

Under Crossfire: The Courageous Work of Women-Faith Based Mediators to Prevent, Mitigate and Resolve Violent Conflicts

From 2022 to 2023, the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers (N RTP) and the Berghof Foundation (BF) partnered to study and elevate the challenges and entry points within peace mediation processes faced by women-faith based mediators (WFBMs). Drawing on local research conducted in Colombia, Nigeria, Syria, Cameroon, Iraq, and Kenya, as well as interviews from individuals WFBMs from Israel, Uganda, Yemen, and Aceh, this study unearths the potential of WFBMs for peacemaking, their motivations, their strategies to overcome societal and religious boundaries, their areas of operation and their achievements in the cessation and prevention of violence. Relevant stories and lived experiences of individual WFBMs from different parts of the world build the foundation of the study to understand how the intersectionality of faith, and being a woman or young woman, impacts the effectiveness of peace mediation and negotiation processes at all tracks.



Key Insights and Learnings

1. Many WFBMs have difficulty identifying themselves with the term “mediator” or “negotiator.” These terms and concepts are seen as alien to local understandings and practices. In practice, all tools (mediation, dialogue, reconciliation work, trauma healing, and human rights advocacy) are used simultaneously and consecutively. For WFBMs, it is the purpose that matters and not the tool.

2. Many of the peace mediation and negotiation efforts emerge out of an immediate need on the local level. The majority of WFBMs are involved in track 3 processes, negotiating, and mediating at a local level with local stakeholders and leadership of armed groups. Few WFBMs are involved in peace processes at the national level. Their effective and successful work on track 2 and 3 is crucial to getting the opportunity to mediate at the national level.

3. Almost all WFBMs see themselves as religious and faith-based actors, clearly distinct from secular ones. Faith and religion are constitutive for the motivation of WFBMs, and it gives them courage, resilience, hope, and persistence. WFBMs use faith-based references, values, and knowledge for leveraging their processes, creating entry points, and building trust.

4. The more relevant faith and religion is within a society or community, the more relevant the capability to operate based on faith-based knowledge and references.

5. Despite contextual and individual dynamics, religion as a cultural and societal force has been seen to play a constructive role of opening doors, including for hard-to-reach actors.

6. The potential of WFBMs is not sufficiently utilized due to prevailing patriarchal culture in religious contexts. Gender discrimination is further entrenched and legitimized by direct reference to religious texts. This partly explains the reasons for the limited role they play and the dearth of WFBMs in conflict contexts.

7. Being perceived as less threatening and intimidating compared to their male counterparts allows WFBMs in some situations to take greater risks and to negotiate and advocate for the cessation of violence. Men are often under stronger threat of being punished. Punishment is also gendered with some men facing sexual violence and castration to make them feel or appear ‘less of what society deems a man.’

8. WFBMs are often taken seriously, as they are not seen as part of the problem. Women and WFBMs are perceived as pursuing less personal or political goals and interest. Being seen as not having personal stakes in the conflict, allows WFBMs to change between different roles of advocating, negotiating, and mediating.

9. The added value of WFBMs is also derived from the networks which they create and operate through. WFBMs are able to utilize these networks to open new communication channels and build internal group pressure to leverage during the peace mediation process.

10. In utilizing an inclusive approach, many WFBMs engage and partner with male gatekeepers to facilitate their entry and outreach, including male religious and traditional leaders.

Recommendations

In recognizing the many risks and challenges that WFBMs face within their work as well as the specific support needs that they have identified, below are tailored recommendations for the international community, national governments, and religious authorities and institutions to further support the critical work of WFBMs.

To the International Community

1. Acknowledge and recognize the specific role of WFBMs through promoting their leadership and participation within international policy frameworks and high-level mediation processes.
2. Develop and increase funding mechanisms for WFBMs that are flexible, independent and offer long-term support.
3. Offer further capacity-building and training opportunities for WFBMs.
4. Support the establishment of WFBM networks and platforms as well as advocate for the inclusion of WFBMs within existing women mediator's networks.
5. Offer mental health and psychosocial support.

Read the Full
Study Here:



Photo: Cameroon. Group work with Catholic Women Organization as Faith Mediators in Bamenda 2018.

To National Governments

1. Acknowledge and recognize the specific role of WFBMs.
2. Promote the inclusion of WFBMs within peace mediation processes and government-led negotiations.
3. Ensure the physical safety of WFBMs.
4. Ensure the legal safety of WFBMs.

To Religious Authorities and Institutions

1. Acknowledge and promote the leadership role of WFBMs within peace mediation processes.
2. Promote the allyship and partnership between male religious authorities and actors and WFBMs.
3. Offer formal religious education.
4. Collect data and advance resources on the work of WFBMs.