

FOR LIVING BUDDHISM AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

DHARMA WORLD

APR.-JUNE 2011 Vol. 38



Religions for Peace: Promoting the Roles of Women of Faith in Peace Building

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The international nonsectarian organization is explicitly dedicated to mobilizing religious communities to collaborate for peace. Through its Women's Mobilization Program, it works with others to develop programs that engage both men and women in efforts to empower women and girls.

Religion has begun to receive recognition for its capacity to play a positive role in peace building (Appleby 1999; Vendley 2005; Smock 2006). While this is highly encouraging, this paper limits itself to a review of Religions for Peace's efforts to support the roles of women of faith in peace building. It outlines a gender-aware approach to peace building that focuses on the particular capacities of groups of women of faith.

In offering this outline of Religions for Peace's approach, I am acutely aware that the "visibility" of women of faith as fundamental actors in peace building remains marginal. A search of the literature does not offer much by way of documented cases of woman of faith serving as agents of peace. But visibility in the literature and life on the ground in conflict zones are starkly different realities. In fact, women of faith are vital peacemakers in many conflicts. Their absence in the literature may say more about our "lenses" than about their contributions. My colleagues' and my experience of working in Religions for Peace in conflict zones has con-

vinced us that (1) women of faith are already on the front lines of peace building, and (2) they can do even more than they already are doing if they are recognized, equipped, and engaged in partnerships. This conviction, borne of experience, animates Religions for Peace's commitment to help put a spotlight on women of faith. Given the minimal state of documentation, these reflections will have served their modest purpose if they help to raise our awareness of the commitment and capacities of women of faith to build peace.

Religions for Peace is a nonsectarian organization established in 1970 and explicitly dedicated to mobilizing religious communities to collaborate for peace. Religions for Peace advances a multidimensional notion of peace that acknowledges that the well-being of each person is related to the well-being of all, and it calls for the responsibility to reject the misuses of religion in support of violence (Religions for Peace 2007). Its mission lies in multireligious efforts to transform violent conflict, promote just and harmonious societies, advance human development, and protect the earth. The work to promote the inviolable rights, well-being, and dignity of women and children is therefore at the core of Religions for Peace's mission. There is no peace when a woman is dying giving life, when a child is raped, when a woman faces honor killing, when proliferation of arms threatens the security of entire communities, or when climate change alters the course of the earth. Through its Women's Mobilization Program, Religions for Peace works with network members to develop different programs that engage both men and women in efforts to empower women and girls, and to address common threats to peace.

Women of faith are often overlooked mediators of conflict. One of the successful approaches of Religions for Peace is to build the capacities of religious communities to act as mediators in situations of conflict. Haja Simatu Kassim was one of the fifteen women of faith who resolutely left the relative safety of their homes, churches, and mosques to meet with a rebel group to negotiate peace in their country. It was April 1997. Buildings lay in smoldering ruins. Women and children stared hopelessly, their hands and legs amputated. The fight-



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One of the working groups meets at the Women's Assembly held August 24–25, 2006, in Kyoto before the Eighth World Assembly of Religions for Peace, which convened August 26–29 in Kyoto.

ers whom Haja Simatu and the other women of faith were set to meet were largely responsible for this misery. For two decades, Sierra Leone, a poor country of five million people, had been lurching from crisis to crisis. Political turmoil, war, and corrupt rule had forced individuals and communities to react through whatever means to defend themselves under uncertain circumstances. The fighters had ravaged villages, recruited child soldiers, and mutilated or murdered all those suspected of disloyalty. As the women of faith headed up to the mountainous hideout to meet with the fighters from the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), they had only faith to hope that they would survive, or even begin to quell the violence. Ignoring personal safety, and despite knowing that their respective communities and families might be put at risk, these women of faith, members of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone, representing the nation's largest Christian and Muslim organizations, successfully met with the rebel leaders. This led to a process of negotiations that involved multiple partners and ultimately to an unprecedented release of fifty child soldiers.

This mediation by women of faith from the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia illustrates one of Religions for Peace's approaches to peace: networking the existing religious com-

munities, organizations, and groups for multireligious cooperation by building national and regional Inter-Religious Councils (IRCs). IRCs bring together women and men of faith for common action. Religions for Peace is composed of more than seventy national IRC structures and six continent-based IRCs around the world that help diverse religious communities to align around common challenges to peace, and offers ways to utilize complementary strengths of different faiths. There are some situations where IRCs lack political will to effectively support the leadership of women of faith. More can be done to strengthen the capacity of IRCs to fully and more effectively integrate women of faith. There is progress with more and more women of faith providing leadership in IRCs, and through their networks. They not only serve as mediators, but play other peace-building roles, including conflict prevention and early warning, negotiation, advocacy, nonviolent activism, and education.

Women of faith also take effective action as peace builders working through their already established networks and groups, both formal and informal. Religions for Peace established the Global Women of Faith Network in 2001 as a conduit for mobilizing and promoting women's visibility and agency in peace building. The network, with its national

and regional affiliates in thirty countries and five continents, consists of more than one thousand religious women's organizations engaged in peace building. The network aims at providing a common forum that facilitates communication, coordination, and the exchange of insights that stimulate creative common action for peace among women of different faiths (Religions for Peace 2009). It also provides a powerful impetus toward mainstreaming women of faith as leaders in multireligious forums.

Religions for Peace convenes women of faith alongside male religious leaders for dialogue, advocacy, and action. About every five years, Religions for Peace convenes representatives of its Global Women of Faith Network for its World Assembly. At the most recent World Assembly, held in Kyoto in 2006, women of faith formed more than one-third of the official delegates. The World Assembly elects its governing board, and today women of faith form 34 percent of the Religions for Peace World Council governing body.

Religions for Peace equips the Global Women of Faith Network for action through capacity building and training. Existing literature stresses that NGOs' approaches to peace building can be sustainable when they are geared toward

capacity building for skill-based infrastructure (Lederach 1998, 47–51; Smock 2006; Reeves and Baden 2002). Religions for Peace has engaged its Global Women of Faith Network in conflict-transformation training workshops that focus on interactive problem solving, collaboration, and analysis of shared problems (Religions for Peace 2004). The training programs have played a convening role, bringing women of faith from different religions and sides of the conflict together to share their perceptions of the conflict, analyze their roles in it, and develop approaches to advance reconciliation.

Haja Simatu recounted her experience to other women of faith from Liberia, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, and Sierra Leone at a regional training seminar on conflict transformation organized by Religions for Peace in Freetown in 2003: "I had never seen a rebel leader, only heard of their terror. Now, standing face to face with one, I just called on Allah (God) to help me stand still. The rebel leader looked at me for a long time. Then he opened his mouth to speak and his first words were 'you look like my mother, all of you look like my mother. I have not seen my mother for a long time. Shall we pray?' and this is how we began our first meeting with the RUF fighters."

Through its African Women of Faith Network, Religions



Participants in the Women's Assembly held before the Eighth World Assembly of Religions for Peace in Kyoto in August 2006 pose for a commemorative photo. More than a third of the delegates to the Eighth World Assembly were women.

for Peace has facilitated solidarity visits and cross-border exchanges in countries with violent conflicts. For instance, through the program on the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa Inter-Religious Coordinating Mechanisms for Peace, women and men of faith have been engaged in regional convening and capacity building to address the root causes of the conflicts in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa region. This coordinating body has undertaken solidarity visits to Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Religions for Peace has developed a number of tools following the capacity-building training, including a leadership manual for women of faith to transform conflict, manuals to address HIV/AIDS-related stigma and discrimination, fact sheets on maternal deaths and fistulas, and a tool kit for engaging religious communities in ending violence against women and girls (Religions for Peace 2004, 2009). The tools are essential for further mobilization and capacity development of the networks.

Although the Global Women of Faith Network is an effort toward greater inclusion and visibility, the danger of essentializing or ghettoizing women's roles in peace building must be avoided. Religions for Peace has embarked not only on building a movement of women of faith but also on strengthening multisectoral partnerships with other secular, academic, and governmental organizations.

Religions for Peace contends that religion brings particular values, resources, assets, and services that can be mobilized to build peace (See table 1). Table 2 illustrates some of the forms of problem-solving roles engaging these religious assets for common action to transform conflict.

Religions for Peace has adapted this basic method as a framework to take into account other forms of conflict and violence and therefore be more precise on the multidimensionality of conflict and peace that affects women's security and livelihoods.

Religions for Peace hopes to contribute to the literature



Women religious leaders representing many countries and religious traditions exchange opinions about work for peace during the Women's Assembly held August 24–25, 2006, in Kyoto.

on women of faith as agents of peace building by documenting some of the good practices. That will include a gender-aware analysis of the agency of women of faith in relation to resources, relationships, institutions, and access to peace-building assets and decision making. Analysis of these dif-

Social	Moral	Spiritual
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mosques, churches, temples, and other social structures located in virtually every village, district, and city • Networks of communication and action • Most developed, interconnected, and locally led social infrastructure in existence, reaching from the smallest village to the capital and beyond • Familiar and trusted institutions that can provide social cohesion in the aftermath of violent conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spiritualities, moral structure, and influence • Elaboration of code of ethics as moral standards • Mechanisms for inculcating moral visions and religious identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make available the strength to bear the unbearable, hope when all seems hopeless, forgive the unforgivable • Spiritualities for reconciliation and reconstruction

Table 1. Religious Assets and Their Peace-Building Roles (adapted from Vendley 2005)

Forms of Problem-Solving Roles	Religious Assets			
	Social	Moral	Spiritual	Multireligious
Education	Grassroots religious networks educate local populations regarding seeds of conflict.	Religious leaders speak out against scapegoating other religions, ethnic groups, and communities.	Religious communities invoke religious practices to counter messages of hate and calls for violence.	Religious leaders of different faiths advance shared commitments to transforming conflict.
Advocacy	Women of faith call for peace in their communities. Grassroots religious networks promote community justice initiatives.	Religious leaders articulate the moral responsibilities of combatants, call for cease-fire, and engage in nonviolent activism for peace.	Religious communities engage community-based efforts to break the cycle of violence.	Different religious communities work together to advocate for an end to violence.
Mediation	Religious congregations and women's groups bridge the divide between combatants.	Religious leaders provide a space for mediation and call on the faithful to support peace negotiations.	Religious leaders engage religion to bridge the unbridgeable.	Inter-Religious Council facilitates "Track 2" peace negotiations among combatants.
Reconciliation	Local religious community institutions work to reintegrate former child soldiers.	Religious leaders foster community reconciliation that protects the rights of all groups.	Religious practices foster mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation.	Inter-Religious Council promotes and supports national reconciliation among all groups.

Table 2: Forms and Problem-Solving Roles of Religious Assets (adapted from Vendley 2005)

ferent but interrelated components should focus on both the specificity and the diversity of roles among women of faith with other women, and in relation with men.

Religions for Peace's approach entails building multi-sectoral partnerships aimed at overcoming the invisibility of women of faith as religious actors to ensure access to resources, decision making, and sustainability of their efforts. The approach calls for rigorous documentation that fully demonstrates the comparative advantage of engaging women of faith, and the significance of their roles and values in peace building. Fruits are already apparent, and as we hone our lenses they will appear more and more in the literature. □

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