UNRISD Research and Policy Brief 11

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Religion, Politics and Gender Equality

Contrary to modernist predictions that religion would retreat into a private zone of worship and practice, recent decades have seen religion become increasingly salient on the political stage worldwide. Does this matter? From the point of view of women's rights and gender equality, much is at stake. UNRISD research shows that politicized religion impinges on women's rights in problematic ways. The challenge to gender equality comes not just from fundamentalist agendas, but also from those who instrumentalize women's rights for political ends.

The Issue

While religious attachments and practices may have weakened in some geographical regions (most notably in Western Europe), on a global scale they seem to have persisted, if not intensified. Moreover, religious actors and movements have gained prominence on the political stage over the past three decades. This "de-privatization" of religion puts into question the prediction that sweeping secularization would be the inevitable companion to development (see box 2).

What are the social and political implications of religion assuming prominent and contested political roles? Has the spread of politicized religion made it harder for women to pursue equality with men?

Some observers see incompatibilities between democracy, human rights and gender equality, on the one hand, and a world in which religion plays an active role in public affairs, on the other.

Others ask whether it is useful to see religion as the nemesis of gender equality, and secularism as the precondition for it. Questioning the opposition between a "religious Right" and a "secular Left", they provide a more nuanced assessment that recognizes the need for greater attention to women's agency and engagement with religion in ways that may be empowering. Many observers now agree that banning religion from the public arena of citizen deliberation and association is problematic from a democratic point of view, and ultimately counter-productive. Some even argue that religion can be a counterweight to the institutions of the state and the market, revitalizing public debate on their workings and social implications.

In addition, where states have failed to deliver physical security, welfare provisioning or a sense of national belonging, faith-based groups have enjoyed a revival as they have rushed in to fill the gaps. The resilience of these groups, their ingenuity in substituting for state services (be it health, education or some minimal form of social protection) and their effectiveness in providing members with a sense of dignity and purpose, can render them indispensable to the communities they serve.

Box 1: UNRISD Research on Religion, Politics and Gender Equality (2007-2010)

This Research and Policy Brief summarizes selected findings from the UNRISD project *Religion, Politics and Gender Equality*. The project explored how religion and politics have interfaced in different national settings, and the implications of this nexus for gender equality and feminist politics—that is, how women, individually and collectively, have contested (or reinforced) religious norms that may be inimical to their interests. Research was carried out in 11 countries: Chile, India, Iran, Israel, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Poland, Serbia, Turkey and the United States. The countries were selected for maximum variation with respect to religious tradition (countries with populations belonging to diverse religions, including Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism) and the level at which politics and religion intertwine (state, political society, or civil society). Five thematic papers complemented the country-level research.

All country reports, thematic papers and Programme Papers are available for download from the UNRISD website (www.unrisd.org/research/gd/religionandgender); see also UNRISD Sources and Further Reading below.

These are clearly contentious issues that must be assessed in context. This Research and Policy Brief therefore explores how religion, as a political force, shapes and deflects the struggle for gender equality in contexts marked by different (i) histories of nation-building and challenges of ethnic/religious diversity; (ii) state-society relations (from the more authoritarian to the more democratic); and (iii) relations between state power and religion.

Research Findings

Historically, religiously grounded claims about the equality of all human beings have inspired the fight against slavery, civil rights activism, mobilizations of the poor and landless, and movements for women's emancipation. More recently, however, the entanglement of religion with politics has generated some of the most conservative interpretations of major religions (such as Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism) and a narrowing of agendas across faiths converging on "private sphere" issues.

In principle, religious authorities *could* speak out more forcefully on a number of pressing social issues, such as growing inequalities, inadequate wages and working conditions, and/or the need for greater solidarity through progressive taxation and redistribution. Instead, many give their attention to regulating sexuality, reproduction and conjugal roles, and reinforcing the "proper" family. Such injunctions, premised on transcendental principles, are often steeped in patriarchal and hetero-normative assumptions. Issues such as the right to divorce, permissible forms of sexuality, and access to contraception and abortion have become sites of intense contestation. Conservative religious actors see religious moral principles as timeless and non-negotiable, while feminists and other human rights advocates argue for pluralist and rights-based alternatives. It is difficult to challenge discri-minatory practices when they are justified by "divine truth". And the struggle for gender equality is further complicated by the ways it intersects with struggles around ethnic/religious, class and global inequalities.

The entanglement of religion with politics: Pitfalls for gender equality

Is the strict separation of religion from the state and political society a *necessary* or *sufficient* condition for democratic politics?

Some argue that as long as both the state and religious institutions/authorities adhere to the rule of law and tolerate each others' autonomous decisions, then the political presence of religion will not endanger democratic pluralism. It is further argued that religious

Box 2: Varieties of secularism: From singular to multiple

The secularization thesis developed by scholars such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber made a number of assumptions.

- *Rationalization*—social systems, including religious systems, become more rational over time.
- *Social-structural differentiation*—functions of different institutions (the church, the state, the market and science) become separated.
- *Freedom*—rationalization implies greater freedom from religious authority.
- *Privatization*—freedom must operate in the public sphere to allow democracy and the rule of law, and hence religions must be contained in the private sphere.
- *Modernization and progress*—all of the above elements together produce the modern era, which is marked by progress over the past.

These elements have been questioned in recent decades. José Casanova, for example, made a useful distinction between some of the key dimensions noted above, arguing that the separation of church and state is not neces-sarily linked to either the decline of religious faith and practice, or the withdrawal of religion into a private sphere. He also made the obvious, but often overlooked, point that not every expression of religion in public is conservative. Religion can be separated from the state without necessarily being banned from public and political life.

Religions can play a *variety* of political and social roles. There is not one singular form of secularism but plural secularisms across the world.

- "Assertive" secularisms—In France, and in Mexico and Turkey until recently, the state played an assertive role to confine religion to the private sphere (also referred to as *laïcité*). This was in part a reaction by revolutionary forces to the historical fusion between the ancien régime and religious authorities. The banning of religion from political party platforms, and from the public arena more broadly, have been contested issues in all three countries.
- *"Passive" secularisms*—The Indian Constitution does not mandate a strict separation of religion and state, nor is there an established "state religion". Rather, given the country's multi-religious population, the state has chosen to interpret secularism as the responsibility to ensure the protection and equality of all religions. In the United States, while the First Amendment to the Constitution officially separates religion from the state, and guarantees the free exercise of religion (as in India), Protestant ideas and presumptions operate within the legal and political system. For example, the display of religious symbols at public expense or on public property at Christmas has been interpreted by the courts as an essentially secular act.

Sources: Casanova 1994, 2010; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008; Kuru 2007.

forces can participate constructively in civil society, challenging the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes, or drawing attention to abuses of human rights. From a gender equality perspective, these assertions raise four key concerns.

- **Getting the history right.** Was religion ever a purely private matter (as the term de-privatization implies), separate from the state and contained within the private sphere of personal belief? There is plenty of evidence to the contrary. Even in Western Europe, a stronghold of secularism, religions have shaped welfare states and national policies on abortion. Elsewhere, the secularisms that took hold in the twentieth century were not only diverse, but also developed in relation to particular religious formations (be it Protestantism in the United States, or Sunni Islam in Turkey). Furthermore, many nominally secularist states were not willing to risk their political survival by interfering in matters of the family, marriage and personal laws, which were seen as the domain of religious authorities. The state thus effectively endorsed gender inequality in family/personal status laws (and sometimes also criminal laws). In nominally secular states such as Israel and India, religious axioms continued to hold sway.

- **The importance of individual rights.** In theory democracies should (and sometimes do) uphold individual rights. It is questionable, though, if diffuse notions of "toleration", democracy and rule of law are sufficient to protect the rights and needs of women and men, believers and non-believers, against discrimination. Viewing the connection between religion and the state in quasi-corporatist terms—as a relationship between democratic political institutions, on the one hand, and religious communities and authorities, on the other—pays far too little attention to the ways in which each of these may coerce its individual members (for example, women, non-believers, homosexuals). Hence the relationship also needs to be viewed through the lens of *individual rights and needs*, rather than assuming that the interests of individuals will be unproblematically represented by religious authorities or by states.

- **The silences and hierarchies of civil society.** While religious organizations can (and sometimes do) contribute to the public debate in progressive ways, it is misleading to represent civil society as a power-free zone where participants deliberate as peers. Although in some contexts oppositional movements may be able to articulate new social visions, when it comes to breaking taboos on gender roles, family forms and sexuality, their voices are often muffled, if not entirely suppressed. Where think-tanks and NGOs enjoy state support and patronage, the distinction between the state and civil society may not be entirely clear. It is therefore problematic to rely exclusively on civil society to produce egalitarian visions and projects. It can easily reproduce existing hierarchies and exclusions.

- **The informal power of religion.** The interface between politics and religion is frequently examined in terms of religious influence over state power and formal political institutions (such as the state, statutory laws and political parties). However, much of the "informal" power of religion lies outside the political arena, in the way religious ideas and norms are diffused throughout society. As evidenced by countries as diverse as Pakistan, Turkey, Serbia and Poland, religious actors have introduced some insidious and lasting changes in practices and meanings that reshape people's minds and become unquestioned social norms. In Pakistan, for example, the most damaging legacy of the Islamization policies of General Zia in the 1980s was not necessarily the laws (some of which were later overturned), but the reshaping of the social fabric and social norms. When such norms are discriminatory or reduce women's opportunities, they are of serious concern.

Politicizing religion and constraining gender equality: Diverse junctures

Explanations of the prominence of religions (for example, as a response to the failures of modernization or neoliberalism) often miss the specific political contexts in which they have flourished.

- **Religion, nationalism and ethnic conflict.** Religion has played an important part in the formation of most nation-states. As a powerful source of identity, it can both enhance cohesion within groups and heighten conflict between them. Such conflicts have been evident in the former Yugoslavia, Israel, India and Nigeria, where politicians have consistently used (ethno-)religious mobilization to fuel social exclusion and conflict. When religion is thus politicized in multi-religious or multi-ethnic societies, gender issues are also often used as an instrument to further discriminate against minority/disadvantaged groups. In states like India and Israel, conflict between the majority (Hindu and Jewish, respectively) and the minority (primarily Muslim) populations has made it difficult for women's rights advocates to push for reform of personal status laws governing the lives of minority women without feeding inter-group conflicts. Similar issues have arisen in Europe, where much-needed interventions against forced marriage and honour killing have been used to criticize immigrant groups (and hasten the retreat from multiculturalism).

- **Religion at the service of authoritarian states.** The capacity of civil society to promote democratic change can be constrained in contexts where religious actors and dogma become fused with the state. Where state power is exercised in the name of religion, any critique or opposition can be treated as heresy and brutally suppressed. In authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states such as Pakistan and Iran, the state's legal, punitive and ideological instruments have been used to impose an anti-democratic and

misogynistic template on society. The obsessive preoccupation with sexuality, women's bodies and deportment, as well as fierce efforts by the state to regulate the private sphere, have given women's issues particular urgency. Blatant discrimination has fuelled unprecedented women's rights activism that focuses on discriminatory personal status and criminal laws. Yet there is also a pressing need for women's rights and human rights advocates more broadly to present a credible social agenda that speaks to popular concerns about increasing inequality, unemployment and insecurity, rather than ceding this ground to the morally conservative elements who exploit such anxieties.

- **Religion, democratization and the democratic paradox.** Women's movements have both contributed to contemporary processes of democratization and benefited from them to advance their agendas. Yet democracy has unforeseen and complex effects, and built-in paradoxes. In the context of electoral competition, religious organizations are often seen by contending political parties as good alliance partners, since they are able to tap into sizeable social networks. One illustration is the coalition between conservative evangelical groups and secular neoliberals of the Republican Party in the United States. In 2000 and 2004, this coalition supported Republican dominance in electoral politics and gave a major boost to conservative policies on issues of gender and sexuality, both domestically and internationally. In cases where religious actors/institutions have played an important role in overthrowing authoritarian regimes, as in Chile and Poland, it was difficult for women's rights advocates to oppose them in the nascent democracies when the Catholic Church virulently opposed policies for sex education in schools and abortion (respectively).

Feminist politics: Creating alliances for justice and democracy

The narrowing of the agendas of religious actors and movements in recent years has brought them into direct confrontation with women's rights advocates at national and global levels. Yet there is no automatic opposition between feminism, presumed to be secular, and religion, presumed to be conservative. In fact, there is substantial diversity within both constituencies, as illustrated by networks such as Catholics for Choice, or Women Living Under Muslim Laws. Nor can it be assumed that movements for gender equality can seamlessly enter into alliances with those struggling for class and global equality.

- **Secular-religious alliances for gender equality.** In contexts where secular spaces are limited (such as Iran), or where ethno-religious conflicts have created tensions between feminist and group-based claims (such as in Israel and India), feminists who work within religious communities to advocate woman-friendly religious interpretations have played a crucial role. They have sometimes persuaded religious authorities into conversations about the rights of women, in the hope of paving the way for legal and political reforms.

However, the extent to which these alternative discourses get a public hearing or can influence state policy is contingent on the broader political context, including the nature of the state. When the state and religion are fused, and conservatives dominate the state, governments can repress advocates of women's rights, even when such advocacy tries to demonstrate the compatibility of such rights with religion. Considering the significant social authority of many religions, and the power they can wield against dissident voices, internal reform movements on their own may not be sufficient for egalitarian change. Indeed, it is unhelpful to oppose internally and externally generated change, or to represent one avenue of activism as superior to (or more "authentic" than) the other. Those who work internally for reform very often draw upon the ideas of external advocates for change. Alliances between feminists of different religious and secular persuasions are therefore important.

In Iran, reformist religious women have increasingly reached out and joined secularist women in various campaigns. In India, an alliance of Muslim women's groups with the Indian women's movement has been crucial to the struggle for women's rights. Given the exclusionary nature of nationalist and identity politics in multi-religious states, however, such alliances can be difficult to build and sustain. In Israel, for instance, women's rights activists within the Muslim community have resisted appeals from their Jewish counterparts to join forces in demanding secular civil family laws because this would give the state more authority over the (Muslim) community without addressing the problem of state discrimination.

- **Global alliances for socioeconomic justice and gender equality.** The connections between socioeconomic justice, on the one hand, and gender equality, on the other, are clear in women's lives: legal rights to abortion and bodily integrity mean very little where a decent income and quality public health services remain out of reach; and formal rights to divorce and child custody can remain fictitious if women do not have the financial wherewithal to support their dependents. An enabling environment for gender equality therefore requires both a rights-based agenda that guarantees individual rights and autonomy, as well as policies that uphold social and economic rights.

Feminist groups and movements, often in alliance with trade unions and other social movements, have drawn attention to the distributional failures of the

neoliberal agenda. However, those who mobilize against poverty and inequality have not always been supportive of women's rights agendas, especially in the arena of reproduction and sexuality. Such fissures were apparent at the United Nations conferences of the 1990s: the alliance led by a group of conservative states and largely religious NGOs that was critical of the economic liberalization being pursued by Northern governments was also opposed to the women's rights agenda. The Vatican in particular voiced concerns about North-South inequality and poverty while countering women's rights agendas.

Similarly at the national and local levels, some of the organizations that champion a social justice agenda and are critical of globalization may simultaneously hold deeply patriarchal views on the family. With such regressive views on gender equality, such organizations cannot be considered potential allies. This complicates feminist efforts to build effective alliances.

- **Transnational alliances.** The influence of transnational networks and platforms in shaping feminist activism at the national level cannot be emphasized enough. In countries that have signed on to key United Nations conventions (such as the Convention on All Forms of Discrimination against Women) and are therefore subject to the scrutiny of human rights bodies, or that seek accession to regional bodies (for example, the European Union), women's rights activists can bring pressure to bear on their governments to change the national legal or policy frameworks. In parallel, participation in transnational networks can bring women's rights violations to international public attention and create international pressure on states that violate these rights.

  In other words, struggles for gender equality and against patriarchal religious discourses and practices must take place on parallel fronts, embracing secular-religious alliances, capitalizing on international standard setting, and seeking broad-based alliances with other progressive forces struggling for a more equal world.

Policy Implications

The authority of religion has been used too often to dictate how women should relate to their parents and husbands, whether and what they can study, where they can go, and what they can wear. The language of religion has even been invoked to condone various forms of violence against women. Individual rights provide necessary protection from such interference. The discourse of rights is not restricted to Western liberalism, nor do Western countries have a monopoly over rights—the global human rights conventions reflect the struggles of diverse movements, across North-South and East-West divides, and rights can be formulated and argued in both religious and non-religious terms. **Hence, the protection of human rights has to be given priority, particularly when it comes to claims made in the name of religion (and culture).**

The connections between economic, social, civil and political rights are particularly clear in women's lives. Yet in many contexts the state has done far too little to provide the infrastructure, social services and access to justice needed to substantiate rights and thus give them meaning. Where class bias enables better-connected, more affluent people to flout the law while the poor are penalized, and where the state and its resources mean one thing for the poor and another for the rich, the vacuum can be easily filled by morally conservative elements. **It is the duty of the state to provide inclusive social and economic programmes that meet people's needs in a dignified manner. Women's rights and human rights advocates need to engage more forcefully with livelihood issues and popular concerns about unemployment, lack of services and insecurity.**

This Research and Policy Brief draws attention to ways in which gender equality has been instrumentalized—whether to repress marginalized ethnic/religious groups, or to advance particular political agendas. **In such contexts it becomes even more important for women's rights advocates working with governments, international NGOs or regional and international agencies to learn from grassroots women's advocacy groups that are familiar with the constraints of their localities.**

In recent years a diverse range of development actors, from NGOs to governments and international agencies, have entered into alliances with faith-based organizations in order to further their mandates (from health services to post-conflict rehabilitation). Such alliances are frequently justified in the name of pragmatism. But this is not sufficient. **A useful guiding principle here is the following: the alliance should work not only for the immediate objective (for example, reaching women and their families), but also in terms of its long-term transformative effects (such as expanding women's options). Organizations must be vigilant to avoid achieving immediate objectives at the expense of legitimizing structures and/or principles that are inimical to gender equality.**

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Third World Quarterly, Special Issue, Vol. 31, No. 6, 2010. *The Unhappy Marriage of Religion and Politics—Problems and Pitfalls for Gender Equality*, Shahra Razavi and Anne Jenichen (eds.).

The special issue contains the following contributions.

1. The unhappy marriage of religion and politics—Problems and pitfalls for gender equality. Shahra Razavi and Anne Jenichen
2. Contested identities: Gendered politics, gendered religion in Pakistan. Farida Shaheed
3. Religion, politics and gender equality in Turkey: Implications of a democratic paradox? Yeşim Arat
4. Islamic politics and women's quest for gender equality in Iran. Homa Hoodfar and Shadi Sadr
5. Between universal feminism and particular nationalism: Politics, religion and gender (in)equality in Israel. Ruth Halperin-Kaddari and Yaacov Yadgar
6. On the bodies of women: The common ground between Islam and Christianity in Nigeria. Charmaine Pereira and Jabrin Ibrahim
7. Gender, religion and democratic politics in India. Zoya Hasan
8. Religion, politics and gender in the context of nation-state formation: The case of Serbia. Rada Drezgić
9. Democracy in the country but not in the home? Religion, politics and women's rights in Chile. Virginia Guzmán, Ute Seibert and Silke Staab
10. Politics, religion and gender equality in contemporary Mexico: Women's sexuality and reproductive rights in a contested secular state. Ana Amuchástegui, Guadalupe Cruz, Evelyn Aldaz and María Consuelo Mejía
11. Reproductive rights in Poland: When politicians fear the wrath of the Church. Jacqueline Heinen and Stéphane Portet
12. Sex, secularism and religious influence in US politics. Elizabeth Bernstein and Janet R. Jakobsen

Country reports, thematic papers and Programme Papers for the *Religion, Politics and Gender Equality* project are available at: www.unrisd.org/research/gd/religionandgender.

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