
UN Women
Expert Group Meeting
‘Envisioning women’s rights in the post-2015 context’

New York, New York
3-5 November 2014

Extremism in the Mainstream: Implications for and Actions by Women

Expert paper prepared by:

Janet R. Jakobsen*
Barnard College, Columbia University
United States

I’d like to thank the organizers for inviting me to be a part of this conversation and the authors for a very interesting paper. In this brief response I won’t be able to respond to every aspect of this important paper, so I will begin with one of the points from near the end of the paper in the section on “Women’s Resistance to Extremism and their struggle for Rights, Peace and Plurality.” This section articulates a number of ways in which women and feminist movements are responding to the challenges of the contemporary political moment, including “Providing alternative messaging and counter-narratives.” The authors say of this strategy, “The strategy of counter-narratives is a young but growing field. One review of civil society and government initiatives concludes that successful campaigns attempt to ‘plant seeds of doubt’ rather than promote another extreme which can perpetuate dangerous black-and-white thinking. Successful counter-narratives also pay close attention to the target audience, historical and cultural context, and the credibility and authority of the messenger.¹”

As someone trained in religious studies, I find this strategy to be a particularly powerful one for a number of reasons: as the authors note, this strategy strives to avoid “black-and-white thinking,” in which one must choose secularism *or* religion, good religion *or* bad, old *or* new approaches to the world. Feminists have long criticized this type of binary

*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

¹ Briggs, Rachel and Sebasiten Feve. “Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism.” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, July 2013. Available at strategicdialogue.org.

opposition. In addition, as the paper points out, these binaries often fuel the conflicts in which women (and women's bodies in particular) are the "battlefield" (10).

These binaries also flatten the complexities of women's lives and of the social contexts in which they negotiate these lives. So, one of my thoughts in expanding this strategy would be to infuse some more of this fluidity into not just counter-narratives about the values of human rights and women's lives, but also in those narratives we provide as social analysts, whether as scholars or activists or both. For example, the authors of the paper push us to see that there are many sources of the type of anti-feminist measures that are our concern in this discussion. "Religion" alone cannot account for shifts in societal possibilities for women: "There is a fluidity to the range of actors and movements that are promulgating these values." This fluidity also includes a range of social forces that promote destructive values. They note that the spread of neoliberal capitalism has had a profound effect on the role of religion in society; they explore the ways in which politics and political institutions can undercut rights, including the flows of political influence across national boundaries; and the authors also include the role of new technologies and social media. In none of these cases does the flow move in only one direction – politics doesn't simply push religion, nor religion politics.

There are other points in the paper where it might be useful to infuse more of this fluidity, multiplicity and nuance. For example, at the very beginning of the paper, the authors present a framework that understands the problem of religious extremism to be one of extremist minorities moving into the mainstream: "Every major world religion – Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism- is witnessing the outgrowth of an extreme minority that exploits religion to justify intolerance, oppressive and violence. . . . In each instance, the vociferous minority has made significant strides into the mainstream" (1). I'm sure there are cases in which this is an accurate description of the social landscape, but if we think that this model is accurate to every religion and every area of the world, then we obscure some of the very analytic points that are so helpful in other parts of the paper.

I see two points at which this analytic narrative could benefit from more complexity. First, the idea that the problem feminists hope to address through their counter-narratives should be named as "religious extremism," sets up precisely the kind of binary that the authors later suggest is a problem. This naming of the problem sets up the problem as religion when taken to the extreme. An alternative way of understanding this problem would be the ways in which religion becomes implicated in a range of social forces – including geopolitical forces and economic flows. Sometimes moderate versions of religion are implicated in these forces and sometimes extreme versions do so. For example, the United States has tried to promote "moderate religion" around the world as part of its geopolitical strategy in ways that can be as problematic for local populations as "extreme religion." Rather than trying to adjudicate between "moderate" and "extreme" religion, feminists can analyze the ways in which interactions among various forces contribute to human rights violations and gender injustice.

Just as focusing on religion in a way that lifts it out of other social relations can undercut social analysis, so also understanding the issues in terms of a single direction of action – from margin to mainstream – can obscure some of the sources of human rights violations. For example, in discussing the political problem of “leveraging politics to spread regressive attitudes,” the authors draw on the example of Zia Al-Huq’s introduction of an Islamist agenda in Pakistan with the support of Saudi Arabia in the 1980s in order to support his own political position and power. This example shows the transnational complexity of political influence, and it also shows that sometimes the influence is top down, emanating from states, i.e. from the mainstream of public life rather than from “fringe” minorities that then move into the mainstream and toward political power. Now it may be the case that the top down influence of the Pakistani state in this case gets picked up in complicated ways by various religious and political actors, some of whom are on the margins of society and who, in fact, in subsequent decades use Islamism precisely to challenge the Pakistani state. But, what this suggests is a model in which religious ideas and possibilities are circulating in multiple directions and that, in this case, the state may be as much a source of the problem as it is a source of human rights protections. More recently in Russia we have seen the state (re)institute the Russian Orthodox Church, and then use that religious institution in a top down fashion for nationalist purposes – here both state and religious institutions are working top down, in this case to overrun a gay minority that wasn’t in the mainstream but is being used as a battleground on which to establish a new version of the nationalist mainstream. The intertwining of state and religion in this situation is quite profound and did not become so through a religious minority moving into the mainstream and then to political power.

The narrative that the authors provide on the implications of neoliberal capitalism similarly involves the state as well as religious actors. In this case the key action is the state’s pulling back from the provision of social services to citizens and, thus, opening the door to increased activity by religious social service providers who tie the provision of services to the provision of their religious message and in some cases to the acceptance of that message. Noting the effects of the state’s pulling back in certain arenas is crucially important when trying to trace the sources of anti-feminist action, but this shift in the state doesn’t just affect religious actors. We can also note that the state has been an active player in suggesting that with neoliberal privatization, familial relations should replace state-sponsored social service provision. In the United States, the government continues to spend millions of tax dollars on marriage promotion as an answer to poverty – this program has been sponsored by both Democrats and Republicans, and the idea of marriage as a solution to poverty has been articulated by members of both parties, whether or not they are members of right-wing Christian political movements.

Even within religious institutions the direction of influence may be from the center or mainstream of a religious tradition out toward religious participants. The paper helpfully highlights the importance of liberation theology in relation to a central Catholic focus on social justice. Historically, this social justice focus has included promotion of economic justice, critique of the death penalty and of nuclear war. Liberation theology was also a major source for Catholic feminist activism, including feminists like Rosemary Reuther in North America and Mercy Oduyeye in Africa. The destruction of liberation theology

was often experienced as a movement of the mainstream of the church (in wealthy locations in the global North) against more marginalized positions (grounded in base communities in the global South) led away from this broad social justice perspective as part of the Catholic vision to a more singular focus on issues of gender and sexual hierarchy as the litmus test for adherence to Catholic doctrine. So, in this instance, to understand the challenges that feminists, including Catholic feminists, face one would need to provide a social analysis of traditional structures of religious authority and of why those structures have sometimes shifted their focus with regard to basic categories like the primary meaning of justice.

The reason for pursuing this additional complexity in how we tell the story of religion in relation to human rights violations is not just that it gives us a better picture of what's happening, showing us how social forces circulate in different contexts and at different moments. A more complex analysis also raises questions about how feminists might best respond. For example, this additional nuance in the way we might tell the story of "religious extremism" raises a central question about where feminist action should be located. The paper's title points to the importance of "action by women," but the conclusion of the paper focuses on governmental sites: "The challenges posed by rising conservatism and extremism requires a fundamental shift in how national governments and international institutions understand and address the issues." This shift in national governments and international institutions is, indeed, crucial. The first paragraph of this concluding section of the paper, for example, makes an exceptionally important point about the dangers of the role that states play in promoting anti-terrorist activities that often make local situations worse, rather than better. Interestingly, in the next two paragraphs of this section, the site of action becomes vague: "Innovative solutions reach out to all actors," but who is reaching out? And does it make a difference whether outreach emanates from states or international institutions or from civil society and social movements? My suggestion is that once we develop a multi-causal, multi-directional, analysis of how religious extremism flows through societies we might want to raise additional questions about the best sites on which to focus action, as well as about the best type of action to pursue. This more complex analysis also opens more room for feminist counter-narratives. Rather than focusing on a particular religious identification (whether extreme or moderate; mainstream or marginal) as a problem, we can see more clearly how religious and secular feminists might ally over resistance to the human rights violations and the creation of a more just world.