



FAITH & VALUE CREATION – WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF FAITH AND GENDER? 2022 Policy report

New Women Connectors and GERIS -
Global Exchange on Religion in Society

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Table of Contents

Faith & Value Creation	ii
Aims	iii
1. What is the future of faith and gender?	1
2. Understanding the text in context	1
3. Gender and Hinduism	2
4. Gender and faith in a dream	3
5. Gender, Youth and Religions for Peace	4
6. How can we? Stepping into the circle of council	5
7. Outcomes of the Discussion	6
8. Acknowledgements	6

Faith & Value Creation

#ConnectandDebate
to explore gender equality in different faith communities

A webinar as part of GERIS microprojects

August 25th, 2022

Welcoming the panellists and participants as chair, the Executive Director of New Women Connectors, Ms Anila Noor, highlighted the importance of coming together in a safe space to discuss and debate the role of women and gender within faith communities. She said that New Women Connectors was an initiative led by refugee and migrant women who wanted to bring a perspective shift, from integration to inclusion, and from support to opportunities, for the refugee and migrant individuals and communities. She said NWC responds to bridging the gap between the intersections of interfaith communities, focusing on safeguarding women's space in the absence of female faith community leaders' voice in policy and decision-making. We highlighted perceptual mistakes and understanding gaps due to not considering the specific barriers, priorities and networking platforms for women working with and towards faith communities. The NWC provides this platform for their success stories and tries to connect them with relevant forums at a national and international level.



Anila Noor,
NWC Founder



Seyran Khalili,
NWC Project Lead

Aims

The aim of this event was to explore gender equality in different faith communities because there are many faith communities, including migrants, that are finding themselves in a shift of time. These are all things we need to change in our society and, in order for changes to happen, we have to make the challenges visible and prepare a safe path showcasing role models for new ways of living authentically.

1. Support transition to change outdated actions that are not in line with contemporary reflections and take steps towards solidarity across faith communities.
2. To strengthen female faith leaders' visibility and challenge gender stereotypes within faith communities. Through initiating a safe space where female faith leaders can mobilise and network to channelise value creation to be an entrepreneur within a faith community
3. To connect and amplify female faith leaders and voice their needs for policy change within society.

1. What is the future of faith and gender?

The event explored gender equality in different faith communities, including migrants, that are finding themselves in a time shift. These are all things we need to change in our society, and for changes to happen, we must make the challenges visible and prepare a safe path showcasing role models for new ways of living authentically.

2. Understanding the text in context

Ms Riska D. Agustin, lecturer in Islamic studies at State University Sultan Aji Muhammad Idris Samarinda, gave her presentation on how Islam sees equality between gender. In this presentation, Riska presented the key findings of the research from Indonesian scholars. Gender issues are not only about women but also men and the relationship between men and women, from a rapidly changing environment for gender to understanding gender in social norms, status, and roles of the individuals. All of this should encourage enlightenment for Muslim scholars to return to scriptural research and to ask a question by identifying the higher objective.

The issue of *the* status of women in Islam is one of global interest and debate, and one where Muslim scholars must be assessed how the scriptural or text resources are read and how we deal with issues in families and our societies. Before considering the roles of men and women, we should consider the spiritual dimension of the being as human, the relationship between ethical and moral, and the role of the men and women as individuals within families and societies. This brings us to two points of concepts in Islam's legal traditions. The first is to differentiate between what is fixed and what is a continuous culture. Furthermore, to again define what flexibility exists there. The second to reconsider is the terminologies used in the scriptural form and to understand them in their original context. Considering contemporary context and challenges, we need women and men as Muslim scholars and ordinary citizens who specialise in the field to differentiate between natural and cultural.

The differences between sex and gender are pretty significant. Sex is about biological matter, and gender is about social construction. Maybe approximately around the last three decades, several female Muslim scholars have discussed Islam in gender discourse in the modern era. They are considered to have one common ground in their research for their understanding of Islam by differentiating their understanding of Islam from the formal textures of how we can understand the text from context. The challenges within Muslim communities can be linked to going back to the text and 'Sunna'; however, on the other side, we must face the reality of many social changes. The challenge lies in how the interpreter interprets the scriptures and allows for critical thinking amongst Muslim scholars on how religion can be a solution and answer to societal challenges.

Between males and females, equality lies as the fundamental principle amongst the legal bases. Gender and religious inclusivity and raising an inclusive and gender-friendly society is not merely a task of a few people; it takes a strong commitment and real work together towards a just and human social transformation following the prophetic and religious mission. Many have a deep layer of integrity when it comes to the love for faith and religion, which is something that should not be diluted, but the question is how gender and inequality impact has on women and youth on a day-to-day basis.

Highlighting the importance of where the knowledge is based on the perspective of asking "Why should women be leaders?", "Why should women take higher education?" traditional roles should develop or continue to be re-interpreted; some chapters can be interpreted with other meanings towards a more just society and equality. These measures are impactful, primarily when implemented through policy change, such as in the example of Indonesia, where there are re-interpreted of them towards a better understanding aligned with equality for women using the new interpretations of the text in context.

3. Gender and Hinduism

This webinar was aimed to strengthen female faith community leaders' visibility and challenge gender stereotypes within faith communities.

Dr Swati Chakraborty shared an overview of two significant concepts within Hinduism, the concept of gender and its role in Hinduism and the role of women in Hinduism. There are many approaches to gender studies within Hinduism, both descriptive and less-analytical approaches dealing with traditional scriptural injunctions relating to women. For example, the image of Hindu women is often derived from two categories of sacred texts: the Vedas, the oldest and most authoritative Indian text (c. 1500-700 BCE) and Manusrti, the best-known prescriptive text and the most cited source of Hindu dharma (c. second-century BCE-second century CE).

Gender and its role in Hinduism: Gender fluidity in Hinduism connects to different cultural expressions of sexuality, apart from heterosexuality. Hindu mythology focuses on transgender people – men who turn into women and women who turn into men. So, it was there from the beginning of Hinduism and has always been there. There has not been any need for constitutional changes or advocacy, as Hinduism was less monastic, and transgender people were accepted into society, though not mainstreamed, forming part of the community, or serving the temple.

Most temples in India are maintained by male priests and only very few by priestesses – why so? Can women be priests? This question was asked to Sadguru, a (well-known figure in Hinduism) to which he replied, *"traditions evolved at a certain time in history in a particular situation and context. Technology has levelled the field to some extent. Previously the context of the tradition was such that activities outside the home were more suitable for a man, not a woman. There are other dimensions to it. In India, only public temples were maintained by men because they were more suitable for managing the public. Nevertheless, there was no home without a little shrine, and women always maintained these private shrines."*

It was a practice that the women performed all the day-to-day offerings. Women made these offerings, this practice is in the society, but the question is how the society is impacting women for specific roles (i.e., menstrual women cannot go to the temple); however, even nowadays, things are changing very rapidly. In social media, people are confused asking questions because upbringing in these contexts has been the norm for many women.

Men and women are different, but the problem with human beings is that every difference is discriminatory. Every society invents different levels of discrimination based on colour, gender, caste, and creed. Based on all traits, people find ways to make themselves superior to someone else inferior until they accept what we are.

Women and Hinduism: Dr Chakraborty highlighted that one of the most profound attributes of Hinduism is the recognition and worship of God as feminine. She said Hinduism is the only major religion that has always worshipped God in female form and continues to do so today. Many Hindus revere God's energy, or Shakti, through its personification in a Goddess. Many festivals, such as Vasant Panchami, Navaratri, and Dussehra, are wholly dedicated to Goddesses. While the social practice has not lived up to the Hindu ideal of gender equality and mutual respect, Hinduism remains one of the few major religions in which women have occupied and continue to occupy some of the most respected positions in spiritual leadership.

Concentrating on the Hindu scriptures extol the qualities of the feminine divine and the spiritual sameness of male and female deities while highlighting their differences in nature. Female and male principles are described as two halves of a whole or two wheels of a cart. The oneness of males and females is also highlighted. Emphasis is placed on the gender neutrality of the divine and the ambiguity of distinctions between men and women. Hindu teaching states that every human is made up of varying degrees of both feminine and masculine traits. Many ritual texts also emphasise that there is no difference between man and woman regarding the right to perform Vedic rites, and they often use gender-neutral language when describing God.

When it comes to goddess worship, Dr Chakraborty mentions how among the four main deity traditions still followed to date, Ganapatya, Vaishnava, Shaiva and Shakta, the feminine divine plays a central role. The Shakta tradition exclusively worships the feminine divine in the form of Shakti or Divine Mother. God as a

Mother Goddess is responsible for the well-being of the Universe and is considered the embodiment of incredible power.

The Feminine in Scriptures: Since ancient times, female figures have featured prominently in Hinduism, both in human and divine forms. Many of the sages associated with the realisation and authoring of the Vedas were women. The Rig Veda contains hymns composed by women such as Lopamudra and Maitreyi. Sage Gargi appears in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, where she poses a volley of questions to Sage Yajnavalkya on the nature of the soul and teases out core teachings from Yajnavalkya that a courtroom of male philosophers failed to. The question is, why has it changed? From the ages of Vedas, we are considering that women should also wear the veil, even within Hinduism. Why have such changes take place? If we would like to find an answer, the answer is a lack of self-sufficiency. Now we are not moving forward but rather moving backwards. So, how we interpret our scriptures; how we interpret them is very important. The male interpreters and philosophers also challenge the equality of a shared space.

The Hindu epics such as Mahabharata and Ramayana idealise women, embodied by depictions of Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandava princes in the Mahabharata, and Sita, the wife of Prince Rama in the Ramayana. Many Puranic texts also elucidate the stories and symbols of solely the feminine divine. Stories and prayers from the Devi Mahatmyam and the Devi Bhagavata Purana, for example, are the subject of art, poetry, dance, drama, and worship. Of course, consorts of male Gods, such as Vishnu and Shiva, also figure centrally in respective Vaishnava and Shaivite scripture.

The Role of Women in Ritual: Certain rites of passage, which were traditionally for both genders, such as the sacred thread ceremony signalling the commencement of one's religious education, over time, became the domain of boys and men only. There are steps, albeit small, to have such rites for both boys and girls. Regionally, there are also special rites that are just for boys and just for girls as well.

Current Indian Scenario in Women Religious Leadership: Today, most lineages or sampradayas ("denominations") are male-dominated in terms of leadership but generally open to women for dedicated monastic life or other levels of involvement. Others, however, are led by women such as Ammachi, Dadi Janki, Gurumayi Chidvilasananda, and Karunamayi, amongst others. Lastly, in many temples with secular, legal governing structures, there is no differentiation between men and women for voting or decision-making. Many temples have had women leaders – women serving as presidents or chairman, organising and leading religious events, and managing temple operations.

Dr Chakraborty ends with a conclusive remark highlighting the importance that the ideal women of India are appreciated based on her kulinism and characteristics. These characteristics include fidelity, chastity, servitude towards her husband and his family, obeisance, non-fickle mind behaviour, honesty, purity and many more. By fascinating and conditioning women based on these characteristics given by society, the notion of being a woman is not always given the space to be defined in her terms.

4. Gender and faith in a dream

She highlighted the significance of narratives in using controversial documentary films related to Islam and the arts because of her dedication to LGBTQ+ rights and human rights activism through her influential films.

Ms Nefise Özkal Lorentzen highlights the importance of storytelling as part of the recent film "*Seyran Ates – sex, revolution and Islam*". She highlights the importance of working with dreams and spirituality and being able to see the magic in religion despite the challenges. She started working with Islam in 2001, and although the topic was weighty, the film took many years. The first film in the trilogy has called "Gender Me" (2008, as Director), about Islam and homosexuality, then followed by "A Balloon for Allah" (2011) which is about Islam and feminism. Then came the film "Manislam" (2014), which was filmed in Indonesia, and the final and fourth one is the movie "Seyran Ates: Sex, Revolution and Islam" (2021)

As a creator and Director, Ms Lorentzen has always worked with Islam in many ways, but always within a dream as a vision. During her presentation, she highlights the importance of using storytelling and how through use of clichés makes it easy to communicate with each other when talking about a sensitive topic. Using

different dramaturgical tools, she was trying to find a homosexual imam, which was not easy to find. As an immigrant woman living in Norway with a Muslim background, she had experienced many strange questions about her background. In one of her creations, she invented the machine measuring her frustrations to answer to the host country's "white" dominated community who was curious about her background. In one of her creations from "Manislam", she tried to visualise how men are done in the world. Though not all of the inventions are by men, depicting in one of her artistic creations is a boat being driven by enslaved people and getting the energy from the enslaved people. Building on the previous speakers in the event, the Quran does mention slavery, questioning why a religion that talks about equality also talk about slavery.

In the following creative arts, one can see the feminist man who sees something and turns back. We may be trapped by politics, religion or the old way of thinking because we look forward and do not look back. Did we destroy everything? It was vital for her to document her imagery.

5. Gender, Youth and Religions for Peace

Young women in interfaith communities and leadership. How did we get here, and how to move forward?

Ms Emina Frljak presents from the perspective of youth, gender, and religion for peace. Her speech highlights her reflections and focuses on the role and position of women, particularly young women, in interfaith spaces. She was born, raised and grew up in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where east meets west. When reflecting on her path, she highlights that she was lucky to come across interfaith when she was still in high school, thanks to her teacher who taught her the culture of religion. Her journey started and developed after starting to work with religions for peace, focusing on our similarities and differences.

Her journey continues, and now she is working with the association 'Religions for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina'; and raises the question, "what has she learned whilst working in the interfaith spaces? She has learned that women are doing extraordinary work in the interfaith spaces, and sometimes the only ones who are keeping communities together and have the ability and strength with courage to do so. However, their work often gets under the radar and is not recognised. She has learned that they champion interfaith work in post-conflict places where it might even be dangerous to work, but they still persevere. She was privileged to meet and work with these women. On a more focused part, she noticed that women tend to focus more on the dialogue of action and life rather than theological and diplomatic dialogue. We tend to see them much more in these spaces because we have very few religious leaders working with diplomatic dialogue. Maybe also because there is a lack of women in these positions in our faith communities.

So, comparing the situation from 20-30 years ago and now, we see some women in these spaces, but there is still a tremendous amount of work to do. However, where are young women in these spaces? In this sphere of dialogue of action and life, more focus has relied on faith as a driver of change and social action. However, where research undertaken by religion and global society found that theological conversations, with regular attendance and religious spaces, were defining interfaith in the 20th century. However, young people now use more action-based words in solidarity to describe interfaith. This research found that there is no appetite to entirely separate from traditional interfaith structures. However, there is an intense desire for those structures to adopt ideas around social action and be much more welcoming to young voices. This shows us that we need some changes also on the hierarchical level.

In the 20th century, we needed to champion young women and social action. We must promote leadership opportunities within interfaith to those prohibited from more traditional roles. It is still relatively rare to find young people in interfaith leadership positions, especially in the role of religious leaders. However, being a woman makes it more challenging to achieve. So, we still have a long way to go since some religious communities are more religious and patriarchal than others. As a personal reflection, Ms Frljak highlights that without interfaith, she would not have been who she is today. Emphasising that she would not be able to understand her religion in the same way by learning to embrace her Muslim female identity as she does now.

Moreover, she would not be eager to speak about her religion so openly and feel as belonging to the world, humanity, and the planet as she feels now. So, we must open and make interfaith spaces more inclusive and susceptible, especially to young women. We carry an enormous potential that needs to be harvested to create a better present and future for the younger generations and everyone and work on intergenerational dialogue. Women and youth must be in leading positions to engage in interfaith dialogue.

6. How can we? Stepping into the circle of council

The Q&A session further deepened and broadened the discussion. The event's facilitator and panel leader, **Ms Octavia J. Hendricks**, echoed the collective response to awareness to constantly remind us that we cannot and will not stop defending our fundamental human rights. We also know that attacks and human rights violations have increased again following the case of 'Roe vs Wade' being overturned or when we look at the Turkish Juris dictionary confirming Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. These cases raise the alarm about what is happening about these old autocratic systems of leadership that still want to hold on to power, shedding light on the gratitude of being reminded of the paramount importance the roles and women must play in our faith communities. Ms Octavia, as the facilitator, welcomed the participants to engage and share their thoughts and reflections from their own experiences. The participants were welcomed to share what they have identified as practical tools that can be put into place in our communities, faith spaces and workplaces that allow our young females and female students to be acknowledged and celebrated because that step comes with interfaith. Participants were invited to participate in the circle of practice that is part of all our ancestral lineages. 'Council' is an indigenous and evolving practice that responds to humanity's call for radical responsibility and participation through authentic sharing and deep listening – listening to understand. Through the facilitation of Osun Rise by their module "Council of Women", Ms Octavia Hendricks led the session through the "circle".

The circle is explained through this module as having **healing power**. In the circle, everyone is equal and when in the circle, **no one is in front of you. No one is behind you. No one is above you. No one is below you.** The sacred circle is **designed to create unity**. The facilitator highlighted that we have also come to learn that **it takes a village** to achieve **gender equality**. To quote the beloved Kofi Annan sharing, "**gender equality is more than a goal itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development, and building good governance**".

The session built on an interwoven experience of unpacking two scenarios, leaning into scenario thinking. This methodology offers a way of facing future threats and opportunities and potentially impacting the organisation and our communities. The facilitator invites us to learn about scenario thinking as a method that contains essential components to promote the effective exchange of opinions and beliefs within a management team.

Scenario question 1:

How can we support the transition to change outdated actions not aligned with contemporary reflections and take steps towards solidarity across faith communities?

Scenario question 2:

If you were a female faith leader, what are the barriers in your career working towards faith communities, and what would you like to change in the next five years?

As key take aways Ms Octavia highlighted the importance of this conference and the issue of women still not being given a seat at relevant tables and being given the opportunity to fulfil religious leadership roles, in the context of the present worldwide crisis. We are also in a deep crisis of values. But female entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation could and should serve society. We must return to a values-based society where people are motivated not only by money, but also by a sense of service to the community.

Governments and Religious Houses in turn must recognize that women play an important role in social cohesion and, therefore, in many cases fiscal policy and women's rights legislation should be adapted to create a more harmonious environment for the establishment of a social purpose. The current global crisis, especially

taken from recent events in Iran, has shown that new paradigms are necessary to build a more conducive world for us all to live in, and a safer tomorrow for women and children.

Public-private-partnerships, global corporate citizenship and social entrepreneurship are key pillars to create a world which is socially and environmentally more sustainable.

7. Outcomes of the Discussion

- Recommendation of disconnecting the religion from the state to bring structural and institutional reforms rather than surface changes. Develop awareness programs and training for public policymakers and public office holders.
- Continuing to strive for equality and diversity of belief
- Aiming for a systematic approach or concept from divergent to convergent. Creating more collaborative initiatives at the civil society level creates more spaces for dialogue and interaction within migrant communities and with policy-making forums.
- Create more awareness amongst refugees, find platforms where people can meet across faith communities
- Having more proactivity in interfaith forums, not just highlighting what is missed or lacking
- Highlighting self as a faith leader and explaining the barriers of practising religion following the faith and societal challenges,
- Continuing to challenge for change in the current situation and culture of patriarchy and bring equality for women and men with more concrete policies over the next five years in the practical sides of coexisting within the faith communities
- Across faith communities, the notion challenges patriarchal leadership and societal structures.
- Mainstream media should stop portraying female faith community leaders in stereotypes and celebrate the diversity and strength within female leadership and the room for growth as role models for younger generations.

8. Acknowledgements

The policy brief draws from the webinar expert panel on “Faith and value creation - what is the future of faith & gender?” held on August 25th, 2022, and from presentations, material and conversation with participants and experts. The webinar was organised by New Women Connectors, in collaboration with Global Exchange on Religion in Society (GERIS), MamaCash, and Osun Rise and funded by the European Union through the GERIS micro projects.

The panellists included:

- Ms Anila Noor (Founder, New WomenConnectors)
- Ms Seyran Khalili (Project lead, New Women Connectors)
- Ms Octavia J. Hendricks (CEO, Osun Rise)
- Ms Emina Frljak (Program Coordinator within Youth for Peace)
- Ms Nefise Øksal Lorentzen (Turkish-Norwegian writer, filmmaker and professor at The faculty of Audiovisual Media and Creative Technologies at Innland University, Norway.)
- Ms Riska Dwi Agustin (Lecturer on Islamic Studies Methodology, Sociology of Religion and Gender in Islam)
- Ms Swati Chakraborty (Assistant Professor, Centre for Human Rights, Law and Justice, GLA University. Project Fellow, GERIS)

References:

- IMDB Link information about the films
- N Özkal Lorentzen; Integral Film
- N Özkal Lorentzen; Film in 12 different languages

Partners and collaborators:

- GERIS (Global Exchange on Religion in Society)
- European Union
- MamaCash
- Osun Rise with Octavia J.
- Hendricks
- Project lead: Seyran Khalili
- Chair: Anila Noor

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New Women Connectors is a women-led initiative that advocates for "gender transformative changes" in EU migration policies. We promote equal opportunities and inclusion while avoiding the stigmatisation of vulnerable groups.

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