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Women, Religion, Peace, and Security

in the Middle East

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I love my faith. The beauty of the ritual and liturgy reminds me of the oneness of the entire human family. My faith makes clear to me that equality and justice are not just social constructs, but an ontology, part of the divine order of life. That we are all a part of a large web of connection that is sacred, if we have eyes to see.

~Helen LaKelly Hunt, Ph.D., *Faith and Feminism: A Holy Alliance*
# Women, Religion, Peace, and Security in the Middle East

*By Kristen Lundquist*

## Contents

1. Introduction ........................................................................ 2

2. Basic Principles of Women’s Religious Peacebuilding ................. 2

2.1. Psychological Feminine Abilities Applicable to Peacebuilding ........ 3

2.1.1. The Ethos of Care ..................................................... 3

2.1.2. Relationship Building ............................................... 4

2.1.3. Nonverbal Gender Communication .............................. 4

2.1.4. Gender Access ....................................................... 5

3. Critical Societal, Political, and Military Challenges Facing Women’s Religious Peacebuilding in the Region Today .............................................. 6

3.1. Case Studies: Practice of Women’s Religious Peacebuilding Within Contexts of the Middle East .................................................. 6

3.1.1. Israel-Palestine ......................................................... 6

3.1.2. Lebanon .............................................................. 8

3.1.3. Syria .................................................................. 10

3.2. Gender Stereotypes ......................................................... 11

3.3. Religious Women of Peace in Military Service ....................... 12

4. Theological Trends that Buttress Involvement in Women’s Religious Peacebuilding ................................................... 14

5. Societal Elements that Cause Women to Identify with a Religious Struggle, as Opposed to a National Struggle, in Regions of Ongoing Conflict ........................................ 15

5.1. A New Vocabulary for Peace ........................................... 16

5.2. Current Societal and Political Implications of Pursuing Peacebuilding as an Outpouring of Religious Belief ........................................... 17

6. Methods Being Used by Practitioners to Promote Peace and Recruit Future Generations of Women Religious Peacebuilders ............................................. 18

7. Key Recommendations of Engagement for Western NGOs Attempting to Collaborate with Women’s Religious Peacebuilding Initiatives in the Region ................................................ 20

8. Conclusion ......................................................................... 21

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1. Introduction

“Peace in the Middle East.” It’s a phrase that the world-over has loved, lived, and to a certain extent, grown complacent over—hoping for the best in a region of ongoing conflict, but often living and seeing the reality of the worst. The tensions and conflicts that continue today within and among Israel-Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon have been the focus of numerous peace processes, yet despite this focus, the states remain precariously balanced on the edge of conflict, giving rise to the question—What is the missing piece for sustainable peace and security in this region?

In July of 2000, when President Clinton gathered the Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, and the Palestinian Authority Chairman, Yasser Arafat, many around the world thought that this was “it”; the meeting at Camp David would be the beginning of the end of the conflict. Today we know this not to be true.

When President Clinton gave a press conference regarding the events of the summit, he brought attention to a vital missing piece of the peace talks, stating that if they would have had women at the table, they would now have a peace agreement (Hunt & Posa, 2001, p. 42). President Clinton recognized that women bring something to the table that men alone cannot—a difference in perspective, skill, and perhaps even access.

A second missing piece of the summit was religion. In a region that boasts some of the most dogmatic and diverse faith groups in the world, why was the process that was supposed to bring them peace conducted without the blessing and advisement of major religious leadership? Religion had been viewed as a part of the problem, and so, de facto, it could not be considered as a part of the solution.

This paper looks at the nexus of gender, religion, peace, and security, and the manifestation of women’s religious peacebuilding in the Middle East, examining the extent to which religion plays a role in women peacebuilders’ pursuit and/or conception of peace in the region. Through interviews conducted with practitioners and scholars of women’s religious peacebuilding in the Middle East over the course of a year, synthesized with the present scholarship on the topic, the research reveals basic principles of women’s religious peacebuilding; critical societal, political, and military challenges facing women’s religious peacebuilding in the region today; theological trends that buttress involvement in women’s religious peacebuilding; societal elements that cause women to identify with a religious struggle, as opposed to a national struggle, in regions of ongoing conflict; methods used by practitioners to promote peace and recruit future generations of women religious peacebuilders; and, key recommendations of engagement for Western NGOs attempting to collaborate with women’s religious peacebuilding initiatives in the region.

2. Basic Principles of Women’s Religious Peacebuilding

Due to its infancy as a legitimate sector within the field of international relations, women’s religious peacebuilding still holds an aura of mystery as to its theory and practice, not only in the Middle East, but on a global scale. The nexus of gender, religion, peace, and security has long existed throughout history in various forms, contexts, and degrees. However, not until the mid-1990s (with women’s participation in the Northern Ireland Peace Process), did the concept of women’s involvement in conflict prevention gain significance among international policy makers (Anderlini, 2007, p. 21). With the adoption of United Nations Resolution 1325 in 2001—recognizing the need to focus the world’s attention on women’s participation in peace negotiations and in post-conflict reconstruction—women...
now had a recognized role in these movements. Some women have explored how their unique roles as women, combined with their motivations of faith, have an impact and influence on their societies, governments, and the world.

Although it is difficult to assign a formal definition to the nexus of gender, religion, peace, and security due to its infancy and the often sporadic and ambiguous nature of its practice, for the purpose of this paper, “women’s religious peacebuilding” will be defined as: the process of conflict resolution, reconciliation, and development catalyzed through feminine abilities and access, and motivated by spiritual principles and values. This definition has its roots both in gender-based psychology, and religious belief and tradition.

2.1. Psychological Feminine Abilities Applicable to Peacebuilding

Anyone who has engaged a number of individuals in the topic of women’s involvement in peacebuilding will likely have heard the old adage, “Women make good peacemakers, because they are naturally peaceful” (Blumberg, Hare, & Costin, 2006, p. 40). While this belief—that women hold the monopoly on peace because it is somehow a part of their genetic makeup—is largely unfounded, the essence of this belief—that women are by-and-large well-suited to peacemaking—is not necessarily untrue.

2.1.1. The Ethos of Care

A primary element of this “peaceful nature” that is frequently cited as a sign that women hold the monopoly on peace is the ethos of care. In various cultural contexts, and especially in the Middle East, women have a carefully constructed set of socially acceptable activities that often involve the nurturing and care of people (Stall & Stoecker, 1998). Studies show that women do not hold the monopoly on care—indeed, given the right context women can publically exhibit extremely uncaring and even violent action, actively taking part in conflict, with female soldiers among fighting forces in 36 out of 54 countries of recorded conflict between the years of 1990 and 2002 (Mazurana et al., 2002, p. 97)—rather, there are specific actions and behaviors reflecting care that are supported by society for women—causing these behaviors to become social norms (Matlin, 1987, p. 191-92).

According to Susan Stall (1998), a Professor of Sociology and Women’s Studies at Northeastern Illinois University, the actions of women in peacebuilding are often in response to the needs of their children or those within the greater community. Women and their children constitute 90% of the victims of ethnic and religiously-motivated conflicts, and they disproportionately suffer when conflict arises, giving them a significant stake in the creation of sustainable peace (Wanis-St. John & Kew, 2008, p. 18). Nancy Naples, Professor of Sociology and Women’s Studies at the University of Connecticut, describes a woman’s need to effect change for their family and community as "activist mothering," a larger understanding of maternal care "to comprise all actions, including social activism, that address the needs of their children and the community" (Naples, 1998, p. 109; Stall & Stoecker, 1998, p. 739). Indeed, as Anna Costin, a journalist focusing on terrorism and security, states, “The concept of the enemy is seen differently by women and men. Women often think of each other as mothers and daughters. A theme that unites many women’s peace groups is their special relationship to motherhood, emphasizing the polarity between giving life and taking it away” (Blumberg, Hare, & Costin, 2006, p. 39). This maternal responsibility to protect and care for life should not be underestimated as an underlying principle for sustainable peace at the local level.
This maternal care under difficult circumstances and/or in conflict situations may have also roots in the common biology of women. In a study conducted by UCLA on stress reaction in men and women, researchers found that when women experience increasing levels of stress their auto-reaction is to “tend and befriend,” due to increased oxytocin levels; whereas in men, stress prompts the release of adrenaline, prompting the “fight or flight” response (Taylor, 2006, p.273). In other words, when women are “under fire” they will look to make sure everyone is present and safe—a basic foundation of the ethos of care. This care is a major catalyst in women becoming involved in peacebuilding at the grassroots and, more recently, at the national level, and has implications for subsequent generations’ commitment to peace and stability.

2.1.2. Relationship Building

A key strength of women’s religious peacebuilding is the ability of women to form relationships that serve as bridges for positive change in society. Indeed, women in post-conflict situations have formed and leveraged relationships across seemingly irreconcilable differences and socio-cultural barriers in order to affect stability and peace on the ground. The women who take on this role are known as “center women” or “bridge leaders,” and they use networks to build a sense of community and common value. These networks and their “bridge leaders” can serve a variety of functions according to the societal context. Given a conflict situation, the network can be leveraged for peacebuilding; given a government policy concern, the network can be leveraged as a political force; etc. Through these networks and their leaders, women utilize the core skills they obtain in community building and networking for “effective public sphere leadership” (Stall & Stoecker, 1998, p.744).

Networks, especially when comprised exclusively of women, can be empowering for women at the grassroots level. Research shows that women often “develop a collectivist orientation” and “learn a morality of responsibility connected to relationships” (Stall & Stoecker, 1998, p.739). These relationships can grow strong and deep very quickly; studies have shown that in single gender situations, women tend to be more direct, not hesitating in making connections or offering forth personal information (Matlin, 1987, p. 180, 196). This sincerity and honesty can often be an advantage in negotiating conflict situations or post-conflict development, as those on the outside often respect this openness. This quality, combined with the findings of psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen, shows that women “express anger less directly and propose compromises more often,” positioning women’s networks as solid platforms from which to tackle conflict and post-conflict issues (Anderlini, 2007, p.81). Indeed, studies show that whereas the guiding principle for men in conflict is justice, the guiding principle for women is the preservation and building of relationships (Blumberg, Hare, & Costin, 2006, p.40-41).

2.1.3. Nonverbal Gender Communication

Although it is infrequently mentioned in the field of women’s peacebuilding, the implications of nonverbal gender communication are significant. The way in which women differ from men in their nonverbal communication style—using both innate and learned traits—affects the level of congeniality within relationships. Research shows that women tend to gaze or look their conversation partner in the face, and that people in general tend to gaze at women more than men, meaning that two women in conversation make frequent eye contact, whereas two men in conversation rarely look at one another (Matlin, 1987, p.183).
Similarly, women statistically smile more often when in conversation, which psychologically has been known to trigger a desire for competent and congenial action in the recipient, both male and female (this has implication on a larger scale, as studies show that an increase in the presence of women “has a pacifying influence on international relations”. [Blumberg, Hare, & Costin, 2006, p. 40]). In addition, women—when on the receiving end of nonverbal communication—are excellent at decoding the true meaning of the expression or action. In studies, women were better decoders in 106 out of the 133 gender comparisons, speaking to a significant advantage in strategic interaction with diverse individuals (Matlin, 1987, p. 183-85)—an advantageous skill especially in conflict and post-conflict situations.

Interestingly, these nonverbal communication skills and abilities may have very little to do with the make-up of an individual’s X and Y chromosomes, but rather may be the result of learned behavior. Girls are often told or encouraged when they are younger to be congenial or “to put a smile on your face.” Men are often berated for such things as feminine hand gestures, causing men and women to adopt “feminine” and “masculine” specific nonverbal communication traits. The interesting implication is that it is theoretically possible for these “feminine” traits and abilities to be learned and adopted by men (Matlin, 1987, p. 188).

2.1.4. Gender Access

The perception that women are naturally peaceful—although this is not necessarily imprinted on their genetic code—can, at times, provide unique access to situations and individuals not open to their male counterparts (Pankhurst, 2000). For example, a woman can have “unique access to those in power, through social or personal connections,” with this access typically playing out behind the scenes (Manchanda, 2005, p. 4743). This unique, nuanced access to those in leadership, to various markets, and to religious communities, provides a strategic network for quickly spreading messages and information, promoting the cause of peacebuilding and security on the ground (Schirch, 2004). Unlike traditional views of heroism in conflict and warfare, women tend to perform heroic works behind-the-scenes over a longer period of time. This provides the necessary advocacy and message building for sustainable peace on the ground (Matlin, 1987, p. 191).

The combination of these gender-specific skills and access presents a strategic element all too often missing from local, national, and international peace processes. Indeed, the power of women’s unique knowledge and intuition on the process of building peace and security around the world could have substantial and far-reaching implications for the way in which individuals, people groups, and governments relate and interact with one another. B. The impact of religious belief on women’s pursuit of peace

As it is common for religion to be a rallying cry for groups in conflict (reassuring those who fight that their actions are just, for God is on their side), it serves to reason that religion needs to be equally included in activities that build peace—in other words, it’s difficult to combat the ideology of a religious cause with a secular one; rather, one must “fight fire with fire” in order to create a balanced perspective. When religion is infused as a motivation for peacebuilding endeavors, according to Stephen R. Goodwin, a lecturer specializing in religion and reconciliation at Marmara University in Istanbul, it serves a positive role in society—from the formation of common values and identity, to promotion of concepts of ethics and inherent human worth, and finally to the formation of leadership within supportive and sustainable networks (Goodwin, 2006).

In October of 2010, women practitioners and scholars from over 20 countries met in Nicosia,
Cyprus to examine how they could further use their faith to build peace, working from their positions of leadership within their communities. The group determined that an essential element of integrating religion into women’s peacebuilding was to encourage women to read and pursue scholarship on religious doctrine and hermeneutics, practicing their own exegesis when necessary. For many of the women, this made all the difference, and it proved to be “crucial to their emancipation” and leadership in the peace movement. In this way, women could find motivation in their religious beliefs, and break free from the restrictions of their societal contexts—restrictions that often were more a reflection of local culture rather than religious precepts (Francis, 2010). When women took the initiative to explore their faith for themselves, they found that the difference between what they were told and what they were reading was significant enough to spur them on in peace, and into a relationship with the “other” (Women Peacemakers Program, 2010). As Daisy Khan, Executive Director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement, poignantly stated, “Faith has compelled me to assertively and unapologetically pursue peace and justice, both as an empowered woman to secure women’s human rights and as an active citizen for the betterment of society and humanity” (Khan, 2008).

In regions of ongoing conflict within the Middle East, in the midst of physical borders and checkpoints, and theological and political barriers, women have come up with new ways of practicing time-tested reconciliation efforts in order to connect on both a social and spiritual level. Once these networks are in place, characteristically, they stay in place. In a region where hope is all too often dashed by extremism, political downfalls, and military brutality, women see these groups as a sign—a sign that peace between culturally and theologically diverse peoples is possible, despite what those around them may say. Within different contexts the practice of women’s religious peacebuilding takes on different “clothes,” sometimes existing within education, sometimes within civil service, sometimes through advocacy movements, and sometimes as a result of military service. The challenge of seeing all of this through a religious lens is that now women must learn to use the theological tools that once were used to build the barriers between them, to now build bridges—seemingly beating their proverbial swords into plowshares [Isaiah 2:4].

3. Critical Societal, Political, and Military Challenges Facing Women’s Religious Peacebuilding in the Region Today

3.1. Case Studies: Practice of Women’s Religious Peacebuilding Within Contexts of the Middle East

Nowhere is the practice of women’s religious peacebuilding more polarized and complex than in the Middle East—the region that gave birth to the world’s three major religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The following case studies conducted over the course of a year (2010-2011) explore the manifestation and dynamics of women’s religious peacebuilding within this context, specifically in the countries of Israel-Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria.

3.1.1. Israel-Palestine

The women’s groups that perhaps face the greatest challenge for reconciliation are those in Israel-Palestine. The growth of the women’s peacebuilding movement in Israel-Palestine gained momentum during the early 1980s, when women lobbied for peace as a result of the Israeli invasion into Lebanon. This movement gave birth to dozens of women’s groups that called for peace and an end to occu-
pation of Palestinian land. Most notably, a group of women banded together to create the protest organization “Women in Black” (Coward, 2004, p. 171) in 1988. Five years later, the Jerusalem Link was formed—a coalition between two organizational bodies, Bat Shalom and Markaz al-Quds al-Nisā (The Jerusalem Center for Women) (Anderlini, 2007, p. 85). The Jerusalem Link brought together Israeli and Palestinian women for peacebuilding activities that celebrated women’s religious traditions, and served as a strong social and political voice for peace (Bat Shalom, About). Since then, a number of women’s religious peace groups have come to the forefront of the peace movement.

Although these groups always face challenges, they have encountered new and unique ways of banding closer together to fight the cultural and religious barriers that threaten to separate them. According to Dr. Gili Zivan, Assistant Director at the Yaacov Herzog Center for Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, religious women need to look within their own religious sects for reconciliation and peace before they can reach outward into a multi-faith environment. If women are able to see the many faces of their own religion, it then becomes easier to see the different faces that exist in other religions (G. Zivan, personal communication, November 11, 2010).

Today, greater divisions than ever before exist within the Jewish community in Israel—separated into ultra-orthodox, orthodox, conservative, and reformed groups. Observing these divisions, Dr. Zivan has developed “The Many Faces of Judaism,” an innovative study and dialogue project that examines and promotes Jewish pluralism. Through this project, once a week, 60 individuals from the orthodox, conservative, and reformed streams in Jerusalem gather at the Yaacov Herzog Center for dialogue. In the beginning, this intra-faith dialogue prompted a negative reaction from local Rabbis, claiming that the groups would try and “convert” each other to their way of living, and that discussions of this kind should be left to those with more intellectual prowess. However, upon invitation, several of these Rabbis sat in on the sessions, and at the end many cited the program as valuable to Judaism (G. Zivan, personal communication, November 11, 2010).

At the same time, there are women’s groups in Israel that do innovative women’s religious peace-building from a multi-faith framework. Elana Rozenman started Trust Emun in 2006, in an effort to bring together multi-faith women for peace. The organization regularly partners with Palestinian organizations and multi-faith groups throughout the region (Trust Emun, About). Trust Emun offers innovative ways for women to find common ground, pulling themes—often from nature and the environment—as a rallying point for Israeli and Palestinian women who have experienced the hurt and loss of violent conflict. When asked “Why nature?”, Elana replies, “In a few years, we are going to end up in such a drought in this region that none of the rest of the conflict is going to matter” (E. Rozenman, personal communication, November 11, 2010). Elana is not alone in this thinking, Dr. Dina Feldman, a former clinical psychologist with Israeli Defense Forces, agrees, “I would invest most in environmental issues. When you explore environmental issues, you realize how much we are the same, and in the same situation. Also, most of the problems that I saw during my time with the Commission on Human Rights were about the impact of the environment on soldiers” (D. Feldman, personal communication, November 12, 2010). Caring for the environment becomes a way that diverse women can work toward the common good, for both their neighbors and their own families.

Engaging this issue, Trust Emun conducted a “Women’s Walk and Blessing for Rain” on 23 November 2010 with over 40 women, as away of finding multi-faith solidarity amidst an environmental struggle that has and continues to affect the majority of the region. For Elana and the women of Trust Emun, women’s religious dialogue offers an environment where women have the opportunity to find their voice, where women can share intimate thoughts, beliefs, and ideas without feeling inhibited by
the presence of men. She sees this dialogue as a necessary step in bringing women to the table, and a foundational element of a sustainable peace (E. Rozenman, personal communication, November 11, 2010).

Despite some positive results, there are dissenting voices from women and men who have become disillusioned by women’s religious peacebuilding endeavors in Israel-Palestine. Although they see the ancillary benefits of dialogue between religious women, these individuals argue that there is limited impact on the conflict at large. In a conversation with Dr. Deborah Weissman, President of the International Council of Christians and Jews, founding member of Kehillat Yedidya Synagogue, and a past participant in women’s peacebuilding dialogue endeavors, she stated:

Women’s dialogue is nice, but it’s not necessarily effective. The women can go off and have their own wonderful dialogue, and we’ve done that. A few years ago it occurred to me that most of the decision makers in this region were men. Twenty-one years ago, I participated in a women’s dialogue where at the end we came up with a statement, which was basically the two-state solution. If any of us had been in positions of power and were able to push this forward, we could have saved thousands of human lives. But who are we? We’re women—who cares! Separate dialogue does the women a lot of good, but I’m not sure it does the peace process any good. (D. Weissman, personal communication, November 10, 2010)

Although this perspective is not always one that women’s groups prefer to hear, Dr. Weissman isn’t alone in her assessment of the effects of women’s religious peacebuilding. Her counterparts, like Sharon Rosen, co-Director of the Search for Common Ground’s Jerusalem office, shares her frustration with the lack of integration of women’s religious peacebuilding into mainstream peacebuilding efforts. In a recent conversation, Rosen expressed her appreciation of women’s religious peacebuilding as a “jumping off point” for women seeking to get more involved in the peace process, but also expressed disappointment at these groups’ lack of involvement in political reform—stating that significant change and peace in our lifetime will only come through reform at the political level (S. Rosen, personal communication, November 19, 2010).

The complexity of Israel-Palestine and the conflict that exists there makes comprehensive peace-building difficult. Grassroots individuals and groups can gather and effect change at the local level, but find that few people beyond recognize that peace without a formal agreement. Political deals can be struck at the national and international level, but without buy-in from the people on the ground, the peace will not be sustainable. The work of women’s religious peacebuilding groups in Israel-Palestine must move to further span this spectrum, having a voice not only at the local level, but also obtaining a “seat at the table” in national and international level negotiations.

3.1.2. Lebanon

With the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1997, the women’s rights movement in Lebanon began a time of unprecedented growth, as women’s groups felt the benefit of a formal recognition of the importance of their work within greater society. Nine years later the government reported in 2006, that they had initiated efforts to include women in “peacebuilding, decision-making, development and the rehabilitation process” through work with ten villages in southern Lebanon affected by the war with Israel in July and August of that year. In addition, the government reported that they had supported the formation of a project entitled Women Empowerment: Peaceful Action for Security and Stability (WEPASS), a joint collaboration between the UN Population Fund and the National Commission for Lebanese
Women. This project served to enact objectives contained in UN Resolution 1325 in regions that had experienced ongoing conflict in Lebanon (Coalition of Quality without Reservation, Lebanon).

Since ratification of CEDAW, Lebanon has seen the rise and strengthening of several women’s organizations working for women’s rights and reconciliation: Lebanese Association for Combating Violence Against Women, the Committee for the Political Rights of Women, the Lebanese Women’s Council, the Lebanese Association of Women Lawyers, and the Council for Lebanese Women’s Organizations. These organizations are by nature multi-faith, organizing around the greater principle of women’s empowerment, due to religious restrictions that at times rob women of equal rights. The country recognizes 19 different religious groups, that have autonomy to hold their own religious law—which weakens organizational efforts to lobby to the central government for their rights. Many efforts have been made to appeal this system and establish a common law to the country, but have since failed. Under this system, groups that work for women’s empowerment have seen many struggles and challenges in their work toward a more progressive Lebanon (Coalition of Quality without Reservation, Lebanon).

Yet the unique dynamic of Lebanon—separated into religious factions under the same national umbrella—opens a door of opportunity for women who work through a faith-based framework for empowerment and peace, some would argue utilizing the system instead of fighting against it. Together diverse women examine issues that affect women nationally. For example, the Forum for Development, Culture, and Dialogue based in Beirut recently sponsored programming for religiously-diverse women which explored the concept of citizenship—its meaning, its promotion through civil service activities, and equality of citizenship among diverse faith groups. As stated by the organization’s Director, Dr. Riad Jarjour, “Religion isn’t the problem. People are the problem.” Once programs create an environment that is not focused on individual women’s religious differences, they can enter into safe relationship with one another for a common goal and purpose. Once this has been established, women can begin to dig deeper into their spiritual beliefs and background and have a firm foundation of friendship and common purpose to steady them (R. Jarjour, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

In the same strain, the René Moawad Foundation conducts programming for religiously diverse women in the north of the country, also not focusing on religious diversity as the strategic point of meeting, but rather encouraging women to work toward a common objective that builds their capacity. Through these activities the organization has found that there develops opportunities for multi-faith dialogue (R. Moawad, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

This process of exposure before multi-faith education is a running theme in Lebanon among women’s peacebuilding groups. In a conversation with Elissar Douaihy, Training and Mobilization Coordinator for the WEPASS project, a clinical psychologist, and a practicing Christian, she stated that the problem on the ground among religiously-diverse women is that women do not know the core of their religion, and because of this they can be easily swayed. If they have strong examples of women whom they respect, and that are willing to enter into multi-faith partnerships, they will be more willing to as well. By building the capacities of these women—gaining them access to municipalities and decision-making mechanisms—they can be sensitized to tolerance. Women typically participate and/or support violence and extremism because they do not have these capacities (E. Douaihy, personal communication, October 28, 2010).

The situation of women’s religious peacebuilding in Lebanon is one of uncertainty. Although women are seen as important to the peace process, gendered meanings of peacebuilding are still
largely misunderstood among the general population and at the national level (Blumberg, Hare, and Costin, 2006, p. 40).

3.1.3. Syria

The women’s movement in Syria—a country that is over 74% Sunni Muslim, and only 10% Christian—has had a long and arduous childhood. Not until 1968, with the formation of the General Women’s Union under the Ba’ath Party, did women’s civic participation in the country gain attention and a place as a legitimate force in the public square (Central Intelligence Agency, 2011) (shortly after, in 1973, the Syrian constitution was ratified, specifically delineating the removal of barriers for women to participate in the construction of the socialist Arab state). In limited ways, the general Women’s Union has served to improve the status of women in Syria—encouraging government policies that have focused on the issues of education, professional equal opportunity, and family planning. This has improved women’s literacy from 48% to 74% over the course of 12 years, buttressing the number of women who are economically active, and increasing the number of women who utilize contraception and family planning services. Despite this seeming progress, the ability of women to advocate for their rights is greatly hindered by socio-cultural norms, as well as the penal and personal status codes imposed specifically upon women. Although there are groups who advocate for women’s rights in the country, they face great restrictions (Bellafron, 2004).

Lana Antaki—a former board member and trainer for Al Moubadara Al Nissa’yeh (The Women’s Initiative), an organization that until recently existed as a Syrian NGO working in defense of women’s rights in Damascus—detailed the challenges that women’s organizations face in Syria. Unlike in the West or other countries in the region where women enjoy significant autonomy and the ability to participate and organize around social justice causes and issues like peacebuilding, Syrian women are still in the midst of emancipation. At present, the General Women’s Union is the only women’s group that is registered and recognized by the government, receiving their mandate from the Ba’ath party. All NGOs in Syria are required to be registered with the government, and their meetings must be approved in advance, or they are not allowed to take place. Not surprisingly, women’s organizations are extremely limited. According to Ms. Antaki, there are currently seven organizations doing work for women’s empowerment in Syria (2 Muslim, 5 secular), although all lack government recognition, and subsequently have limited to no programming, existing only as research institutions. In the case of Al Moubadara Al Nissa’yeh—Antaki’s organization that started in 2002 and was registered for three years with the government—it has lost its registration, run into trouble with the Ministry of Social Affairs, and been denied permission to work in the field. Today those involved in the organization exist as private consultants, offering their expertise through concentrated research (L. Antaki, personal communication, November 1, 2010).

Despite the seemingly dire context in which women’s organizations in Syria exist, there is hope for future development. According to Antaki, although progress in Syria has characteristically come slowly, “Syria is beginning to see some change…we’re starting to see a real civil society, in charities, in literature, in culture/lectures, but to a large extent these things are still largely confined, compared to the modern world. Change here is slow; it doesn’t happen overnight. It can take 15 to 20 years to see the effects of these programs.” Until that time comes, Antaki and her colleagues continue to work independently on issues of early marriage, education, health, and political reform, utilizing the networks that exist between the women’s organizations in Syria and organizations in surrounding countries like Jordan (i.e., Women’s Jordanian Union) and Egypt, to garner support and to provide a
venue for some cross-cultural and cross-geographical exposure (L. Antaki, personal communication, November 1, 2010).

Further north in Syria, there are organizations and institutions, like the Al-Andaluse Institute led by Dr. Rufaida Al-Habash in Hama, pushing forward women’s empowerment and involvement in social justice issues and peacebuilding by working through an educational and religious framework. The Institute exists as a school that serves to educate women in Islamic Studies, often integrating diverse religious perspectives and international exchange with global organizations. Although the majority of the students are Sunni Muslim, the Institute is open to and has worked with Ismaili and Shiite women. In many ways, the Institute is paving the way forward in a region where pluralism and peace has historically not been present (in February of 1982 the town of Hama was bombed by the Syrian army due to a revolt by the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist global movement). The Institute encourages women to explore the meaning of the Qur’an for themselves, promoting the motto and urging of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH to “revive your religion.” The students of the Institute often graduate to become the teachers at the Institute, promoting these progressive values to the next generation of women in the region (R. Al-Habash, personal communication, November 2, 2010).

An example of the impact of the Institute is Dr. Habash’s own daughter, Sirin Hamsho—a graduate of the Institute and private Islamic lecturer and trainer working in Syria and France. To current knowledge, Ms. Hamsho is the first woman in the Islamic world who has successfully recorded her recitation of the Holy Qur’an from memory (soon to be released). She has participated in multi-faith forums, hosted her own TV show, and is pursuing graduate studies examining the dynamics of Islam and the West. During her time in Washington, D.C. in November of 2010, Ms. Hamsho expressed her desire that women in Syria would know more about how the Qur’an calls them to be active participants in their faith and their world. In many ways, Ms. Hamsho represents the beginning of a generation that has gained enough awareness of their own faith to constructively and positively engage the global community with respect and understanding (S. Hamsho, personal communication, November 16, 2010).

3.2. Gender Stereotypes

Within the context of Israel-Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon, there are certain stereotypes regarding women’s involvement in peacebuilding. Perhaps the most common and most frequently heard stereotype when talking about women’s religious peacebuilding is the inherent peacefulness granted solely to women. In a discussion about the benefits of women’s dialogue and peacebuilding activities, Dr. Riad Jarjour stated “women are more peaceful, which is why they should be given a voice.” Yet it is statements like this, that have recently caused dissention between mainstream organizations that conduct peacebuilding and dialogue, and individuals and organizations that conduct similar programs exclusively for women (R. Jarjour, personal communication, October 27, 2010). Dr. Stolov, Director of the Interfaith Encounter Association in Jerusalem, finds difficultly with the statement that women are the sole possessors of peace. Instead, he feels that a balance between the “masculine” and “feminine” qualities of peace must be struck—peace cannot happen through only half of the population, which is why women need to be increasingly integrated into a process that historically has only been open to male leadership (Y. Stolov, personal communication, November 9, 2010).

When there is an unbalance of masculinity and femininity in peacebuilding endeavors, individuals who practice women’s religious peacebuilding, such as Elana Rozenman, claim that masculinity has a tendency to squelch and corrupt the peaceful nature of feminism, especially within a political
context. To combat this tendency, many promote exclusive groups for women, where dialogue and peacebuilding can occur away from men (E. Rozenman, personal communication, November 11, 2010). Scholars like Dr. Gili Zivan feel that programs like this simply “level the playing field,” and empower women so that they are then able to integrate into the mainstream peace movements and negotiations. But many of their male counterparts perceive these groups to be exclusionary, and feel unwelcome and/or uncomfortable with the idea of women’s-only peacebuilding and dialogue groups (G. Zivan, personal communication, November 11, 2010). Indeed, when asked, male practitioners state that they are ignorant of how women’s religious peacebuilding is different, and admit that they have not actively looked into the growing movement (R. Jarjour, personal communication, October 27, 2010; R. Moawad, personal communication, October 27, 2010; Y. Stolov, personal communication, November 9, 2010).

The stereotypes held regarding women’s religious peacebuilding in the region, are important to engage, for these stereotypes have an impact on the greater ability of women’s groups to operate, advocate, and integrate into the larger peace process, bringing the gendered and religious voice that is all too often missing.

3.3. Religious Women of Peace in Military Service

The stereotype that women are by nature more peaceful than men, presents certain challenges when considering women participation in the military and police units within the Middle East. These units are beginning to see an influx of not only women, but religious women (Cohen, 2007, p.314).

Although military units are often set up to respect religious affiliation and practice, the real outpouring of this faith during service, and its motivation for women to utilize military skills to defend rather than harm, is often lost on military units and fellow secular servicemen and women. “Most of the time the secular soldiers don’t understand or are not aware of your specific religious practice...sometimes it is easier to relate to Muslim women than it is to relate to Israeli secular soldiers,” states Dr. Dina Feldman. Indeed, the struggle between religious practice and military service can be delicate. Yet with a third of female high school graduates within the national-religious school system in Israel now electing to serve in military units in the IDF, efforts to harmonize theological beliefs with patriotic duty within the force have increased (Cohen, 2007, pp.316, 333-34).

For Dr. Dina Feldman, her identity as an orthodox Jew was more central in the initial stages of her service with the IDF, yet the more that she moved up in the ranks, the more that her identity as a woman mattered. This was further compounded when she had children, making her a “triple minority” among IDF servicepersons. In 1988, Dr. Feldman moved with her family to the United States. At this time she was an officer in the IDF forces. Although she and her husband were given the choice of living within an Orthodox community several cities away, they refused. They chose to live outside this community, and felt that for the first time that they were given the opportunity to learn about Arab people.

Dr. Feldman’s path to peacebuilding began during a lecture that she attended by Elie Wiesel during which a group of Palestinian Arab people came and sat behind their party. Feldman recounts, “I was scared to death. But when I realized that they were there to listen to Wiesel, when I realized that, my bones felt like they were on fire. How can I contribute to change it? When I got back to Israel, my high officer asked me what my next position would be. I told him that the only position I would accept was as a part of a team working for peace. They thought that I was crazy, because I was speaking of peace” (D. Feldman, personal communication, November 12, 2010).
What does Feldman suggest as a way of continuing the peace process? She states, “What is important is to let people meet, but at the same time, to work together on projects. Politicians are dominating the reality, and the grassroots do not have the opportunity to build a metric and develop a kind of other power. If I had never met my Arab friend Najeh, met her as a human person, what I would have in my mind? The images from movies, from what journalists are doing? She [my friend] may be very extreme, but she is a human being. The meeting is very important” (D. Feldman, personal communication, November 12, 2010).

Like Dr. Feldman, Inbal Avnon is a young woman soldier serving in a Nachal Gar’in unit, also having served as a combat soldier in the Karakal unit, patrolling the southern Israeli border. Today, she serves within the civil service sector of the military. Avnon describes the first time that she staffed a checkpoint and started to cry at the indignity with which she saw people being treated. The mentality that shaped her service there, and impacted her views toward peace, was that it was better for her to carry out military duties with a spirit of understanding than it would be for someone intent on doing them in a negative manner. Women have a significant advantage in this regard because of what Inbal terms a woman’s “emotional intelligence,” not entirely present in men, that allows women to “see and cope” in new ways. This emotional strength can be a powerful weapon. However, as Avnon states, “That’s not something they teach you. You have to develop it. For some, it’s relatively easy—for others, less easy. Behind every soldier in uniform is a soul. Courage is encountering a situation that is difficult in every way—physically, emotionally—and doing what you need to do, and doing it the best you can” (Melton, 2008, p.26).

Pulling from the same concept—that behind every soldier and serviceperson, is simply, a soul—Nadia Kanan, a captain in the Palestinian civil police force in Ramallah, claims that strength is in our minds: “When you feel God is with you, you feel strong.” It is this strength that has motivated Kanan to remain in the force even after experiencing a near fatal kidnapping by fellow Palestinians. Her belief in peace is rooted in the idea that “Israelis are like us,” in that they also have people within their population who desire peace, and that it is always possible to bring forth the good in someone by showing them goodness. Her faith combined with her feminism makes Kanan a rallying voice for women in Palestine. She represents a generation that believes in its ability to effect change, believes that women are stronger than they think, and believes that when united, women can do infinitely more than one person can imagine (Melton, 2008, p.130).

These women of faith represent a small and relatively unrecognized minority within military and police forces in the region, yet their perspective is infinitely valuable in looking at how peace is fostered in the cogs of conflict. Their abilities to pull concepts of peace, and their dedication to pursue it through their military service, provides a strong glimmer of hope for military reform in Israel-Palestine.

The critical societal, political, and military challenges facing women’s religious peacebuilding in the region today can at times seem insurmountable. Change and a movement toward peace, if history is any indicator, may come slowly, not only for the sector but for the region overall; yet, the diligence, patience, and faith with which women in the region approach conflict, signals a gradual “wearing away” of barriers, and could have significant impact for a sustainable peace between individuals and eventually nations.
4. Theological Trends that Buttress Involvement in Women’s Religious Peacebuilding

Theology and scripture significantly influence the actions of religious women working for peace in the region. The scriptures and theological principles that women utilize to justify and support their leadership and pursuit of empowerment and peace in the Middle East are varied, but engagement with the scriptures is often characterized by a lack of exegesis and hermeneutical diligence at the grassroots level. Women often pull from socio-religious principles of what is “good,” “true,” and/or “right” (which at times has a connection to scripture). The nature of these seemingly fluid principles provides a certain amount of freedom for women to craft their programs and endeavors according to the environment in which they work.

However, when women do engage in scriptural exegesis as an outpouring of peacebuilding, they often begin to view all scriptural text in relation to their religious “other.” As stated by Dr. Gili Zivan, “A person’s interpretation is just as important as actual scripture. The interpretation is what brings people together.” In the Jewish tradition, individuals study the text in a Beit Midrash, or “House of Interpretation;” the Hebrew word stems from the same root word as Madrassa, the name for Muslim schools for the study of the Qur’anic text. For the Jews, the Beit Midrash ensure that the words that are passed on in scripture remain “alive” through the people. Put another way, the text provides the avenue, but the people provide the legs that spread the message far and wide. For many women who practice peacebuilding from a religious framework, their tangible actions to build peace are an outpouring of the theology that they hold within, helping the religious “other” to understand their faith experientially (G. Zivan, personal communication, November 11, 2010).

The concept of peace within all three Abrahamic religions holds divine sanction in the minds of women peacebuilders in the region. An arching principle that many follow as peacemakers is: those who pursue peace honor God and will enjoy his blessing. Dr. Rufaida Al-Habash from the Al-Andaluse Institute in Syria pulls motivation from the Surah Al Hadith, reading that God has promised the one who believes and does good deeds a life of strength—He will overcome the fear that is inside them and replace it with security and peace, to the extent that they serve and follow Him. Many Muslims view this principle as true not only for Muslims, but for all who honor the true God, al-Kitab, “the People of the Book,” Muslims, Christians, and Jews (R. Al-Habash, personal communication, November 2, 2010).

Interestingly, the concept of the “Image of God” is just as powerful within all three Abrahamic traditions. In a conversation with Sheikha Ghina Hammoud, Director of the Al Ghina Islamic Center in south Beirut, the idea that God created human beings and sustains them is an important element of belief, and is mentioned in the hadith (G. Hammoud, personal communication, October 28, 2010). This belief that one should protect and love those made in the image of God in order to honor God is also common in Christianity, and motivates Christian women like Elissar Douaihy, who states, “this is what Jesus said. This is the real thing and everything else is wrong” (E. Douaihy, personal communication, October 28, 2010).

To a certain extent caring for all people—whether al-Kitab or those made in the image of God—precludes specific theological differences, and allows women to find common ground at the most basic level of human existence—simply, life. Dr. Weissman attributes this concept to the first chapter in the Torah, Bereishit—the Christian book of Genesis. This passage tells how all human beings, male and female, are created in the image of God. According to Dr. Weissman, anything
that cares for or enhances human dignity enhances the image of God and should be taken seriously by all religious people; human dignity calls us to peace with one another (D. Weissman, personal communication, November 10, 2010).

According to the three Abrahamic religions, seeking the destruction of those made in the image of God warrants divine punishment of the persecutor in the afterlife. The idea of justice, if not in this life then in the next, motivates people of faith to move past irreconcilable differences and seek to respect and understand the “other.” Sheikha Hammoud specifically mentions this principle in relation to her work, stating that our actions will in essence “meet us” in the other world/life. We will “meet” our work, and it will tell us whether our pursuits were good or bad (G. Hammoud, personal communication, October 28, 2010). Dr. Al-Habash echoes this statement by citing Surah al Kehib “The Gate” in the Qur’anic text, which details that the people, men and women, who believe and do good deeds will have the highest position in paradise. Their behavior toward one another, in their actions, in their motivations, determines their situation in eternity (R. Al-Habash, personal communication, November 2, 2010).

Are there passages or theological principles that speak specifically to women in their role as peacemakers? Interestingly, this is not a primary concern for women doing peacebuilding at the grassroots level in the region. Of superior importance is finding passages within their religious scripture that serve not to set them apart as unique or different, but to equalize their abilities and status with that of men. For Dr. Weissman this means blending Halakhah, or Jewish law, with principles of feminism. “Jewish law has never been static; it has always been dynamic. It may have developed slowly, but it still developed. We have come to a place where women are able to become scholars; the law changed to meet the changing needs of society,” states Weissman, who believes that within our religious traditions we must constantly be innovative and develop new ways of men and women relating to one another (D. Weissman, personal communication, November 10, 2010). For women of faith who work to build peace at the local level, this means determining how to integrate the effective programs with women into more mainstream advocacy efforts that include men and serve the entire population.

5. Societal Elements that Cause Women to Identify with a Religious Struggle, as Opposed to a National Struggle, in Regions of Ongoing Conflict

In the February 25, 2010 issue of The Economist, Near East Consulting, a leading West Bank pollster reported that women in the Palestinian Territories are beginning to identify more with a religious struggle than with a national one (Can the Islamist tide be turned?, 2010). Given the rising attention to women’s peacebuilding done from a religious framework in Israel-Palestine, it is prudent to examine to what extent this trend exists in other areas of the Middle East.

In a region where the voice of religious leadership holds significant weight at the local level, and often at the national “table,” it appears logical that women would work through the religious system in order to effect greater change for peace. In many ways, this has shown itself to be true, as with the orthodox and conservative Jewish communities in Israel, in which women are finding that increased knowledge of the Torah scriptures gives them a voice, which was previously not possible (G. Zivan, personal communication, November 11, 2010).

Strengthening religious knowledge also seemingly provides a stronger sense of identity for women...
doing peacebuilding in the region; whereas, previously, this “demarcated” identity would have ostracized women from one another—today it serves as a bridge (E. Douaihy, personal communication, October 28, 2010). Those who are diligent in understanding their religious tradition and faithful in its practice are increasingly identified by women religious peacebuilders on the ground as “al-Kitab,” or People of the Book. This calls into action the tenets of scripture from all Abrahamic traditions that require practitioners to respect and defend those within this tri-belief circle that also seek peace.

In addition, rallying behind a religious cause, as opposed to a national cause, allows those at the grassroots level to reclaim the peace process from politicians and secular government bureaucrats, who have led and often failed in their attempts to create sustainable peace. Diplomacy that happens at the national level between political figures often fails to reflect the situation and the perspectives of the people on the ground. Politics is becoming ineffective, so people turn to something that is bigger and more personal: faith.

5.1. A New Vocabulary for Peace

Building peace from a religious framework allows women to integrate the values and principles of their communities into the objectives and goals of peace. This shift in focus from a secular peace to a religious peace, built through strategic relational diplomacy among citizens, between citizens and their clergy, and between citizens and their government, has precipitated the creation of a new peace lexicon—one that incorporates religious principles and strives to counteract the negative connotations of previously used vocabulary.

The most basic term, “peace,” brings with it problems. After multiple “peace” processes that only brought increased conflict, people at the grassroots level have begun to shy away from this word, seeing past and current “peace” deals as intrinsically unfair to certain people groups—not bringing true peace to all. “‘Peace’ is a very big word,” states Inbal Avnon, “the truth is that I once thought it would be a lot easier” (Cohen, 2007, p. 26). Indeed, as Sheikha Hammoud explains, “In the Qur’an, we can’t speak about peace. Maybe I make peace with you, but I still hate you. In Islam, we must love all the people of God; and not only accept peace. Peace isn’t the most wonderful thing in the world, because often under the peace, there is something else.” Instead, the Sheikha uses the word love, emphasizing that true peace will only come when we love the “other” as much as we love ourselves (G. Hammoud, personal communication, October 28, 2010). Similarly, for individuals who have dedicated their life to multi-faith dialogue, such as Dr. Yehuda Stolov, “love is the essence of peace” (Y. Stolov, personal communication, November 9, 2010).

If love is the essence of true peace, then for Dr. Stolov, care is the foundation for love; respect for the other is no longer enough. Respect gives the impression of being “removed” or theoretical, but it is not practical or actionable in ways that support people and make a difference in their lives. Perhaps, as Dr. Stolov posits, it is better that the region has not yet known a peace agreement, because the agreement would not yet reflect the true situation on the ground; it would be an empty peace—with no love between people groups, where false respect cloaks those who could care less for their neighbor (Y. Stolov, personal communication, November 9, 2010). For individuals like Dr. Stolov and Elana Rozenman, the connotations of the word “dialogue” can be negative for their participants due to the connection of the act of dialogue within formal processes at the national level—processes that have so often failed to result in real peace. Instead, they often utilize the word “share,” as a positive alternative. To share means to freely give information but it also often means the giving/showing of emotion, access, and resources—things which infuse the basic information
about the “other” with meaning and purpose. As stated by Rozenman, “Dialogue doesn’t matter unless the human relationships are really there…we’ve already seen what happens when you just sign a piece of paper” (E. Rozenman, personal communication, November 11, 2010).

Two additional terms that can have negative connotations for women and their communities are “empower” and “support”—terms that at face value are fairly neutral, but when applied to women’s religious peacebuilding, can create barriers. According to Elissar Douaihy, the term “empower” often spurs dissension in the community, especially from men who misinterpret this word to mean “raising women above men.” In many patriarchal communities throughout the Middle East, this misinterpretation prompts negative reactions against programs that are meant to create equal, not necessarily superior, opportunities for women. To improve this often ambiguous term, Douaihy suggests using “equally empower” when referring to women’s empowerment, especially in acts of service or peacebuilding (E. Douaihy, personal communication, October 28, 2010).

Finally, the term “support,” when used in reference to sponsoring Western or international NGOs carrying out peacebuilding programs in the region, has recently begun to carry a negative connotation as well. Dina Feldman says the word “support” often means only monetary investment. As an alternative, Dr. Feldman prefers the term “facilitate” for Western or international NGOs carrying out peacebuilding programs. It is an active verb, and it implies not only monetary support, but also the significant investment of time and human capital toward the process (D. Feldman, personal communication, November 12, 2010).

5.2. Current Societal and Political Implications of Pursuing Peacebuilding as an Outpouring of Religious Belief

The social and political implications of pursuing peace at the local level as an outpouring of women’s faith is gaining increasingly positive recognition. These implications are especially clear in areas of Lebanon and Israel-Palestine, where women’s groups have been looking at innovative ways of bringing women of faith together for the betterment of the community through civil service activities, microenterprise endeavors, or environmental programs. For example, Dr. Riad Jarjour, Director of the Forum for Development, Culture, and Dialogue in Beirut, detailed an occurrence involving religious women and a microenterprise food production and marketing initiative in a Palestinian village called al-Hamra. The mayor of the municipality in this village was also a sheikh, but unfortunately was very corrupt. During the next municipality election, the women involved in FDCD’s program banded together and lobbied to kick the mayor out of office, electing a new one. In a Muslim-majority area, they were able to kick out a sheikh, garnering the positive support of the community. Their success was in part due to the positive contributions of the FDCD’s program (R. Jarjour, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

The unfortunate dynamic is that religious and gender issues are often used as political playing cards that are dealt and played according to popular opinion in countries in the Middle East. As long as peacebuilding initiatives serve a “promotional” purpose, they are tolerated and even supported, but if they become too progressive or too reconciliatory with the “other,” they are shut down or inhibited. Lana Antaki’s organization Al Moubadara Al Nissa’yeh (The Women’s Initiative) was denied permission to operate as a nonprofit in Syria because they became too vocal for women’s rights on the political scene, promoting civil law. Elana Rozenman, during her service with the Interfaith Encounter Association in early 2000, developed a Women’s Coalition for the Environment,
working across cultural and religious barriers in Israel-Palestine to focus on issues of drought in the region. Unfortunately, this activity was shut down by the government when the second intifada broke out in September of 2000. And finally, the Al-Andaluse Institute (an all-women’s religious college in Hama, Syria) faced limitations to its programming after they co-sponsored a conference on reconciliation between Muslims and Christians with an American nonprofit organization (L. Antaki, personal communication, November 1, 2010; E. Rozenman, personal communication, November 11, 2010; R. Al-Habash, personal communication, November 2, 2010).

The societal elements that precipitate women identifying with a religious cause or struggle as opposed to one that is connected to a political or national identity are both vast and varied, but without a doubt this identification is changing the way in which women pursue peace in their thoughts, words, and deeds.

6. Methods Being Used by Practitioners to Promote Peace and Recruit Future Generations of Women Religious Peacebuilders

During the International Center for Research on Women’s Celebration of International Women’s Day on 8 March 2011, a panel discussion was held featuring four private sector and corporate leaders who have revolutionized the way in which women are empowered throughout the world. Interestingly their programs didn’t focus on the invention of programs but rather emphasized the benefit of utilizing old methods of programming, in new ways. Women religious peacebuilders in the Middle East are currently under the same impression—that change and progress does have to mean “reinventing the wheel,” but rather redirecting the processes that contribute to peace and security.

Perhaps the most prominent and popular method of peacebuilding among women of faith, is that of dialogue (or methods of “sharing” as mentioned in the previous section). This time-tested method has been improved upon by women at the local level, through lessons learned from previously failed attempts at dialogue between diverse religious women. The first re-direction of dialogue is endeavors at relationship-building prior to dialogue sessions. Dina Feldman suggests that when dialogue facilitators reach out to potential participants to build relationships, and furthermore, demonstrate multi-faith cooperation with one another in their facilitation, women gain the mental preparation and trust they require in order to enter into multi-faith dialogue sessions.

In addition to the aforementioned, Dina offers some quality advice on the boundaries and direction of dialogue for women’s religious peacebuilding. Attention to the diversity of the group is paramount, as bringing together highly educated women and those who have not had the opportunity or desire to pursue academic or professional pursuits, can be too much of a disconnect to bridge in one session. In addition, explaining prior to the session the things which intrinsically devalue one or both parties, provides a healthy baseline for discussion, and sets the awareness level and tone for future interaction. Finally, Dina urges facilitators to allow participants to work at their own pace, not forcing them into familiarity or commonality before they are willing, which can come off as patronizing, especially considering that these individuals live in the midst of the conflict, day-in and day-out (D. Feldman, personal communication, November 12, 2010).

As individuals building peace from a religious framework, Dr. Jarjour feels it is necessary to be concerned with what he calls “the dialogue of everyday life.” How and when people communicate with one another in their daily interaction makes a huge difference in the normalization of peace, and since religion plays such a significant role in how people live out their daily lives, he encourages
organizations to infuse their peacebuilding ideologies with theological principles not political ones, buttressed with the support of religious leadership (Dr. Jarjour specifically mentions Dr. Rufaida’s work in Syria as effective in this method) (R. Jarjour, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

“The Qur’an teaches us how to communicate with one another,” says Sheikha Hammoud, offering up story after story of real life situations directed by scriptural principles that focused on transparency and authenticity in both action and intention toward one’s religiously-diverse neighbor (G. Hammoud, personal communication, October 28, 2010). This focus on everyday communication infused with religious principle holds the promise for Dr. Stolov, who sees too many opportunities for dialogue to fade because people are too concerned about political differences, that they, in essence, have very little control over (Y. Stolov, personal communication, November 9, 2010).

In addition to dialogue sessions between multi-faith individuals, religious women like Elana Rozenman have begun to integrate innovative techniques of interaction involving visits to each other’s homes by physically and culturally taking participants across borders. Once there, women participate in a series of techniques such as: visualization—consciously picturing someone whom one trusts in one’s mind and seeing those characteristics in a diverse individual; listening exercise—forcing oneself to listen to the entire life story of a diverse individual before vocally responding; silence—performing acts of solidarity in the absence of dialogue, in a spirit of peace and tranquility; and, study—expanding women’s understanding of the religious laws that shape their traditions and subsequently, often their relationships with one another. These techniques discipline participants into thinking and seeing peace with the other in a new way—in a way that is intrinsically present within their religious tradition, and within their own identity (E. Rozenman, personal communication, November 11, 2010).

If this is the way, how do women of faith foster this in a new generation, to the extent that they carry this on? Elana Rozenman, Sheikha Hammoud, and Dr. Al-Habash believe the answer lies in mentorship. When current women of faith practicing peacebuilding in the field take the time to “teach the future teachers,” it makes a difference in ensuring that these methods are sustainable. Elana insists that within women’s religious peacebuilding, we “need to pull the older generations and younger generations of women together. Older generations will recount their experiences of Jews and Muslims living in peace together. Help the younger generations get a taste of what it was like before the conflict. Older generations can be a spiritual conduit of a time when there was peace” (G. Hammoud, personal communication, October 28, 2010; E. Rozenman, personal communication, November 11, 2010; R. Al-Habash, personal communication, November 2, 2010).

In addition, this mentorship can have a chain reaction. Taking the time to create vision and foster up future leaders for grassroots change, means that young women will also likely foster up leaders for change and peace within their own families, specifically among their children, discouraging extremism and violence against the “other.” Dr. Al-Habash takes the responsibility of mentorship seriously, having seen the positive change that is wrought in the women that attend her Institute in Hama, Syria—“I have the responsibility to calm the women and absorb their anger, and try to educate them all the time that this is not the good way, and if you do extremism, it will just bring destruction to you and your family and your country. To create this change, you have to follow the course of dialogue, and be calm, taking things in a wise way, and dealing with things in a wise way. And so we can feel that this generation is now somehow calmer toward their neighbor inside” (R. Al-Habash, personal communication, November 2, 2010).

Ironically, despite media stereotypes of women contributing their children to the forces of extremism and violence, many on the ground have found the opposite to be true, like author Sanam Naraghi
Anderlini, author of “Women Building Peace” and former Director of the Women Waging Peace Policy Commission from 2002 to 2005, during which she led unprecedented field research on women’s involvement in conflict prevention in twelve countries. Ms. Anderlini found that many mothers in the region actually “take measures to prevent their children’s involvement in violence, including marrying them off early” (Anderlini, 2007, p. 34). In fact, many mothers are alarmed to hear that their children have been participating in acts of violence and extremism, as was recounted in a story in Coward and Smith’s “Religion and Peacebuilding” (2004, p. 171), “Most Israelis had learned to ignore what was happening in the territories through the first twenty years of occupation, but with the outbreak of rebellion there, terrible stories began to surface. Now, on top of the twenty years of oppression, new episodes were revealed of the brutality of Israeli soldiers in trying to quell the uprising. These were ‘our sons,’ eighteen or nineteen years old, clubbing people and opening fire into crowds.” This realization that one’s children are taking life, can be the catalyst for women to forge ahead in peace.

The methods which these women religious peacebuilders utilize are not entirely new, but rather pull from the best of what peacebuilders have undertaken in the past, blended with the best that feminine characteristics and spiritual belief can offer. If as Plato said, “Necessity is indeed the mother of invention,” then mothers are certainly the inventors of innovative peacebuilding.

7. Key Recommendations of Engagement for Western NGOs Attempting to Collaborate with Women’s Religious Peacebuilding Initiatives in the Region

There is a joke about a journalist—he came to Israel-Palestine and after a week he had an idea for a book documenting the conflict. After spending a month there, he considered instead writing an article. After three months in the region he decided to go home, having written nothing. The moral of the story: the longer a person spends in the region, the more they begin to realize how complex it is; how the problems that exist take a lifetime to understand, if not longer. Therefore, when asking women and men religious peacebuilders about their critique of Western NGOs coming into the region and enacting programming, the foremost answer was “lack of understanding and humility.”

Western NGOs that frequently come into the region to enact new and innovative programs to build peace, or serve as mediation for conflicting groups in a specific area, are seen as coming with an air of superiority—from a land that knows peace, to a land that can’t seem to figure it out. Yet as is often the case, as quickly as many organizations come to the region, they leave—never building the necessary knowledge of culture, history, or dynamics on the ground, and only leaving projects and programs that have aided individuals in ancillary ways, but have done little to motivate people as peacemakers. In particular, secular organizations that enact programs in the region, often make little to no mention of the role of religion in the peace process, and reflect a tendency to de facto view religion as exclusively part of the problem, and not a vital component of the solution. In a region where religion isn’t just a practice or rite, but rather a way of life, this approach can be problematic. The solution? Practitioners like Dr. Deborah Weissman suggest that these practitioners should “come and learn,” continually coming back to the region (D. Weissman, personal communication, November 10, 2010).

Secondly, practitioners of women’s religious peacebuilding, like those at the Rene Moawad Foundation, suggest that western NGOs do their homework on the specificities and unique characteristics of the groups with which they will be working. As stated by Nabil Moawad, President of the Founda-
tion, “80% of our programs work with really grassroots individuals. Most western NGOs that come here want to work with well-educated women, but that is not the case. We work with women who are under-educated. And we work with women from many different cultural and religious backgrounds that westerners may not understand. Therefore, it’s better for a western NGO to go through a local NGO on the ground—that understand this work.” Knowing the social, academic, or civil status of an individual before engaging them in programming can help an organization better tailor their curriculum and training methodologies to the needs of the local population (R. Moawad, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

Finally, practitioners and scholars in the region suggest that western NGOs and foundations direct their funding toward building women’s rights in the region, instead of just buttressing activities that are “associated” with women or that women are notable stakeholders of, such as child literacy (L. Antaki, personal communication, November 1, 2010). Due to the sensitive nature of programs that promote women’s rights, especially in countries like Syria, it is of the upmost importance that foreign NGOs go through the proper government channels to gain the approval and support that is required. Programs that are enacted secretly or without the knowledge of the State can bring negative attention and consequences to local NGOs striving for the same cause in the region (R. Al-Habash, personal communication, November 2, 2010).

8. Conclusion

The infant-state of women’s religious peacebuilding—with its moving parts of gender, religion, peace, and security—means that it is still relatively weak in comparison to other forces, yet its potential growth and strength are great, given the right nourishment and care. As the world sees the effects of conflict and revolution within the Middle East and North Africa, the role of religious women who strive for peace in this region is coming into its own—precipitating real understanding and reconciliation in the midst of power struggles and empty agreements—ultimately, offering hope in the midst of despair.

The principles, challenges, trends, identities, methods, and recommendations presented in this paper serve as a “picture in time” of women’s religious peacebuilding, edifying the work that has been done, and serving to inform the work that will be done. The women who contribute to this effort are not only dedicated, but spiritually convicted to pursue this cause, investing not only their time and energy into peace, but their spiritual identity and practice as well as their feminine abilities and access. It is for this reason that women’s religious peacebuilding is both powerful and unique, promising to contribute a vital missing piece for sustainable peace and security in the region.
References


