A DISCUSSION WITH JACQUELINE MOTURI OGEGA, DIRECTOR, WOMEN'S PROGRAM AT THE WORLD CONFERENCE OF RELIGIONS FOR PEACE

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http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/interviews/a-discussion-with-jacqueline-moturi-ogega-director-womens-program-at-the-world-conference-of-religions-for-peace

Background: This discussion took place as part of the preparations for a July 2010 conference in Washington on women's roles in peacemaking, especially taking religion into account. **Ms, Jackie Ogega** focuses both on her work to support and develop the **Religions for Peace Women of Faith network** and her ongoing research in Kenya, which focuses on the roles women of faith may have played as peacebuilders in the ethnic conflicts among the Gusii and Masaai. Her analysis builds from the argument that **women's multifaceted roles are important and often invisible, underplayed, or ignored.** She sees **peacebuilding as extending far beyond conflict resolution to the broad development of communities and relationships**. Training and confidence building play key roles. The discussion took the form of telephone conversations between Katherine Marshall and Jacqueline Ogega; it also includes extracts from an interview with Ms. Ogega posted on WCRP's website.

Can we start with your personal path? How did you get started and what has been your personal motivation for your work and the questions you grapple with?

Both my academic interests and my personal story have led me to my present focus on women and faith.

I do have many lovely memories of my childhood, but I must also say that the violence I witnessed influences my desire to promote peace. I was born and raised among the Kisii of southwest Kenya. The Kisii are one of the smaller ethnic groups in Kenya about nine percent of the population. Historically, there have been significant ethnic tensions, especially with the Maasai and Kipsigis, but they tend to attract far less attention than the larger ethnic communities like the Kikuyu and Luo. Other forms of violence I witnessed were in my own village and family. My parents did not bear sons and suffered all kinds of discrimination and violence as a result. But both my parents were determined that their daughters (I have two sisters) would be successful, and they supported us in going to high school and university. They made it clear to us that as women we had a right to speak on the podium. Faith and prayer were an important motivating force in the family and community. As a Roman Catholic, I have grown to affirm the inviolable dignity of every human person enshrined in our religious teachings. I must stress that this personal experience has very much shaped my academic and professional development.

My first degree was in education, and I then did a master's in gender and development, very much grounded in my personal story and experience. I was fascinated by theories of freedom and agency, and keenly aware of what gender discrimination involved. I was a teacher in high school for eight years, teaching literature and Kiswahili. And then I served as a national gender program coordinator for Caritas, Kenya. That was an amazing experience, working in all the very different dioceses of Kenya on many kinds of programs, such as microcredit, training, and addressing violence against women and girls.

In 2003, I joined Religions for Peace, again in Kenya, as the African women's project director, working with Azza Karam, my predecessor. I helped establish and develop the African Women of Faith Network. The work was very fulfilling, and I worked in over 18 countries with women of faith, conducting training and convening for information and skills building. I realized that the life experience I had had, of gender-based discrimination in my own community and in Kenya, was everywhere in Africa.

In 2006, I took up a new position at Religions for Peace, directing the global women's mobilization program at the international secretariat in New York. My current work is really an affirmation of my view of gender as an archetype conflict. I see intricate links among patriarchy, power, gender relations and conflict. Familial or community conflicts are really the micro manifestation of all macro conflicts. But an even more important affirmation in my work at Religions for Peace is the recognition of the agency of women of faith to transform conflict, avert violence and build peace.

Let's talk more about your current work at Religions for Peace and with the Network of Women of Faith. Since you have articulated it clearly in an interview that appears on the Religions for Peace USA website, we can quote that as a start (http://www.rfpusa.org/resources/interviews/jacqueline-ogega-moturi)

"The object of the network [of Women of Faith] is to mobilize women of faith around issues of peace. And I mean peace in broad terms, not just the absence of war, but living honorably, dying in peace, and not starving. Women of faith are well suited for it because they are caregivers, focus on the family, and transmit peace values over generations. Their maternal gift is resolving violence without conflict.

"The challenge is that these women are not in the mainstream and are not visible at the leadership level where they are needed in decision making and promoting critical values. Gender mainstreaming must happen at all levels. Women can shed light on decisions and policies involving work they are doing but there is a lack of confidence to join. This confidence must be built and their space must be claimed so we must involve them.

"According to the gender roles in Africa, it is the responsibility of women to take care of these problems. Therefore they are ignored and invisible. This is why they are having such a hard time accessing resources.

"We must recognize that men and women are affected differently and women are affected more drastically by war, poverty, HIV/AIDs, etc.. Therefore, their needs are different. Women face the trauma of rape, sexual slavery, child motherhood; moreover, orphaned families headed by girls are more vulnerable. Female orphans are more disadvantaged because they take care of the family and therefore are more likely to skip out on school, are prone to facing sexual abuse, and are generally part of unsecured child-headed homes. And if an extended family member decides to support an orphan family they are more likely to support a male child-headed family because girls get married. Thus, they are more vulnerable than male orphans. Staff must understand these gender realities in Africa."

Can you say more about what kind of network you are working to build?

Please note that that the interview that you have just referred to was done in 2005, when I was still working for the Africa program, and now I do have a broader mandate. The main objective of the Religions for Peace Global Women of Faith Network is to mobilize inter-religious action for peace by working with already existing networks of women of faith. Ours is truly a "network of networks" that draws on women's capacity to build networks, formal and informal, and to form an extraordinary range of different kinds of associations. There is a big opportunity to engage them more strategically in

conflict transformation. The women who are involved in these networks and associations are on the front lines, but in most situations they need to be engaged more systematically in work for peace, and in ways that their contributions can be recognized.

As you look at the network that has emerged, do you have particular success stories or heroines that you can point to?

There are women working for peace, with religious links and inspiration, in practically in all situations where there is violent conflict, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to Liberia to Mindanao, to Kenya, and so on. And when we go beyond just violent conflict, to a broader notion of positive peace, the list is much longer. Women of faith are working virtually everywhere.

The work women do is in many areas. Among the work we encounter most often is addressing violence against women, healing and dealing with loss and trauma, helping to rebuild communities, engaging in transitional justice mechanisms, teaching children and adults about peace and justice, and so on. The work tends to be very local, very real, and very tangible.

But there is a major, generic problem: this work has been very poorly documented. Women have been acting in so many places, but there is in truth very limited documentation about what exactly they do. So what we are drawing on is largely ad hoc or anecdotal information, stories from our own direct experiences. That can make it appear that we are romanticizing women's roles. We need more credible evidence to prove what women of faith and their organizations have done. In general, there is a vast wealth of undocumented work that women of faith are doing for peace, on all fronts.

What about bars to women's roles in some communities? What do you see as blockages? And where are women's roles as religious leaders most recognized?

In formal roles that have to do with religion, women are obviously in a small minority and they are formally barred in some traditions and places. Some of the more mainstream religions tend to be very hierarchical in the way they are structured and this is important in defining what women do, especially formally.

But there are examples where women have taken more visible roles as religious actors, especially in their roles as spiritual healers. In communities where they are spiritual leaders, especially in traditional roles, women are often recognized as the spiritual leaders for healing and cleansing. This takes on special importance in situations where there have been extreme atrocities against the people and communities, and where healing is extraordinarily difficult. Women are also given leading roles in prayer and worship rituals in many faith traditions. Women can play some strategic roles here.

To take one quite well known example, what roles have women played in the Acholi Religious Leader group and initiative?

Religions for Peace has at times worked with the Acholi leaders. I think that they have tried to integrate women to their peacebuilding initiative. But, although the women have played key roles and mobilize peace committee in their communities, their roles and contributions still have limited visibility, compared to the male counterparts.

Interfaith work, however, can be an opportunity to change that situation and mainstream women of faith more fully. We have found at Religions for Peace that one of the creative capacities of the interreligious movement is that it allows new ways to engage women of faith in inter-religious structures and mechanisms. Because these are new structures in new forms, they are often not seen as threatening existing structures, so it has been possible for women to take more prominent roles.

But still, we have found through our work at Religions for Peace that that women of faith continue to be unrecognized, underfunded, and unsupported in their efforts to build peace. It is difficult for the media to pick up the story that women of faith are leading change by organizing peace committees at the village level, and that their work contributes to the overall efforts to build peace.

What do you see as major challenges for the Women of Faith network and for women's work in this area?

The lack of resources is the central challenge. The way religious women's organizations are structured, even well organized women's groups, limits the possibility of getting resources to them in any significant way. Available resources tend to go to mainstream religious groups. Women may be asked to organize local communities, but that is very limited in terms of resources and also limited in terms of building organizational capacity.

That said, there are some opportunities, when organizations have a special interest in bringing in women. At Religions for Peace, by convening women of faith alongside male religious leaders in some high-level events, we are creating visibility and opening doors for partnerships and capacity building. Religions for Peace has worked with many organizations to provide conflict transformation training for women of faith which does result in improved skills. Even facilitating local women of faith to participate at the UN Commission on the Status of Women has provided opportunities to build capacity and confidence. Women who benefit from these openings can become more effective.

How large is the network? Can you say how many women are involved?

That is a big question for us! As a network of networks, we say that we have about a thousand networks that constitute the Women of Faith Network. But we have no exact number of how many women are involved. We know that it is huge: A single Women's Association, for example, might have more than five million members. Then there are much smaller networks, perhaps with 50 or even 20 members. But we have no overall count or formula that allows up to quantify the number of people involved. Some of the networks are very large and global, while some are young and nascent.

Can we come back to the question of success. What examples and stories to you cite when people ask you about success? And how do you assess it?

We come back to the problem and challenge of documentation. It is one of the weaknesses of many faith communities, that there is little motivation to document thoroughly or thoughtfully. The focus is on doing, and what they do it for the glory of God. The women do it because it is spiritual and moral. So we have not found a good way to document the work and successes. Even Religions for Peace is very weak in documenting what we have done. We are currently working with the Ford Foundation to document good practices.

We do have examples we cite of women working for peace. One is of women in Japan who are engaged with Afghan children, teaching them about peace and non violence, and helping them materially, with books and blankets, for example, to face the challenges of their situation.

A classic case that we talk of often is the Sierra Leone interreligious Council. There, women were at the forefront of the negotiations with the rebels, some years ago, securing the release of 50 young boys and leading to a peace agreement. ECOWAS and others had failed, and there was a stalemate. The women of faith came into the picture at the time when there was a vacuum, and acted. But I am not sure how replicable this is because the circumstances were very special. The women of faith had a unique opportunity to be directly part of the negotiations that resulted in peace accord.

Bosnia is another interesting case where Religions for Peace was involved. But the examples tend to be very specific to a given situation. That represents a challenge for all of us doing conflict transformation work because lessons and policy implications are not easy to draw. And we do not learn enough from the failures to solve conflicts.

What roles do well known groups like the Mothers Unions play in these networks and in peace work more generally?

These groups tend to frame their organizations and work in what scholars might consider more "sexist" roles. Women of faith are presented as the mothers, and the peacemakers in that context. The work of these groups has been mostly oriented towards women's reproductive roles, to nurturing, prayer, and care of children. They have seen themselves less in transformative roles or intervening on strategic questions. Some groups undertake activities that are geared to the needs of communities, like education, prayer, and spiritual work to mold. They tend not to progress to roles at a more strategic level, looking to the root causes of violence including gender inequality.

Where do you see the revolutionary women of faith?

Revolution does not happen in a very organized way so the question is hard to answer!

There are women of faith working in situations that are very difficult, beginning with practical simple conversations and moving from there to far larger perspectives and ideas. Then they start to demand justice.

What about young people?

That is a challenge for us. We have not found good ways to engage young women properly. Because Religions for Peace is a membership organization, we work with our members, and they tend not to have young women in prominent positions. That is one of the weaknesses of our organization. We need new spaces to engage younger people. Even though we have an international youth network, it has not gone far enough by way of engaging young women of faith in peacebuilding.

There are a few examples I can think of through, such as a group of young women leaders working in Kibera, the large slum in Nairobi. After the 2007 violence they engaged with young people to help ensure that they did not participate in the post election violence. They were very creative, and they reached both men and women through their peace discussions. But this kind of initiative is not institutionalized, and there are far too few spaces where it can occur. There are not many women's associations that effectively engage young women.

Do you see differences in the way women from different faith traditions approach their work on peace?

Once we bring people together, we find that there is so much commonality in approaches. There are differences in texts, and rituals may be different, but the core is similar. In talking about conflict, all agree that healing has religious roots. They agree that violence and suffering are not supported by any religion. That brings the discourse on peace to the fore. The idea is not to bury differences, but to agree on common principles. Then the groups agree to work with their different capacities. They work so that differences can become strengths.

There is some effort to focus on some of the writings that may not be so friendly to women in the way they are interpreted. But again women of faith work to analyze these texts, looking to the core meaning, drawing out common elements. When we look at violence against women, and look for example at the Christian texts, there are passages that seem to justify violence but when we go to the core of it, the true teaching is on the dignity of women. The goal is not to change texts and doctrines, but to agree on core principles and find common ground for collaborative action.

What is the tangible role and work of Religions for Peace in building this network?

The day to day work takes many forms. We focus a lot on communications, through newsletters. We have meetings at many levels. And, more recently, we are focusing on what we call E-engagmeent. We are working to develop a tool that will allow us to communicate more electronically. There, a focus will be on sharing stories and experience, which can be of direct use in enhancing work by members, but will also help in addressing the problem of lack of documentation. We also have a range of physical publications. We have written and worked with practical manuals, for example the *Women of Faith Transforming Conflict: A Multi-Religious Training Manual*, that is accessible online at *http://religionsforpeace.org/resources/toolkits/transforming.html* We organize training sessions, for example special sessions for women in West Africa and in Kosovo to build skills and knowledge on mediation, psychosocial support and trauma healing.

A major asset of Religions for Peace is its convening power. That means not just the formal assemblies, which happen every five years, but special network meetings and gatherings that happen regionally and nationally. We help to establish women's coordinating committees in various places, again international, regional, and national. The committees are a way to explore ways to support networking among women of faith, and makes it possible to engage on priorities, especially at local level, where they are driven by local realities.

We have yet to exploit fully some of the convening tools we have, potentially. We do work and could work more closely with parts of the United Nations, for example. That would have special relevance for addressing the fundamental challenge of women's invisibility, since the United Nations offers a way to convene at high level. That offers the possibility of recognizing women in high visibility settings as religious actors.

You mentioned earlier that you are studying at the University of Bradford. What is the topic of your study? What is your basic hypothesis?

The topic of my study is simply the roles of women of faith in peacebuilding, taking the Masaai and Kisii ethnic conflict as a case study. This conflict has been going on for some 30 years, though it is little talked and written about. The conflict is largely around ethnic identity. It tends to escalate in times of national tension and violence such as around elections, although there are historical factors including colonialism. But there are also religious elements. And it is difficult to find empirical evidence about what women are doing or have done in such a situation. My hypothesis is that women of faith have played roles in peacebuilding, and that they have used religious assets in doing so. Religion, as in so many situations, has a dual role, in fueling or causing conflict, and in helping to stem violence and to prevent it. I am looking at the specifics of how this works and what the assets are for women of faith to act as peacebuilders.

How does religion play into both the conflicts and in peacemaking?

I hope to find data that clarifies those questions through my field work. The Kisii Masai conflict may have religious dimensions but they are complex. Most people, both Kisii and Maasai, are Christians, with a few Muslims, but they also have traditional African religious practices. They are not monolithic. So I am examining what the religious assets are, what religious resources are present in the communities, and are women able to engage these religious resources for peacebuilding, if at all.

What do you mean by resources?

For example, the ability to convene, but also practical assets, like schools and dispensaries. Women use these resources often in very difficult circumstances. And they help in building networks. And even where there are no physical structures there are assets and networks, for example prayer groups and other informal groupings that women are able to use.

They bring psycho social skills, working on reconciliation and trauma healing, and at the same time minister to physical needs, like health and maternal care.

Many of these kinds of assets and activities are also done by women in a non faith setting. I have identified control groups of these kinds of groupings NGOs and others. And I am interested in seeing what the differences might be. So far, I do see differences, but need more research to pinpoint them and to assess their impact. The women of faith groups seem to have particular forms of agency and special ways of working in the community. I look forward to sharing my findings. This will also contribute to my work at Religions for Peace.

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