On June 14, 2019, a group of scholars and policymakers from governmental, non-governmental and the United Nations gathered to discuss the nexus between religion, development and gender at the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam. In addition to bringing together a unique combination of speakers, the one day roundtable was the first attempt to directly tackle some of the most difficult aspects of these intersections.

Thanks to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as Agenda 2030, formulated and agreed to by 193 governments, an entire SDG is devoted to gender equality and women’s empowerment (SDG 5). Yet, gender equality remains a long road for many countries to traverse, especially since social norms and attitudes remain among the most critical challenges. We know that religious actors are among the strongest social and cultural gatekeepers in most parts of the world, and many religious discourses still uphold patriarchal dynamics. Indeed, some would say that religious institutions and landscapes remain, by and large, the strongest bastions of patriarchy in modern times.

*What are the specific ‘contestations’ that involve gender? How are these positions and voices - this particular selection in the basket of undesirables – arrived at? Are these matters of interpretation or legislation – or both? Are there alternative readings of religious text that enable a mode of life closely aligned with both the spirit and the Indicators of the SDGs and are these texts, together with the current developmental practices able to make a difference to the way religion impacts on policymaking?*

*What are governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental actors doing – or not – to tackle some of these challenges? Are these gendered contestations being ignored or countered?*

These are the questions which structured some of the discussions around the Roundtable. Because gender is often a root feature of human interaction and life, discussions around this nexus invariably identified issues applicable to the entire gamut of the relationships between development and religions. Also rather inevitably, more questions were raised than were answered.

In seeking to address the questions above through diverse presentations, the discussions identified a number of ‘gaps’ in current policies as well as developmental praxis. Among these was the divergence between lived realities and textual interpretations of scriptures, which was elaborated through rich presentations by seasoned academics as well as policy experts. The latter also spoke to the different appreciations of ‘time’ existing between governmental entities (with their strict planning and funding cycles) and religious institutions and actors (whose very purpose is understood as ‘eternal’), and how this often creates a dissonance in the very language and purpose.

Some religious actors spoke to the very real transformations they witness – and are part of – which take place when religious leaders are convened around developmental health challenges - e.g. HIV and AIDS and related gender dynamics – and are able to re-read religious scriptures in ways which ‘heal’ discriminatory behaviour and affirm gender equality and women’s empowerment. These individual transformations which take place among some religious leaders, however, do not ‘translate up’ into the hierarchies of diverse religious institutions. This begs the question of how to effect structural transformations, and in turn, how to draw on the existing wealth of positive transformative work within religious communities themselves? This led to a discussion around theologies helpful for gender equality and women’s empowerment discourses, versus a perceived re-intensification of diverse forms of “fundamentalisms” which are often spurred by a rejection of these very same transformative theologies.

At the same time, a question was asked as to whether there was even a common vision among these diverse sectors represented around this particular table – what, in fact, is the change ‘we’ aim to see? Central to this discussion was a perception – shared largely by the activists and academics who came from the southern hemisphere – that the increased interest in religion being accorded by secular governmental and intergovernmental actors may yet be tinged with colonial lenses. If religion today is the new variable in international foreign policy and development praxis, then is there a real risk of the ‘commodification’ of religion by both governmental and non-governmental actors alike? In other words, is the interest in ‘religion’ a matter of utility for the sake of biased national interests, or is it about fundamentally reappraising and redesigning the way government policies are developed in the first place, as a result of centering the sanctity of faiths, and religiousity, in peoples’ lives, and respecting that for the sake of the common good? And if religion is just another instrument for policymaking as usual, then could governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental actors alike, actually be doing harm? In fact, are any of these actors even asking themselves, and their institutions, this question?

On a more hopeful note, an introspection was raised by UN colleagues who cited how some emergency contexts can actually provide an opportunity to tackle difficult gendered contestations. This view maintains that in the height of political disputations, women’s bodies, and sexuality, can be a feature of the contestations taking place, which also provides an opportunity for *some* religious actors to voice readings and perspectives which counter the dominant patriarchal and misogynistic narratives.

The objectives of the roundtable included suggesting concrete recommendations for academia and (inter)governmental actors. To which end, three concrete recommendations were made. A specific resource was called for which would serve as a user-friendly and reader-friendly gender-sensitive religious (re)reading of the Sustainable Development Goals. This ‘handbook’, would need to include diverse religious narratives, be relevant for multi-faith contexts, and provide examples of interventions which succeeded in transforming harmful social norms around gender, through rereading of scriptures.

Another related recommendation called for more safe spaces (such as that provided by the VU’s Centre for Religion and Development), wherein discussions of very real differences in theological and textual interpretations of and around gender, could be hosted. Thus, far from preaching to the converted, the call is for a space which would allow for respectful and candid religious contestations.

The need to (continue) to provide multi-religious ‘trainings’ -- religious competency skills-building -- for policy makers in governmental and intergovernmental settings was the third recommendation. These recommendations, it was emphasized, need to build on existing resources - some already within the academic and convening capacities of the VU, and some inherent in the networks and platforms of FBOs and UN entities represented at the table (e.g. UNFPA and UNAIDS networks on religious actors and entities working with development issues around the world) as well as resources available in and through partnership platforms such as ACT Alliance, Children on the Move, and PaRD.

Azza Karam – June 23.