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Why religion matters in violence against women and girls

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WHY RELIGION MATTERS IN VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Elisabet le Roux and Sandra Iman Pertek

Introduction

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is internationally recognised as a significant public health, human rights and development issue. Even though almost three decades have passed since the 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, accompanied by various global and regional efforts to address the issue, VAWG remains as pervasive globally. In 2021, WHO published the first global systematic review of scientific data on the prevalence of intimate-partner violence and non-partner sexual violence. Relying on data from surveys and studies conducted globally between 2000 and 2018, the study found that 31% of women and girls aged 15–49 years, and 30% of women and girls aged 15 years and older, have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from a current or former intimate partner and/or sexual violence from a non-partner (WHO, 2021). The data shows "unequivocally that violence against women is pervasive globally. It is not a small problem that only occurs in some pockets of society; rather, it is a global public health

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problem of pandemic proportions, affecting hundreds of millions of women and requiring urgent action" (WHO, 2021:xix).

Within international development, religion was until recently side-lined or ignored. However, since the 2000s, interest in the role of religion and religious actors in various development issues increased considerably (Deneulin and Rakodi, 2011; Jones and Petersen, 2011; Swart and Nell, 2016). Part of this shift includes recognising the role of religion and religious actors in gender equality and non-violence. Especially global, institutional acknowledgement of the role of religion and religious actors in addressing gender inequality and VAWG has become more common over the last decade, as evidenced by the statements, publications, actions and funding decisions of key intergovernmental agencies within international development. For example:

- a global Platform on 'Gender Equality and Religion' was launched in 2017 by UN Women, the UN Population Fund, UK Department for International Development (now renamed the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office) and the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development;
- in 2018, the Gender Equality, Human Rights and Democratic Governance of the Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO) at the European Commission, with the support of the Methodological and Knowledge Sharing Support Programme, launched the Agora on Religion and Development as a safe learning space for DG DEVCO and other European Union (EU) staff working on religion and/or external action to progress in their understanding of the nexus between religion and development and included sessions specifically on religion and gender;
- the EU's Gender Action Plan III (launched in 2020) stipulates that the EU should support the mobilisation of religious actors for gender equality;
- a recent brief published by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund) showcases the work done

by religious actors, and the lessons learned on working with religious actors, on VAWG prevention in a range of projects funded globally by the UN Trust Fund (Le Roux and Palm, 2021);
- the Spotlight Initiative, a global multi-year partnership between the EU and UN to eliminate all forms of VAWG by 2030, has supported various initiatives globally that work with religious actors to address VAWG and/or promote gender equality.

With VAWG recognised as a major development issue, and global acknowledgement of the role of religion and religious actors in development, it is arguably obvious that engaging with religion and religious actors on VAWG should form part of holistic VAWG prevention and response. Yet, it appears that many within the international development community remain hesitant to engage with religion and religious actors, especially on VAWG (Le Roux, 2015; Ager and Ager, 2016; Olivier, 2016; Le Roux and Loots, 2017; Khalaf-Elledge, 2020; Khalaf-Elledge, 2021).

As our research and experiences indicate that this hesitancy is at least partly due to misunderstanding or incomplete understanding of religion and the role that it plays in VAWG, this book strives to contribute to a better understanding of the role of religion in relation to VAWG. It explores both the ways in which religion contributes to VAWG and the ways it counters it. In doing so, we engage with empirical research we (individually) conducted in several countries and contexts with high religiosity and fragility. By exploring these different settings, we aim to identify and unpack the ways in which religion, religious leaders and religious communities contribute to VAWG prevention and response as well as how they contribute to its continued perpetration. While exploring these issues, we are guided by a need not only for thorough analysis but also for practical applicability. In other words, we intertwine the empirical exploration with theoretical reflection in relation to what it means to practitioners and policymakers in their (potential) engagement with religion and religious actors on VAWG.

Background to the volume

This book is the third volume in the series "Religion Matters – On the Significance of Religion in Global Issues". The overarching theme of the series explores the significance of religion in global issues, with each volume focusing directly or indirectly on a specific Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). With this book, we focus on religion and VAWG. This relates to Sustainable Goal #5 ("Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls") and specifically its second target, namely to "eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation" (UN, n.d., unpaginated). Aside from SDG 5, this volume also connects with other SDGs, including SDG 16 ("Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels") and SDG 17 ("Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development").

Being aware of the real-life impact religious beliefs have on the lives and safety of women and girls, this volume prioritises experiences and learnings from empirical research and of practitioners and their activities at grassroots level to better understand the nature and impact of religion on VAWG. We account for the double-edged nature of religion: the role it plays in driving, but also in countering, the violence that women and girls experience daily. The book unites the perspectives of two different religious traditions (Christianity and Islam) in an analytical and practical exploration of how religion matters in both the protection *and* vulnerability of women and girls.

Through its in-depth exploration of both Islamic and Christian settings, the volume contributes to a richer, more nuanced understanding of the role of religion in VAWG. In turn, we develop general guidelines for engagement with and on religion around VAWG, thereby underlining its relevance beyond only the academic sphere into the realms of policymaking and praxis.

The authors of this volume have extensive experience – as practitioners and as researchers – in VAWG prevention and response

praxis. Elisabet le Roux draws on the findings from a range of research projects she was part of over the last 12 years in various countries including, but not limited to, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Liberia, Uganda, Burundi, Zambia, South Africa and Colombia (multi-country studies where in-country fieldwork was not conducted are not included in this list). Sandra Pertek relies on her PhD research with forced migrant women in Turkey and Tunisia as well as a decade's experience of working on gender, VAWG and religion integration in international development. As stated earlier, the different settings explored in this volume all have high levels of religiosity and fragility.

This book is a short volume, written in an easily readable, accessible way. The hope is that it can serve as an entry point for researchers, practitioners and policymakers to better understand the intersection between religion and VAWG. As such, it aims to form part of a nuanced discussion that avoids being religious advocacy or simplistic condemnation of religion, offering a balanced account of the religion and VAWG nexus.

Understanding violence against women and girls

In this book, we use the term 'violence against women and girls' (VAWG), rather than gender-based violence (GBV) or sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV). All three of these terms are used within the international development sphere, fairly interchangeably, to denote the violence that women and girls experience. The term GBV appears to be the most commonly used, yet we intentionally do not use this term. The term 'GBV' originates from within the women's rights movement, where it was used to indicate that women's exposure to violence is due to patriarchy and that the myriad forms of violence women and girls experience is a result of gender inequality. Using the term 'GBV' was part of the political agenda of feminism, emphasising the structural drivers of the violence women and girls are exposed to and the need for gender equality (COFEM, 2017). However, calls for gender neutrality and gender sensitivity have led to the term 'GBV' no longer being used to refer only to the violences that women and girls experience

but also to all violences suffered by anyone based on their gender or gender identity. This shift in definition has been embraced by influential governments, policymakers and funders. For example, the US government officially sees GBV as targeting both men and women, defining it as "…directed at an individual based on his or her biological sex, gender identity, or perceived adherence to socially defined norms of masculinity and femininity…" (USAID, n.d., unpaginated). The EU's definition of GBV uses gender only as a demographic indicator, defining it as "…violence directed against a person because of that person's gender or as violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately" – although it does state that women and girls are most affected by GBV (European Commission, n.d).

We choose to use the term 'violence against women and girls' to avoid any confusion and emphasise that we are focusing on the role that religion plays in violences that *women and girls* experience. As such, we draw on the definition of VAWG as captured in the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women:

> any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women [and girls], including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.
>
> *(OHCHR, n.d., addition by authors)*

We also recognise that combining 'women' and 'girls' in a definition runs the risk of ignoring or marginalising the specific and unique forms of violence that girls (and not women) experience. We nevertheless still choose to engage with both (as violence against women *and* girls), as the violences that women experience and the violences that girls experience have many drivers in common. We therefore choose to include girls in our focus, as we believe it is important to emphasise that women experience violence across their life cycle and not only when they reach adulthood.

We also wish to emphasise that women and girls do not only experience violence simply because of being women or girls but

also based on their intersecting identities. Intersectionality emphasises that women are oppressed and become vulnerable by interlocking systems of oppression, such as sexism, racism and ageism (Crenshaw, 1991, Collins, 2015; Armstrong et al., 2018; Kumar, 2018), and across different levels of socio-ecology (Heise, 1998; Pertek, 2022). Women's risk of experiencing violence is due to power imbalances and social inequalities associated with different identity categories (e.g. race, gender and class) and wider circumstances (e.g. occupation and location). This means that not all women's level of risk of experiencing VAWG is the same nor are their needs the same in the aftermath of experiencing VAWG (Crenshaw, 1991; Palm and Le Roux, 2021). Furthermore, women and girls experience a spectrum of violence over time and place, with the real-life boundaries between different acts of violence being indefinite and messy (Gray, 2019; Pertek, 2022). Our general discussion of VAWG in this volume does not mean to ignore this reality, but it is beyond the scope of this book to go into intersectionality in more depth.

Understanding religion

In studying religion, some approaches study religion from within (e.g. religious studies), while other approaches attempt to understand the nature of religion as a social and cultural phenomenon (e.g. social sciences) (Rakodi, 2007). In this book, we follow the second approach. We are not concerned with the truth claims of Christianity and Islam (the two specific religions studied in this volume), but rather focus on understanding how these religions impact drivers of and resistance to VAWG.

There is no universal definition of religion. Within social sciences, there is a tendency to distinguish between substantive and functional definitions of religion. Substantive definitions focus on what religion *is*, paying attention to the cross-cultural attributes of religion that differentiates it from other social phenomena and emphasising belief in a transcendental reality (Rakodi, 2007). Functional definitions, on the other hand, focus on what religion *does*. These definitions emphasise the instrumental role religion

plays in constructing people's worldviews and establishing social cohesion (Rakodi, 2007; Schilbrack, 2013).

Both substantive and functional definitions of religion face criticism. Amongst other things, substantive definitions are criticised for excluding certain religions. For example, when a specific substantive definition is based on theism (a belief in an eternal God Creator), it will not include Buddhism as a religion. Functional definitions are accused of being too inclusive, as these definitions make it "virtually impossible to set any substantive boundary to religion and, thus, to distinguish it from other socio-cultural phenomena" (Spiro, 1966:89). Considering these criticisms, we chose to follow a hybrid definition that includes both functional and substantial elements. We understand religion as offering a normative order linked to a set of practices (functional) *and* belief in theistic or nontheistic realities (substantive): "The key is that the rituals and the ethics of the activity need to connect the practitioners to a super-empirical reality" (Schilbrack, 2013:316–317). With such a definition, non-theistic traditions can be recognised as religious, without all forms of communal meaning-making also being included as 'religious' (Schilbrack, 2013).

In addition to the hybrid definition guiding this book, we recognise that religion carries different meanings for different people. Having conducted research within various communities across the globe, we realise the importance of acknowledging how those in the communities we work with understand religion (Schliesser et al., 2021). Therefore, we also rely on a pragmatic definition based on subjective meanings linked to an individual's experiences with religion. We consider hybrid and pragmatic definitions of religion complementary and helpful in deconstructing and understanding religion's roles in VAWG experiences.

In conceptualising religion in VAWG, we attend to multiple religious resources, helping us operationalise religious influences on human experiences. Gerrie ter Haar highlights that religious resources, like all human resources, can be used for political and development purposes (Ter Haar, 2005). Such reflection is important for this book, which strives to discuss not only how religion can drive VAWG but also how it can oppose VAWG. Through defining

and unpacking four different kinds of religious resources, Ter Haar focuses attention on the potential of religion and religious communities to contribute to the common good:

> The most important reason for paying serious attention to the religious dimension of people's lives is the need to make maximum use of whatever resources exist for development purposes. Given that religion is an integral part of the lives of millions of people, it can be considered a human resource of significant importance. Since it is widely accepted in policy circles that development, if it is to be effective and lasting, should build on people's own resources, it make sense to include their religious or spiritual resources and not material and intellectual ones only.
>
> *(Ter Haar, 2011:8)*

Ter Haar's conceptualisation of religious resources is practical, lending itself to pragmatic use in our volume. We have selected to use Ter Haar's four main categories of religious resources as a framework for organising the discussions in the empirical chapters (Chapters 2,3,7 and 8). She differentiates between four main elements of religion, which correspond to four main categories that can be found in all the world's religious traditions, namely religious ideas, religious practices, religious organisation and religious experiences:

- *Religious ideas* refer to the content of belief, and exploring this resource seeks to understand what people actually believe and why;
- *Religious practices* refer to the way people act and behave on the basis of their belief, often in the form of ritual behaviour;
- *Religious organisation* refers to the community component of religion, that is, how people organise themselves on the basis of their belief;
- *Religious experience* refers to the psychic attitudes and experiences that religion may incite in believers, for example, the subjective experience of inner transformation (Ter Haar, 2011).

Other conceptualisations of religion also exist. For example, Frazer and Friedli (2015) identify five ways of thinking about religion, namely understanding religion as community, as a set of teachings, as spirituality, as practice and as discourse. They related these components with the analysis of dividers and connectors in conflict resolution. Woodhead (2011) combines concepts of religion according to the character of specific study design and suggests a taxonomy of five concepts to enable the study of religion: culture, identity, relationship, practice and power.

However, we selected Ter Haar's conceptualisation of religious resources as we consider it a more useful framework, compared to other conceptualisations, for our discussion of religion and VAWG. First, the Ter Haar framework offers four broad categories that correspond to different areas of human life: religious ideas (cognition), practices (behaviour), organisation (community) and experience (emotional/spiritual). These matter in VAWG and VAWG research, and thus the framework can serve as a heuristic tool for mapping religious influences on VAWG in a structured way. Second, the focus on resources allows for exploring both the substantive and functional components of religion. In other words, both what a religion *is* and what it *does* can be explored under this framework of 'resources'. Third, as this book aims to contribute to the conversation on how religion can support efforts to end VAWG, a discussion focused on resources allows recognition of the potential positive contributions of religion and religious actors without instrumentalising them. At the same time, we also recognise that religious resources are not necessarily positive – as is explored in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4. Fourth, a focus on resources allows for a comparative discussion of religions that continue to recognise the uniqueness of each religious tradition and the setting in which it is practised. As such, the religious resources framework serves as the overarching structure for all four empirical chapters contained in this book, illustrating the potentials and pitfalls of religion in VAWG.

A final note on terminology is needed. In this volume we use the term 'religious actors' as a general term that includes faith-based organisations, religious networks, church-based agencies, religious

groups, religious associations and charities, interfaith networks and councils, missionary organisations, religious community organisations and religious leaders (Le Roux, 2021).

Interpretivist approach

In writing this book, we followed an interpretivist approach. Interpretivist approaches are based on the belief that reality is socially constructed and made meaningful through people's understanding and interpretations of events (Putnam and Banghart, 2017). As people's knowledge of reality is deemed a social construction, interpretivist approaches stand in marked contrast to positivist approaches that claim objective knowledge (Chowdhury, 2014).

An interpretivist approach was deemed appropriate for this book as it allows the researcher to search for the meanings and motives behind people's actions (Chowdhury, 2014). Such an approach is needed when it is not fully understood why certain events occur, or how these events are being dealt with and understood (Bryman, 2008; Babbie and Mouton, 2010). An interpretivist approach thus allows us to focus on lived experience, which is needed because of the pragmatic and hybrid definition of religion that the book embraces. The hybrid definition of religion recognises both the functional and substantive elements of religion, while the pragmatic definition recognises the subjective meanings linked to an individual's experiences with religion. An interpretivist approach, acknowledging that meaning-making is subjective experience, is therefore appropriate for this book's understanding of religion. Additionally, interpretivist approaches value and promote qualitative data, recognising its importance for understanding the uniqueness of a particular situation (Chowdhury, 2014). As all of the empirical studies that this book relies on are qualitative, this again points to the appropriateness of following an interpretivist approach. For data analysis, both authors deployed inductive, systematic thematic analysis, as a flexible method of qualitative analysis which fits well within an interpretivist paradigm.

Pertek, in analysing the data from her doctoral study (which forms a core part of Chapters 4 and 8), followed a specific form of

interpretivist approach, namely social constructivism (Schwandt, 1998). In her study, she paid attention to the subjective expressions of religious ideas and practices in their socio-cultural contexts. In her chapters, therefore, Pertek refers to the way that the social world, and so in part the religious world, was seen by respondents and how they understood their experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). In doing so, she captured how respondents constructed meaning and knowledge of their own lived experiences of religion and VAWG.

Bringing together academics, practitioners and policymakers

Ending VAWG will require partnership and collaboration across different sectors of society: "Unprecedented worldwide public, professional and political interest currently offers exceptional opportunities for action. Strong leadership and coordination, to guide a multisector response and ensure coherence across sectors, can and must be mobilised" (García-Moreno and Temmerman, 2015:187). This volume strives to contribute to such collaboration by engaging with and exploring learning on religion and VAWG in a way that is relevant to academics, policymakers and practitioners and can facilitate conversation between these groups by highlighting areas of joint interest and potential synergies. In doing so, we offer concrete recommendations for each group to enable better understanding and collaboration.

We also aim to contribute to crossing the divide that still exists between the so-called secular and religious sectors within international development, with mistrust marring collaboration in addressing VAWG (Le Roux and Loots, 2017; Khalaf-Elledge, 2020). Improved mutual understanding and trust appears to be much needed in order for multisectoral collaboration to flourish. For example, in a 2015 scoping study on the role of religious communities in VAWG prevention and response (Le Roux, 2015), the key informants from different faith-based international organisations described the international development arena as thoroughly secular and prejudiced against them: "(A)ll of the participants felt

that the knee-jerk reaction of their secular counterparts was still to distrust and avoid faith actors" (Le Roux and Loots, 2017:738). Similarly, research on faith inclusion in VAWG prevention with humanitarian service providers identified that same distrust and adverse attitudes towards engagement with religious actors, as captured in this statement by a Head of Mission from an international non-governmental organisation (NGO):

> Most of the arguments against what you should be doing against providing a service would be coming from a religious standpoint. So I would see more as a challenge, religion as a whole, more as a challenge and not as an asset in my work…
> *(Head of Mission from international NGO, interview by Pertek, 2019)*

This attitude is echoed in a study conducted between 2015 and 2019 (Khalaf-Elledge, 2020) studying different levels of development practitioners (government aid agencies, recipient organisations and local women's rights activists). The study found that:

> an outdated, normative, and binary understanding of secularity's neutrality and religion's irrationality has rendered Western development organisations significantly religion-blind and skewed their sense of objectivity. A lack of knowledge, interest, and engagement with religion may have fostered an Orientalist mindset that essentialises religion as backwards and subjective.
> *(Khalaf-Elledge, 2020:669)*

But secular donors and policymakers argue that it is often challenging to work with religious actors on VAWG. In a small 2021 study with representatives from intergovernmental agencies and government ministries from the Global North, key informants explained the challenges they had in collaborating with religious actors who did not recognise the political and policy regulations and constraints on these agencies and ministries, did not embody the gender principles their programming is supposed to promote and/or were not willing to engage in reflective dialogues on their principles and programming:

> But if we find that faith actors are very stubborn, not interested to dialogue, not interested to change or to reflect on theological standpoints, then it's quite hard for us at [our institution] to engage in new partnerships because we have to have this openness for dialogue and the transformational approach. Because then we can trust. But otherwise, I think there will always be this dilemma of mistrust. You know: 'what is really happening in the work we do not see or do not engage with?'
>
> *(Informant from government ministry, in Le Roux, 2021)*

Through offering honest reflection on and critique of the ways in which religion contributes to VAWG, as well as the ways it counters it, based on empirical studies conducted in various countries and with different religious communities, we hope to advance mutual understanding between actors from different sectors, which can in turn advance partnership and collaboration to end VAWG. The final chapter of the book offers concrete recommendations for academics, practitioners and policymakers, providing pragmatic directions for moving forward in ways that promote collaboration.

Outline of this book

This book unites the perspectives of two different faith traditions (Christianity and Islam) in an analytical and practical exploration of how religion matters in the protection and vulnerability of women and girls to violence. It is an interreligious, interdisciplinary and international exploration, with the aim of being relevant to academics, policymakers and practitioners.

This introductory chapter was preceded by an executive summary. It is followed by the empirical and analytical core of the book, which consists of two main parts (Parts II and III). Part II focuses on how religion drives VAWG. After a brief orientation chapter (Chapter 2), Chapter 3 unpacks the Christian perspective, followed by Chapter 4 exploring the Islamic perspective. This is followed by a joint reflection chapter (Chapter 5), which synthesises,

summarises and reflects on the role of religion in driving VAWG *based on the preceding two chapters.*

Part III focuses on how religion counters VAWG. Again, a brief orientation chapter (Chapter 6) will serve as an introduction, followed by le Roux's discussion of the Christian perspective (Chapter 7) and then Pertek's discussion of the Islamic perspective (Chapter 8). Again, a joint reflection chapter follows (Chapter 9), which synthesis, summarises and reflects on the positive role of religion in countering VAWG based on the preceding two chapters.

Part IV contains the final chapter (Chapter 10), which draws together the insights gained from the four empirical chapters and two reflection chapters, framing it as concrete implications and recommendations for research, policy and practice.

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