined explicitly. People often did not speak of gender equality; instead, they used terms like equity, inclusion, and empowerment, even though equity and inclusion are processes for promoting equality, not goals in themselves. These maneuvers are also made easier because of the neoliberal tendencies in some of these institutions. Speaking of empowerment in terms of the ability to access market instruments and rights in a depoliticized manner are already documented to be a problem in international governance work (Chant and Sweetman 2012; Cornwall 2016; Prügl 2015; Razavi 2012). These existing frames and the tacit knowledges of what can be and cannot be voiced have indeed become the basis for these discursive shifts. Just as reductive definitions of empowerment serve more the naturalization of neoliberal tenets than actual progress toward gender equality, the unintended consequence of not crossing these red lines in the name of cultural sensitivity contributes to stabilizing binary definitions of the inside and outside of a particular culture. This fixes the core of a religious practice along with the power of these definitions over what is deemed controversial and unspeakable in terms of rights advocacy.

One gender expert familiar with multiple OHCHR conventions told me that she saw the value in becoming more flexible in pushing the agenda of women's rights and gender equality, including dealing with actors who used to be completely outside of the realm of development thinking. However, she also had a hesitation:

The [CEDAW] committee is unyielding in terms of its systems on lifting reservations to Articles 2 and 16.<sup>13</sup> But ... the tone of speaking has changed ... from complete rejection and looking at these things as "This is against universal rights of women" ... to "We understand you and we see that you may be having

problems culturally and religiously. But let's try to work with an open mind on both sides." Now, you can read this change as a more understanding, more realistic attitude, and more openness for diversity and inclusiveness. But to the extent that this kind of open mindedness to diversity is mainly happening on these issues, I am wondering whether this can be read as an increasing conservatism of the committee itself.

Accordingly, engaging with the world of faith undoubtedly produces inclusion and dialogue. Yet, this interviewee is also questioning whether these attempts also result in a new status quo in terms of what can or cannot be questioned.

Thus, we can adopt one last vantage point to explore the complexity of making culture and religion. Perhaps the critique that international governance work has excluded the world of religion and diverse cultures needs nuancing. Feminist advocacy located in and around international governance institutions have indeed historically engaged with the world of faith, also to redefine its authority. Perhaps that work needs to be acknowledged in the advances made toward women's rights – without ignoring its limitations and ethnocentric problems.

One interviewee, who had attended the Beijing Conference as part of a Southern feminist NGO, told me they had spent tremendous energy reading and redacting Vatican proposals each night to ensure that feminist demands would not be misconstrued. Her story was a testament to the scholarship on UN conferences, which write about the transnational alliances women's organizations formed to define women's rights as human rights, introduce issues regarding sexual and reproductive rights, and fight conservative arguments from governments and the Vatican (Jain 2005; Moghadam 2005; Friedman, Hochstetler, Clark 2012; Corredor 2019). The original battleground in these conferences was not so much cultural difference but more about where to locate questions of women's rights and gender equality; whether in individualistic terms or within macropolitical issues of war, economic injustice, and underdevelopment (Ghodsee 2010; Jain 2005; Moghadam 2013). In fact, even during the Cold War, a variety of NGOs in the three blocs

had collaborated during CSW declarations, asking governments to abolish all customary practices violating women's physical integrity and human rights (Jain 2005). It was the same transnational movement that pushed for the acknowledgement that any area of international governance is gendered (Friedman 2003).

In this sense, human rights conventions are actually the product of transnational alliances and clashes (Ackerly and Okin 1999; Moghadam 2013; Sikkink 2002; Zwingel 2013). The point I am trying to make is that the idea of diverse cultures beyond the Western order is itself perhaps a problematic generalization that divides the world into categories of secular and liberal versus others. None of this is meant to romanticize the history of international governance; rather, it is more of a quest to understand how 'the West' and 'the East' have never been neatly divided from one another in transnational alliances and contestations. Paying attention to these encounters can perhaps help untangle definitions of what cultural difference ends up standing for today and how 'culture talk' can inadvertently contribute to delimiting discussions of rights.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this article, I aimed to uncover the ambiguities and contestations that unfold around notions such as cultural and religious difference. I argued that international governance has something to do with how these differences are consolidated and the power attributed to them in defining gender equality and women's rights. I proposed that we must explore the contradictory pulls within the international governance system and focus on the ways in which women's rights, cultural difference, and religious belief are constructed side by side. By understanding such encounters at the level of international governance, delineating the diverse positionalities of gender experts, and acknowledging the multiplicity of actors and different types of engagements, we can move beyond the uncomfortable binaries of Western versus Eastern and cultural difference versus ethnocentric

claims of universalism. We can perhaps better identify which political possibilities are realized or precluded if we focus on claims of cultural difference together with the power relations that surround them.

To this end, I first discussed the politics of high-level encounters, which involve religious leaders' participation in decision making. I argued that giving voice only to those at the very top, regardless of how heterodox or orthodox they might be, risks silencing internal dynamics and contestations, especially regarding gender equality and women's rights. In a second layer, I looked at the more diverse work that UN agencies and humanitarian actors do in partnership with faith-based civil society actors in the field. I argued that these engagements are more open ended because they recognize the spectrum of possibilities in each religious tradition. They can therefore help progressive interpretations become more mainstream. Finally, I explored the limits to our imaginations in the way we define these engagements to begin with. I suggested that engagement also includes long confrontations of feminist advocacy to limit the power of religious claims in how we define rights. My contention is not that religions, or religious groups and actors are de facto conservative; rather, I argue that these encounters within international governance contribute to how cultural difference is defined, who gets to define it, and what authority the claimants have in terms of gender equality and women's rights.

These are complex and ambiguous processes. There is no monolithic group of actors of the liberal, secular West dismissing differences of other monolithic communities that are not liberal, secular, or Western. Instead, we can see alliances and contestations that cut across the assumed binaries of one religion versus another, faith versus secularism, East versus West, and so on. All of these are transnational engagements that contribute to how we think of cultural difference and its position with respect to questions of gender equality and women's rights. These diverse

practices can contribute to either naturalizing or challenging the building of a hierarchy of priorities between cultural difference and women's rights.

None of this is to romanticize gender expert work inside international governance or make broad generalizations about faith. It is instead a quest to explore transnational feminist questions regarding how to defend gender equality and women's rights without repeating ethnocentric discourses. It is an effort to challenge orientalist generalizations and self-righteous universalisms while retaining the ability to unpack the political processes and power relations that produce the meanings of culture at any moment in time. These political engagements shed light on one set of processes that construct orthodox norms as the bases of cultural difference *as well as* the battles to denaturalize them.

## References

- Abbas, Sadia. 2014. *At Freedom's Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament*. Fordham University Press.
- Abji, Salina, Anna Korteweg, Lawrence Williams. 2019. "Culture Talk and the Politics of The New Right: Navigating Gendered Racism in Attempts to Address Violence against Women in Immigrant Communities." *Signs* 44(3): 797-822. doi.org/10.1086/701161.
- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2009. "Dialects of Women's Empowerment: The International Circuitry of the Arab Human Development Report 2005." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41: 83-103. doi.org/10.1017/S0020743808090132.
- , 2013. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Ackerly, Brooke. 2001. "Women's Human Rights Activists as Cross-Cultural Theorists." *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 3(3): 311-346. doi.org/10.1080/14616740110077537.

- Ackerly, Brooke and Susan Moller Okin. 1999. "Feminist Social Criticism and the International Movement for Women's Rights as Human Rights." *Democracy's Edges*, edited by Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordon. New Haven: Yale University.
- Ahmed, Leila. 1992. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven: Yale University.
- Altan-Olcay, Özlem. 2015. "Politics of Critique: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Middle East." *Geoforum*. 63(3): 9-13. doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2015.05.003.
- Anthias, Floya. 2002. "Beyond Feminism and Multiculturalism: Locating Difference and the Politics of Location." *Women's Studies International Forum*. 25(3): 275-286. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395\(02\)00259-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(02)00259-5)
- Arat, Yeşim. 1999. "Democracy and Women in Turkey: In Defense of Liberalism" *Social Politics* 6 (3): 370-387. doi.org/10.1093/sp/6.3.370.
- Arat, Zehra. 2008. "Women's Rights as Human Rights." *UN Chronicle* 45 (2-3): 9-13.
- Auchter, Jessica. 2012. "Reimagining the Burqa" *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 14(3): 370-388. doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2012.659854.
- Beattie, Tina. 2014. "Whose Rights? Which Rights? The United Nations, the Vatican, Gender and Sexual and Reproductive Rights." *The Heythrop Journal* 1080-1090. doi.org/10.1111/heyj.12205.
- Bedford, Kate. 2009. *Developing Partnerships: Gender, Sexuality and the Reformed World Bank*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.
- Benhabib, Seyla. 2002. *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*. Princeton: Princeton University.

- Bergeron, Suzanne. 2003. "The Post-Washington Consensus and Economic Representations of Women in Development at the World Bank." *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 5(3): 397-419
- Bob, Clifford. 2012. *The Global Right Wing and the Clash of World Politics*. New York: Palgrave.
- Bornstein, Erica. 2003. *The Spirit of Development: Protestant NGOs, Morality and Economics in Zimbabwe*. New York: Routledge.
- Buğra, Ayşe. 2014. "Revisiting the Wollstonecraft Dilemma in the Context of Conservative Liberalism: The Case of Female Employment in Turkey" *Social Politics* 21(1): 148-166. doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxt001.
- Buss, Doris. 1998. "Robes, Relics and Rights: The Vatican and the Beijing Conference on Women." *Social and Legal Studies* 7(3): 339-363. doi.org/10.1177/096466399800700302.
- Çağlar, Gülay; Elisabeth Prügl and Susanne Zwingel, eds. 2013. *Feminist Strategies in International Governance*, edited by Gülay Çağlar, Elisabeth Prügl and Susanne Zwingel, 282-294. New York: Routledge.
- Case, Mary Anne. 2019. "Trans Formations in the Vatican's War on "Gender Ideology." *Signs*. 44(3): 639-664. doi.org/10.1086/701498
- Chant, Sylvia and Caroline Sweetman. 2012. "Fixing Women or Fixing the World? 'Smart Economics,' Efficiency Approaches, and Gender Equality in Development." *Gender & Development* 20 (3): 517-529. doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2012.731812.
- Cornwall, Andrea. 2016. "Women's Empowerment. What Works?" *Journal of International Development* 28: 342-359. doi.org/10.1002/jid.3210.
- Cornwall, Andrea, Elisabeth Harrison and Ann Whitehead. 2007. *Feminisms in Development: Contradictions, Contestations and Challenges*. London: Zed.

- Collins, Dana, Sylvanna Falcon, Sharmila Lodhia and Molly Talcorr. 2010. "New Directions in Feminism and Human Rights: An Introduction." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 12 (3-4): 298-318. doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2010.513096.
- Corredor, Elizabeth. 2019. "Unpacking "Gender Ideology" and the Global Right's Antigender Countermovement." *Signs* 44(3): 613-638. doi.org/10.1086/701171
- Ferguson, Lucy. 2015. "This is Our Gender Person." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17(3): 380-397. doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2014.918787.
- Finnemore, Martha and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change." *International Organization* 52(4): 887-917. doi.org/10.1162/002081898550789.
- Foley, Rebecca. 2004. "Muslim Women's Challenges to Islamic Law: The Case of Malaysia" *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 6(1): 53-84. doi.org/10.1080/1461674032000165932.
- Fraser, Nancy. 2009 "Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History." *New Left Review* 56: 97-117.
- Friedman, Elisabeth Jay. 2003. "Gendering the Agenda: The Impact of the Transnational Women's Rights Movement on the UN Conferences of the 1990s." *Women's Studies International Forum* 26(4): 313-331. doi 10.1016/S0277-5395(03)00077-3.
- Friedman, Elisabeth Jay, Kathryn Hochstetler and Ann Marie Clark. 2012. *Sovereignty, Democracy and Global Civil Society. State Society Relations at UN World Conferences*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Ghodsee, Kristen. 2007. "Religious Freedoms versus Gender Equality: Faith-Based Organizations, Muslim Minorities, and Islamic Headscarves in the New Europe." *Social Politics* 14(4): 526-561. doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxm022.

- , 2010. "Revisiting the United Nations Decade for Women: Brief Reflections on Feminism, Capitalism and Cold War Politics in the Early Years of the International Women's Movement." *Women's Studies International Forum* 33: 3-12. doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2009.11.008.
- Graff, Agnieszka, Retna Kapur and Suzanne Danuta Walters. 2019. "Introduction: Gender and the Rise of the Global Right." *Signs* 44(3): 541-560. doi.org/10.1086/701152.
- Grewal, Inderpal. 2013. "Outsourcing Patriarchy: Feminist Encounters, Transnational Mediations, and the Crime of 'Honor Killings.'" *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 15(1): 1-19. doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2012.755352.
- ICPD. 1994. ICPD Programme: Preamble and Principles. Newsletter 20, October. www.un.org/popin/icpd/newslett/94\_20/icpd9420.eng/6ch12.html (last accessed August 13, 2018).
- Jain, Devaki. 2005. *Women, Development and the UN: A Sixty-Year Quest for Equality and Justice*. Indiana: Indiana University.
- Jayawardena, Kumari. 1986. *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. London: Zed.
- De Jong, Sara. 2017. *Complicit Sisters: Gender and Women's Issues across North-South Divides*. New York: Oxford University.
- Haynes, Jeffrey. 2013. "Faith-based Organisations at the United Nations." *EUI Working Papers*, 70. European University Institute: Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies.
- Hudson, Natalie Florea and Anne Marie Goetz. 2014. "Too Much That Can't Be Said." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 16(2): 226-346. doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2014.918775.

- Kandiyoti, Deniz. 2007. "Between the Hammer and the Anvil: Post-Conflict Reconstruction, Islam and Women's Rights." *Third World Quarterly* 28(3): 503-517. doi.org/10.1080/01436590701192603.
- Kandiyoti, Deniz. 2014. "Women and the New Populism in Turkey: No Laughing Matter." *Open Democracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/deniz-kandiyoti/no-laughing-matter-women-and-new-populism-in-turkey>
- Karam, Azza. 2010a. "Concluding Thoughts on Religion and the UN: Redesigning the Culture of Development." *Crosscurrents* 60(3): 462-474. doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-3881.2010.00143.x.
- , 2010b. "The United Nations Population Fund's (UNFPA) Legacy of Engaging Faith Based Organizations as Cultural Agents of Change." *Crosscurrents* 60(3): 432-450. doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-3881.2010.00141.x.
- , 2016. "The Role of Religious Actors in Implementing the UN's Sustainable Development Goals." *The Ecumenical Review*. 68(4): 365-377. doi.org/10.1111/erev.12241.
- , 2017. "Positions on Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Muslim-Majority Countries and Institutions: A Telling Indication of Things to Come?" *Development in Practice* 27(5): 698-707. doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2017.1327025.
- Korteweg, Anna 2014. "'Honour Killing' in the Immigration Context: Multiculturalism and the Racialization of Violence against Women." *Politikon* 41(2): 183-208. doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2013.866186.
- Kováts, Eszter, and Maari Põim, eds. 2015. *Gender as Symbolic Glue: The Position and Role of Conservative and Far Right Parties in the Anti-gender Mobilization in Europe*. Brussels: Foundation for European Progressive Studies and Friedrich- Ebert-Stiftung.

- Mahmood, Saba. 2004. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University.
- Moghadam, Valentine. 2005. *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University.
- 2013. *Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1984. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Boundary 2* 12(3)/13(1): 333-358. doi.org/10.2307/302821.
- Narayan, Uma. 1998. "Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism." *Hypatia* 13(2): 86-106. doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1998.tb01227.x.
- Obaid, Thoraya. 2005. Culture Matters to Development: it is the "How" and not the "Why" and "What" Traverse. [https://culturalrights.net/descargas/drets\\_culturals264.pdf](https://culturalrights.net/descargas/drets_culturals264.pdf) (last accessed September 12, 2018).
- Ong, Aihwa. 2006. *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham: Duke University.
- Peterson, Spike V. 2012. "Rethinking Theory: Inequalities, Informalization and Feminist Quandaries." *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 14(1): 5-35. doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2011.631276.
- Prügl, Elisabeth. 2015. "Neoliberalising Feminism." *New Political Economy* 20(4): 614-631. doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2014.951614.
- Rajan, Hamsa. 2018. The Ethics of Transnational Feminist Research and Activism: An Argument for a More Comprehensive Review." *Signs*. 43(2): 269-300. <https://doi.org/10.1086/693885>

- Razavi, Shahra. 2012. "World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development, A Commentary." *Development and Change* 43(1): 423-437. doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2012.01743.x.
- Razavi, Shahra and Anne Jenichen. 2010. "The Unhappy Marriage of Religion and Politics: Problems and Pitfalls for Gender Equality." *Third World Quarterly* 31 (6): 833-850. doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2010.502700.
- Riley, Robin, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Nicola Pratt. (eds). 2008. *Feminism and War: Confronting US Imperialism*. London: Zed.
- Song, Sarah. 2005. "Majority Norms, Multiculturalism, and Gender Equality." *American Political Science Review*. 99 (4): 473-489. doi.org/10.1017/S0003055405051828.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 2000. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Postcolonialism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, edited by Diana Brydon. London: Routledge.
- UNFPA. 2008. *Culture Matters: Lessons from a Legacy of Engaging Faith-Based Organizations*. New York: UNFPA.
- . 2014. "Religion and Development Post-2015. Report of a Consultation among Donor Organizations, United Nations Development Agencies and Faith Based Organizations." New York: UNFPA.
- Yuval Davis, Nira. 1997. *Gender and Nation*. London: Sage.
- Zia, Afiya Shehrbano. 2019. "Can Rescue Narratives Save Lives? Honor Killing in Pakistan." *Signs* 44(2): 355-378. doi.org/10.1086/699342.
- Zwingel, Susanne. 2013. "Translating International Women's Rights Norms: CEDAW in Context." In *Feminist Strategies in International Governance*, 111-126. London: Routledge.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> See <http://research.un.org/en/docs/ga/quick/regular/73>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unaoc.org/who-we-are/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://jliflc.com/resources/united-nations-inter-agency-consultation-on-engagement-with-faith-based-organizations-2008/>

<sup>4</sup> See *Annual Report of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development*. 2018. <https://www.unaoc.org/2018/01/un-task-force-on-religion-releases-2017-annual-report/>.

<sup>5</sup> See see *Annual Report of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development*. 2018, <https://www.unaoc.org/2018/01/un-task-force-on-religion-releases-2017-annual-report/> and *The UN IATF on Religion and Development: Highlights of FBO Engagement by United Nations Entities 2013-2015*. 2016.

<sup>6</sup> All interviewees anonymized, except for Karam, who requested otherwise.

<sup>7</sup> See <https://parliamentofreligions.org/publications/alliance-virtue-common-good-washington-declaration>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://parliamentofreligions.org/sites/default/files/Global%2520Ethic%2520booklet-update-web.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Compiled from UNFPA Annual Reports, at [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/board-documents/Annex\\_4-UNFPA\\_engagement\\_of\\_faith-based\\_and\\_religious\\_actors\\_2018.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/board-documents/Annex_4-UNFPA_engagement_of_faith-based_and_religious_actors_2018.pdf), [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/board-documents/EDAR -  
\\_Annex\\_UNFPA\\_engagement\\_with\\_faith-based\\_organizations\\_2014-2017.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/board-documents/EDAR_-_Annex_UNFPA_engagement_with_faith-based_organizations_2014-2017.pdf) and <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Overview%20of%20Inter-Religious%20and%20Inter-Cultural%20Activities%202013.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Compiled from *Annual Report of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development*. 2018. <https://www.unaoc.org/2018/01/un-task-force-on->

---

[religion-releases-2017-annual-report/](#) and *The UN IATF on Religion and Development: Highlights of FBO Engagement by United Nations Entities 2013-2015*. 2016.

<sup>11</sup> See [https://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_4537.html](https://www.unicef.org/media/media_4537.html) for a summary.

<sup>12</sup> A network of organizations, legal practitioners and scholars challenging orthodox Islamic jurisprudence on the family See <http://www.musawah.org/about/>.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm> for the articles.