

## Now what? Implications for researchers, policy makers and practitioners

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DOI:

[10.4324/9781003169086-14](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003169086-14)

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*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Pertek, SI & Roux, EL 2022, Now what? Implications for researchers, policy makers and practitioners. in *On the Significance of Religion in Violence Against Women and Girls*. 1st edn, Religion Matters, Routledge, London, pp. 147-155. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003169086-14>

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## NOW WHAT? IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS, POLICYMAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS

*Sandra Iman Pertek and Elisabet le Roux*

In writing this book, our aim was to identify and unpack how religion and religious actors contribute to the continued perpetration of violence against women and girls (VAWG) as well as how they contribute to the prevention of and response to it. Seeking a balanced and nuanced account, we explored both Christian and Muslim settings to better understand the intersections between religion and VAWG. Our research in many different contexts with high religiosity and fragility have highlighted that building on the positive contributions of religion and religious actors can be significant and valuable to anti-VAWG efforts. At the same time, the importance of addressing the negative roles and influences of religion and religious actors has also come to the fore.

We followed Ter Haar's (2011) framework of religious resources in structuring this book. On the whole, it is fair to say the framework worked well for the purposes of organising the book. While we used the framework as a heuristic tool, we realise that using a framework in the analysis of religion runs the risk of dictating or dominating how religion is understood and presented, and not necessarily representing the complex reality. In real life, religious

resources may overlap and the boundaries between them may be blurred. Using religious resources as a framework, therefore, should be done with caution so as to ensure that the analysis remains true and representative of the different meanings of religion among diverse social groups.

Building on the empirical and reflection chapters in Parts II and III, we now consider what this means for policymakers, practitioners and researchers involved in addressing and studying VAWG. Simply put, Religion Matters! The VAWG sector should take religion into account. Engagement on VAWG is insufficient if it does not do so, for ignoring or avoiding religion means ignoring or avoiding a dimension of both individual and communal life that plays a fundamental role in how the majority of the global population perceive gender equality, VAWG and what should be done about these.

In striving to support a VAWG sector that is able to engage with religion, we have identified seven key implications of the intersection between religion and VAWG that are essential for strengthening VAWG prevention and response. This chapter shares these implications, offering pragmatic and change-oriented recommendations for researchers, policymakers and practitioners.

### **Implication 1: Engage religious resources and religious actors in VAWG**

For most of the global population, religion remains a part of their communities' social fabric and dictates or influences gender dynamics. It carries meaningful social, psychological and material resources which can be leveraged for VAWG prevention and response. Recognising the powerful potential of religious actors and religious resources for addressing VAWG and supporting survivors' healing is the first step towards meaningfully engaging with religion in anti-VAWG efforts. Religious resources can enable religious actors to join efforts to address VAWG, as it allows them to align such efforts with their worldview. For those who are religious, anti-VAWG efforts that resonate with their worldview and speak the language of religion can be more effective in stimulating

reflection on VAWG compared to interventions that use only foreign concepts originating from value systems outside of their cosmological order.

At the same time, drawing on religion and religious actors in programming to address VAWG runs the risk of instrumentalising religion to advance programmatic agendas. Intentional effort should be put into avoiding such instrumentalisation. This can be done by facilitating dialogue and engagement and building equitable partnerships with religious actors (individual, communal and institutional) and learning from them about the religious traditions, concepts and practices which they can engage to counter VAWG. Such processes of engagement require open-mindedness to discover local ways of looking at VAWG prevention and responses, appreciating the wealth of local knowledge among religious actors. Such engagement may require secular and religious outsiders to step outside of their comfort zone in order to be able to discover the traditions and religious resources that have the potential to reduce violence and build resilience. If such time and effort is invested, the anti-VAWG perspectives that are often inherently present in their understanding of religion can be identified and engaged. For example, many religious traditions emphasise the importance of preserving human dignity, human rights and promoting peace in family and local communities, and this is a religious principle that can be mobilised in anti-VAWG efforts.

## **Implication 2: Recognise the role and potential of religious experiences**

Religious experiences refer to the metaphysical attitudes, moods and motivations that religion may incite in believers, for example, experiences of inner transformation, healing and empowerment. The religious experiences of women and survivors can contribute to or challenge VAWG. Engaging with religion in VAWG interventions requires taking the religious experiences of women and survivors into account because these experiences often constitute VAWG experience. As illustrated in Parts II and III, religious experiences can contribute to continued victimisation, but also

lead to survivors resisting or escaping violent situations. Especially VAWG interventions that address the mental health of victims and survivors need to consider how religious experiences may influence the implementation of their programmes. Psychological, emotional and spiritual well-being are related (Williamson and Robinson, 2006), and therefore religious experiences should be taken into account in programmes that engage with religious survivors. A holistic response to survivors' well-being is required to cater for survivors' multi-dimensional needs where lived experiences of religion, shaping mental health conditions and practical outcomes, are understood and engaged with.

### **Implication 3: Recognise the agency of religious women survivors**

The agency of religious women, including religious women survivors, need to be recognised. While religious survivors' reliance on religious beliefs and practices may seem to be only passive coping strategies, the automatic assumption should not be that they are victims of religion. When religious women's obedience to religious precepts are instinctively dismissed as non-agentic, it leads to patronising and infantilising attitudes towards religious women, which in turn undermine these women's recovery and strength.

Instead of assuming their lack of agency, we should question our core assumptions about survivors' coping, acknowledging that (as an outsider) we may misunderstand their lived experiences of religion. As was explored in Part 3, survivors' reliance on religion is very often an intentional act of agency and even defiance through which they resist the violence that is perpetrated against them and the ways in which it is justified. While it does not always (or immediately) lead to a woman leaving a violent situation, there is nevertheless agency in how she engages with religion.

Certainly, not all actions of all religious women at all times are indications of agency. But the default assumption should not be that religious survivors passively allow their victimisation by using religion to cope with it. Debilitating and reductionist assumptions concerning religious women's agency should be avoided, and instead

the default position should be to identify and recognise their acts of agency and to acknowledge and support them where their recovery is facilitated by the reliance on the religious resources that matter to them the most.

### **Implication 4: Engage with religion when working with perpetrators who are religious**

When working with perpetrators who are religious, interventions should also draw on perpetrators' religious beliefs, as religion influences such perpetrators' attitudes and behaviours. While there are existing programmes that work with men and boys using a religious lens, there is a dearth of programmes that works specifically with perpetrators using a religious lens. This means the potential of drawing on perpetrators' religious ideas, practices and experiences remains untapped. For example, prayers and religious ceremonies, which provide psycho-social support, stress reduction and healing, may help some perpetrators manage anger and other difficult emotions, dissuading from escalating violence. Another potential avenue is drawing on religious texts to argue against VAWG and promote women's rights and familial harmony. Interventions that focus on anger management and communication skills can link these with religious traditions and ethics.

Although incorporating faith perspectives in working with perpetrators who are religious could tap into creative pathways of reforming perpetrators, it is important to emphasise that not all perpetrators are actually religious, even though they may identify with a certain religion. As explored in Chapters 4 and 8, perpetrators may associate with a religious community, yet not actually practice the religion. With such perpetrators, religion-based/inspired programmes may be unsuitable.

### **Implication 5: Prioritise religious literacy to contextualise interventions adequately**

Religious literacy is key to developing capacities for context and faith-sensitive engagements with religion, and adequate

religious literacy is a prerequisite for effective contextualisation of interventions. Building religious literacy involves understanding the basic tenets of religion, including the multiple interpretations and contentions. Religious literacy emphasises the context-specific nature of religious practices and demands a process of mutual engagement with religious actors. Such engagement relies not only on striving to understand the religious actors' self-understanding but also to recognise your understanding of yourself and your own biases. This must be brought into conversation with the VAWG objectives at hand in a specific cultural context, allowing for honest engagement with the diverse roles that religious actors can play in promoting or hindering VAWG (Moore, 2015a, 2015b).

Practitioners and policymakers need to be aware that religious understanding continually and dynamically evolves in a social setting, which requires, in turn, continued engagement and monitoring of religious moods, motivations and manifestations in religious communities. Religious literacy is essential for practitioners and policymakers to understand how religion plays out and interacts with culture in gendered ways, driving or countering VAWG over time and place. Therefore, engaging with religion to address VAWG requires building the religious literacy of practitioners to ensure VAWG interventions are tailored to respond to existing religious manifestations and contentions in religious communities. By developing religious literacy, practitioners are empowered to recognise and mitigate religious-related risks of VAWG, including (1) conceptual risks such as religious (mis)beliefs; (2) behavioural risks such as religious (mis)practices and (3) spiritual and emotional risks such as meanings of religious experiences, often leading to enduring VAWG and gendered harms.

Prioritising religious literacy also means moving beyond Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – to strengthen capacities to work with a variety of religions in the non-Abrahamic world. More engagement is needed with other and diverse religions, including indigenous and traditional religions, impacting millions of people worldwide. To date, there is a disproportionate volume of scholarship on VAWG and Abrahamic religions. Further research should expand our understanding of

non-Abrahamic religions in relation to VAWG to thus enable religious engagement in wider and under-researched settings influenced by diverse religions.

### **Implication 6: Use a hybrid and pragmatic understanding of religion**

Parts II and III explore the positive and adverse intersections of religion and VAWG; based on the conceptual framework we deployed to engage with the substance (*what religion is*) and functions (*what religion does*) of religion. Our empirical chapters indicate the importance of accounting for both the substantial and functional meanings of religion, for only by using such a hybrid understanding can the full spectrum of reach and influence of religion be captured. We encourage researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to use a hybrid understanding of religion, combining the functional and substantial, as it allows engagement with the wide reach of religious influences as well as religious complexities, more effectively. Especially when it comes to understanding and addressing VAWG such a hybrid understanding of religion is important, as it enables an understanding of what religion does in shaping VAWG experiences, through allowing understanding of what religion is. For example, a woman's decades-long endurance of domestic violence can only be fully understood (and potentially addressed) in the light of her religious belief in eternal life and reward in the life hereafter. Religious constructs shaping the VAWG experience often draw on the transcendent beliefs in the invisible world, either supporting or undermining the survivors' well-being and providing or obscuring resources for VAWG mitigation and response. Therefore, expanding the conceptual understanding of religion in VAWG is of paramount importance to ensure lived experiences of religion in VAWG are understood and responded to adequately by research, policy and practice.

At the same time, a pragmatic understanding of religion is also important in the light of the diversity and complexity of religious expressions. A pragmatic approach enables us to deal with religion in lived experience sensibly and realistically, drawing on the

subjective and practical meaning of religion in people's lives. As the theoretical definitions of religion may not adequately capture how religion is understood and lived in local communities, it is important to engage with religion according to how it is understood by those who adhere to it. A real-life understanding of religion should interest us the most in VAWG research, policy and practice, as it enables us to understand lived experiences of abuse.

### **Implication 7: Bridge the divide between secular actors and religious actors**

Stronger and more diverse partnerships between religious actors and secular actors are needed in order to ensure that Sustainable Development Goal 5 becomes a reality. Forging such partnerships is crucial for knowledge and know-how exchange. Facilitating dialogue and collaboration between secular and religious actors should be based on shared principles of respect and trust to facilitate efficient exchange and learning from one another while sharing the objectives of ending VAWG and supporting survivors. Further research can be helpful in identifying how collaboration between secular and religious actors addressing VAWG can be facilitated and strengthened, for the scale of the VAWG pandemic requires developing new ways of working and collaborating with multisectoral partners.

Religion should not be a niche area of exploration for a few select VAWG researchers, practitioners and policymakers. Rather, it should be recognised by all as part of the VAWG landscape. In this regard, it is important for the intersection between religion and VAWG to be more prominent on the VAWG research agenda so as to ensure the development of knowledge and evidence that can guide practitioners and policymakers in engaging with the religion and VAWG appropriately. To enable such research, there is a great need for methodologies and tools that are capable of embracing the complexity of religion. In developing these, researchers and practitioners need to work together to develop and test innovative approaches that can facilitate a better understanding of the functions and impacts of religion at the local level.

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