

Gender, religion and humanitarian responses to refugees

Major international agencies including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have moved towards partnering with faith-based actors to support displaced persons. Despite this, concerns – and suspicions – remain about the nature and impact of faith-based responses to displacement, often stemming from negative assumptions about the relationship between religion and gender. Based on her policy brief launched at the UN Refugee Summit in September, **Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh** outlines how we can overcome these often flawed assumptions.



5th Congress of the National Union of Sahrawi Women. Copyright: Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

Following the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and the UN Refugee Summit, the international community has reasserted its commitment to increasingly support localised humanitarian responses to refugees and asylum-seekers, building upon the expanding interest in the roles played by faith-based organisations (FBOs) and local faith communities (LFCs) in providing assistance and protection to refugees since the 2010s.

While major international agencies including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have proactively moved towards partnering with faith-based actors to support displaced persons, and launched a **Welcoming the Stranger** initiative with key faith leaders in 2013, major concerns – and suspicions – remain about the nature and impacts of faith-based and local community responses to displacement. Such concerns frequently stem from a series of largely negative assumptions about the relationship between religion and gender.

These include the assumption that FBOs are more ‘conservative’ and ‘patriarchal’ than secular organisations and agencies; that LFCs and faith leaders will hinder the participation of women and girls as decision-makers, as aid and service providers and as beneficiaries alike; and that FBOs will refuse to engage with individuals and social groups who do not comply with dominant norms regarding gender and sexuality.



In reality, *neither* FBOs *nor* secular organisations are automatically ‘conservative’ or ‘progressive’ with regards to gender roles and relations: both secular organisations and religious organisations can carry gender-limiting beliefs and practices. A survey conducted by the Organization of Refugee Asylum and Migration in 2013, for example, which examined attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) asylum-seekers, **concluded** that FBOs’ views on providing services to LGBTI people are *no better or worse* than the attitudes held by secular institutions.

Other studies have documented the ways in which local faith leaders and LFCs are often well-positioned to engage with issues arising in displacement contexts that are considered too sensitive, taboo or stigmatised to openly share with external actors. For instance, **Parsitau’s study** of female internally-displaced Kikuyu victims of sexual and gender-based violence in Kenya concludes that faith communities were the only actors able to provide trauma counselling in that context. UNFPA has also championed the value of working with religious leaders to end the practice of female genital mutilation. **Its approach** has shown how sensitively handled partnerships with local religious leaders have led to a fundamental shift “among religious leaders, many of whom have gone from endorsing the practice to actively condemning it” within their communities.

Whilst it is important to identify and examine such examples and counter-examples, a broader issue that requires our collective attention is the very nature and implications of the *assumptions* that exist regarding FBOs and local faith community response, assumptions that are often associated with implicit and explicit suspicion and rejection of faith-based responses to refugees.

In order to reflect on these and other assumptions, I have summarised a series of key points and recommendations for policy, practice and research published in the **MRU Policy Brief on Gender, Religion and Humanitarian Responses to Refugees** (*funded by the Henry Luce Foundation*) launched at the UN Refugee Summit in September 2016.

1. Understand the position of religion and gender in peoples’ lives

We should not automatically prioritise the roles of faith-based actors over secular actors, or artificially centralise the roles of religion and spirituality. Rather, we should create a space to understand how people – refugees, local community members, and humanitarian aid providers – inhabit religious and secular traditions, religious texts and practices, recognising that at times these texts, practices and traditions will defy categorisation as either clearly ‘religious’ or ‘secular’. Given that faith, spirituality and religious practices are a central feature of life for a large proportion of displaced people – women, men, boys and girls – a focus on dignity must include supporting the spiritual needs of displaced people, and better understanding the contribution of religious rituals and faith-based social networks as sources of personal and communal resilience.

2. Focus on all gender-limiting beliefs and practices, not just religious ones

It is clear that religion is often “**used to legitimize patriarchal hierarchies**”, and yet secular worldviews and organisations have their own forms of what Judith Butler refers to as **Gender Trouble**. This is precisely why secular organisations and international agencies have been constantly encouraged to more meaningfully engage in gender-sensitive planning, programming and implementation through the Gender and Development (GAD) agenda.

This leads to the broader question:

What are the gender-based power structures that hinder or enable action on gender equality, gender diversity, sexual orientation, and addressing sexual and gender-based violence in a given process of displacement?

These may be power structures between men and women, but also between both male and female elders over members of the younger generations, and frameworks espoused by males and females of different generations over gender non-conforming individuals and groups.

In essence, discussions around gender-limiting beliefs and practices should not focus exclusively on religious beliefs and practices, but on all the intersecting gender-limiting beliefs and practices that inform and are mobilised by different stakeholders in diverse displacement situations, including generational, national and ethnic identities.

3. Broaden the criteria of faith 'leaders' to include women

The post-2016 World Humanitarian Summit *Charter for Change*, and its commitment to increasingly support localised humanitarian responses to refugees, leaves open the question: which local actors, and with what effect?

The UNHCR's Welcoming the Stranger initiative provided a clear indication of the ways that faith leaders can facilitate refugees' access to services, and can act as opinion changers, having the potential to influence community members' views of and responses to refugees, and indeed, of gender relations and inequalities. However, more attention should be given to broadening the criteria for 'leader' itself: traditional definitions have tended to identify people with theological and/or ceremonial authority, and yet this has largely excluded women. However, women occupy many leadership positions within and across diverse religions, often leading social outreach programmes and mobilising volunteers and refugees themselves.

Female leaders are often harder to identify because they are less publically visible than men in many contexts. Crucially, this should not be taken as indicative of their leadership and influence. Muslim women particularly have often been overlooked as agents of change by international organisations because they do not appear to conform to a Western notion of empowered women when they wear the *hijab* or *niqab*.

It is equally essential to recognise that access to faith leaders is itself gendered in nature. For instance, [a study](#) in Irbid (Jordan) conducted by Islamic Relief revealed that when Muslim refugee women from Syria arrived in Jordan they often approached Muslim faith leaders for support, information and comfort, and mosques have often become a new safe space for Syrian refugee women and girls to gather, learn and discuss their situations. In contrast, the study confirmed that many refugee men from Syria avoid these since they continue to view faith leaders and mosques as being part of a political system which they do not trust.

4. Address the problematic constructions of masculinities when looking at gender

Gender is relational, and yet 'gender' is often assumed to be a synonym for 'women'. However, it is essential to balance an emphasis on women's rights and equality, with equal attention to addressing problematic and exclusionary constructions of gender identities, including problematic constructions of masculinities. In addition to identifying ways in which men can help prevent and address sexual and gender-based violence against women, there is also a need for gender-sensitive assessments of the particular needs of men and boys with different religious, ethnic and other social identity markers and forms of identification.

This is particularly important given the extent to which refugee men from the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa are depicted in the media as threatening sexual predators and terrorists by virtue of their intersecting gender, religious and ethnic identities. Importantly, refugees' religious and ethnic identities may be imposed by external observers, rather than being markers of personal identity and actual identification – indeed, refugees from the Middle East are often assumed to be Arab and Muslim, rather than recognising the ethnic and religious heterogeneity of refugees from and in the region.



This means that there is an urgent need to identify the particular needs and priorities of refugee men and boys through a combination of a gender- *and* faith-sensitive lens. This will help us better understand how to identify the needs, rights and priorities of both refugee women and girls, *and* of refugee men and boys, and to identify what roles, if any, religious institutions and faith leaders can play in lifting the structural barriers that limit the safety and dignity of both women and girls *and* men and boys in displacement situations.

About the author



Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh is Reader in Human Geography and co-director of the Migration Research Unit at University College London, where her research focuses on the intersections between gender and religion in experiences of and responses to conflict-induced displacement in and from the Middle East. Her recent publications include *The Ideal Refugees: Gender, Islam and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival* (2014), and *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* (2014, as co-editor). Elena is also the co-Chair of a new Joint Learning Initiative on Religion, Refugees and Forced Migration (see refugee.jlflc.com).

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