

Beyond the Religious/Secular Binary Trap: Keeping the Focus on Gender Equality

In a global context of deep ideological, political, social and economic polarisations, it is unsurprising that fault lines exist in Western aid circles on how to engage with the role of religion in relation to gender equality. The question remains pertinent as ever: how can external actors support local actors in their struggles for gender justice and women's rights in countries where religion and tradition are instrumentalised for political agendas?

Rationales for engaging religious and customary actors in development

Since September 11th, Western aid actors have selectively worked with religious actors as agents through which positive change can be achieved, under a number of pretexts:

- The need to engage power brokers in contexts where religious leaders, and their discourses are integral to civil society and governance;
- The belief that donors can nurture moderate religious forces where extremism impedes security and development;
- The recognition that religion can be a source of inspiration and resilience within communities;
- The desire to work with unconventional partners beyond government institutions and favoured NGOs;
- An ethical/political desire to discard the orientalist legacy of ignoring other populations' culture and heritage;
- A confluence of Western security interests with areas informally governed by religious/customary law or actors.

This briefing recognises these important issues and acknowledges that 'religious actors' means different things across contexts, but it cautions that engagement must be accompanied by accountability for gender equality outcomes.

Focusing on gender equality outcomes

By focusing on equality outcomes, we mean the implications of political engagement with customary or religious leaders, laws, and practices for enhancing or diminishing opportunities for achieving women's rights. Through [cross-country comparative study from Bangladesh, Egypt, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Tunisia](#), we distilled key

messages emerging from contextualised religio-political dynamics and concurrent gender equality struggles.

Classifying women as either religious/authentic/indigenous or secular/feminist/Westernised ignores the complex ways identities are experienced

The terms 'religion' and 'secular' hold multiple meanings. In Tunisia, negotiations over women's identities and status appeared to pitch Islamist women of the ruling Ennahda Party against feminists who represented the secular, Westernised order. Ennahda's vilification of women's rights activists as immoral and/or atheist (by conflating these concepts with secularism) placed them at [documented](#) risk to their safety. Meanwhile, scholar activists blocked the substitution of 'equality' for 'complementarity' in the new constitution, by displaying their expertise in Islamic religious sources and mobilising public support, while maintaining their stance as feminists.

When Western actors conflate piety with authenticity, and secularity with Western values, they inadvertently collude with nationalist and fundamentalist agendas of anti-women's rights groups who seek to delegitimise local women's rights movements. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood characterised women's rights advocacy as a corollary of a Western-Zionist political project to destroy the Muslim/Egyptian [family](#), thereby silencing the demands of women's rights movements.

Grass-roots women's mobilisations challenge simplified binary framings of women's agency while advocating rights-based gender equality outcomes

From Bangladesh to Nigeria to Egypt and Pakistan, women mobilise around land rights,

health, education, workers' rights and more. They are not necessarily mobilising under either feminist or religious banners, but around community issues. Yet their role is important because they demonstrate that gender and social justice are intertwined. Pigeonholing their activism as religious- or feminist-inspired is not only reductionist but also misrepresentative.

In Nigeria, women who belong to Christian and Muslim faith-based organisations have jointly mobilised to champion the rights of the girl child, even when they diverge on other matters.

When Pakistan's Lady Health Workers (LHWs) are targeted and killed by militants for dispensing 'imperialist and anti-Muslim' polio vaccines, the donor response cannot be to win public support by engaging with religious leaders with a history of militancy. These strategies hurt the communities they purport to serve.

Perverse accountability pathways have opened up, tempting external actors'

support even though they by-pass citizens' rights and undermine gender equality

In Pakistan's conflict-affected areas, donors cultivate tribal councils (*jirgas*) as alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. The rise of militancy was allegedly linked to the breakdown of the court system, but this does not justify 'quick-fix' solutions that further disempower women.

Avoid inadvertently contributing to a backlash against local women's rights

Some Western scholarly and media representations of women in Southern contexts require critique to expose racism and gender stereotypes. In many Southern contexts, those advocating women's rights may face more urgent struggles on inclusive citizenship, which in turn necessitates the strategic deployment of rights-based arguments. In our study, binary framings are often underpinned by political projects of supremacy that reject gender equality. External actors must not inadvertently contribute to the backlash against local feminist actors who are vilified by customary or religious leaders.

Policy recommendations

- **Resist classifying women as 'religious' vs 'secular'.** Such binaries distort reality where women and men have intersecting identities. Gender interacts with religion, class, political orientation, geographic location, and ethnicity in complex ways.
- **Support causes that challenge binary framings of women's agency while enhancing rights.** From Bangladesh to Nigeria to Egypt to Pakistan, women are not necessarily mobilising under feminist or religious banners, yet they play positive roles in expanding rights affecting women and men.
- **Respect the various agendas around which women exercise agency and mobilise, recognising their differential impact on gender equality outcomes.** External actors should avoid prescriptions about how gender equality might be achieved.
- **Recognise and withdraw support from perverse accountability pathways even when upheld by women.** By strengthening customary law channels (often on religious grounds), 'perverse accountability pathways' undermine formal rule of law, an important pathway through which women can hold the state accountable.
- **Respond to different power dynamics undermining equality between different contexts.** Confronting Western gender stereotyping and 'othering' of women in Southern contexts necessitates exposing racism, and challenging media and scholarship.



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Further reading

Tadros, M.; Khan, A. and Edwards, J. (eds) 'Challenging Binaries to Promote Women's Equality', *Feminist Dissent* 4

Karam, A. (2018) 'The Implications of Binary Framings for Western Actors', *Feminist Dissent* 4: 233–39

Grami, A. (2018) 'Women, Feminism and Politics in Post-Revolution Tunisia', *Feminist Dissent* 4: 23–56

Tadros, M. (2018) 'The Pitfalls of Disentangling Women's Agency from Accountability for Gender Equality Outcomes', *Feminist Dissent* 4: 57–87

Credits

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