

## **A Social Capital Perspective on the Peace Work of Religious Women**

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### **PRECIS**

*Women are often invisible when official religious peacebuilding efforts are effectuated. However, religious women, even though often not allowed into official religious peace initiatives, are still active peacebuilders. The religious peacebuilding efforts of men have been subject to academic discussions and theorization during past decades, while the peace work of religious women has frequently been empirically described but to a much lesser extent theorized. This essay seeks to contribute to theorizing the peace work of religious women to enable more conceptual discussions on how their contribution to peace can be understood. Drawing upon older and more recent empirical descriptions of religious peacebuilding efforts led by women, I suggest that we consider how religious norms, identities, and religious organization are utilized to strengthen and create social capital in these efforts. This is a valuable perspective when seeking to understand peacebuilding efforts by religious women.*

### **Introduction**

In peace processes in the conflict zones of the world, women are often invisible. Despite many years of intense attention from the international community, women are rarely granted a seat at the tables where violent disputes are settled and peace settlements negotiated.<sup>1</sup> The same

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<sup>1</sup>See Kara Ellerby, “(En)Gendered Security? The Complexities of Women’s Inclusion in Peace Processes,” *International Interactions*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2013), p. 437; available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2013.805130>.

reality applies when studying peacebuilding<sup>2</sup> efforts by religious actors. Such initiatives often involve religious elites, which are largely male. But, even though religious women are not as visible as religious men in peacebuilding efforts, this does not mean that they are not involved in such efforts. I offer here a social capital perspective on how religious women use their religious resources when engaging in building peace. Religious women are understood here as women who draw upon resources from religious knowledge, discourses, and traditions and who are also active in religious institutions, networks, and groups.<sup>3</sup>

The peace work of religious women is more invisible than the peace work of religious men. This is also the case theoretically. As I will show, while the peace efforts of religious women have frequently been empirically described, these efforts have to a much lesser extent been conceptualized theoretically. Whereas religious peacebuilding has received substantial theoretical and conceptual attention over past decades, these efforts have taken an interest in the more visible male religious elites.<sup>4</sup> These contributions have potentially not fully captured how we can conceptually understand the more invisible peace work done by religious women. I propose to see the peace work of religious women through a social capital lens, to understand

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<sup>2</sup>In this essay, I use the terms “peacebuilding” and “peace work” interchangeably. It is, of course, possible to see conceptual points of understanding as different phases of activities aimed at preventing conflict, reaching peace agreements, and restoring peace after conflict. However, those distinctions are not a major interest here, as I take a broader overview of religious women’s efforts for peace in all phases of conflict.

<sup>3</sup>See Sumanto Al Qurtuby, “Religious Women for Peace and Reconciliation in Contemporary Indonesia,” *International Journal on World Peace* 31 (March, 2014): 27.

<sup>4</sup>See, e.g., R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); John D. Brewer, Gareth I. Higgins, and Francis Teeney, *Religion, Civil Society, and Peace in Northern Ireland* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2011); David Little, ed. (with the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding), *Peacemakers in Action: Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and David Little, “Religion, Nationalism, and Intolerance,” in Timothy D. Sisk, ed., *Between Terror and Tolerance: Religious Leaders, Religion, and Peacemaking* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), pp. 9–28.

better the contribution of such efforts for peace, as I draw upon more historical and recent empirical work done by other scholars to argue for my proposition.

It is important to acknowledge that religious women's marginal or nonrepresentation is a rights-deficit. This deficit should be addressed adequately so that women can take their seats at the negotiation tables and in visible arenas where peace is being discussed. Here, however, I will just acknowledge this claim and not go into depth regarding what is required to get women included in the more visible religious peacebuilding arenas. Rather, my focus is on what religious women do "off-grid" when engaging for peace and how we can understand that engagement.

On a similar note, we should not assume that women always strive for peace. In many world conflicts, women have, in different ways, contributed to prolonging violence. Religious women are no exception, and there are examples of their engaging to create more division between groups in conflict.<sup>5</sup> Assuming that it is the default mode of women—and religious women in particular—to engage constructively in peacebuilding would be wrong. In addition, it would contribute to essentializing women as peace-prone and preclude the broad variety of activities in which women from different religious traditions engage.<sup>6</sup>

Before delving into the discussion of what religious women do when building peace, we need a quick glance at what religious peacebuilding is. Religious peacebuilding is a recognized form of intervention in conflict zones around the world. Currently, religious actors are participating in a broad range of conflict settings, either on their own initiative or in close collaboration with Western donors emphasizing the significance of religion's being mobilized for peace in settings where the opposite is also true—that religion is being mobilized for

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<sup>5</sup>E.g., see Qurtuby, "Religious Women for Peace and Reconciliation," p. 33.

<sup>6</sup>See Dan Smith, "The Problem of Essentialism," in Inger Skjelsbæk and Dan Smith, eds., *Gender, Peace, and Conflict* (London: Sage, 2001), p. 33.

violence.<sup>7</sup> Religious peacebuilding can be understood as “actions taken by people acting with an expressed religious mandate (individuals or institutional representatives) to constructively and nonviolently prevent, reduce or transform inter-group conflict.”<sup>8</sup> As is the case in many nonreligious peacebuilding processes, religious peacebuilding is dominated by men. The male dominance might be particularly strong in religious settings, which are traditionally seen as patriarchal and where women, often with the backing of religious norms and precedents, are denied access to formal and visible positions.

Viewing religious women who are building peace as mere victims of patriarchal structures will not give the analytical depth and understanding I am seeking here. Rather, understanding how women operate on the margins of, and negotiate with, patriarchal social structures might create new knowledge of their efforts. Susan Hayward seems to agree with this perspective, as she has claimed that women in religious peacebuilding activities, even if situated in the margins, are able to redefine their roles and work toward their goals for holistic peace.<sup>9</sup> Linda Woodhead reasoned in a similar way as she pointed out that discussing the role of women in religious communities in light of patriarchy provides a blunt tool for understanding these complex forms of social organization and their interplay with gender differences.<sup>10</sup> She

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<sup>7</sup>Appleby is known to have made important contributions to an academic debate that emphasize the ambivalent power of religion to sustain both violence and peace; see Appleby, *Ambivalence of the Sacred*.

<sup>8</sup>Reina C. Neufeldt, “Interfaith Dialogue: Assessing Theories of Change,” *Peace & Change* 36 (July, 2011): 346; available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0130.2011.00702.x>.

<sup>9</sup>See Susan Hayward, “Women, Religion and Peacebuilding,” in Atalia Omer, R. Scott Appleby, and David Little, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, 1st ed. (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 322; available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199731640.013.0012>.

<sup>10</sup>See Linda Woodhead, “Feminism and Sociology of Religion, from Gender-blindness to Gendered Difference,” in Richard K. Fenn, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 2001), p. 69.

suggested that one key observation about women and religion might be that religion offers a variety of social spaces to women for the articulation and realization of their desires.<sup>11</sup>

Here, I take as a point of departure Woodhead's understanding of the possibilities that religious women have to act in a myriad of ways, also within religious structures. I suggest applying Kristian Harpviken and Hanne Eggen Røislien's conceptual framework of religion and peace—outlining how religious actors use norms, organization, and identities—as a starting point to understand the peacebuilding efforts of religious women.<sup>12</sup> Their framework is meant to shed light on the peacebuilding activities of all religious actors, and I find their framework useful for understanding how women apply religious resources for peace in less visible arenas. In addition, I propose to consider Harpviken and Eggen Røislien's perspectives through a social capital lens, to understand better the networking dimension of religious women's engagement for peace.

Adding a social capital perspective to the study of religious peacebuilding is acknowledged by other scholars as well. For example, John Brewer, Gareth Higgins, and Francis Teeney presented perspectives on how religious actors could contribute to creating social capital through their peacebuilding efforts.<sup>13</sup> What social capital is and how it is a perspective in peacebuilding will be dealt with in more depth below. For now, I will just say that social capital, understood as resources in the form of networks and trust,<sup>14</sup> can be considered an analytical

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<sup>11</sup>See Linda Woodhead, "Women and Religion," in Linda Woodhead, Paul Fletcher, Hiroko Kawanami, and David Smith, eds., *Religions in the Modern World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 333–334.

<sup>12</sup>See Kristian Berg Harpviken and Hanne Eggen Røislien, "Faithful Brokers? Potentials and Pitfalls of Religion in Peacemaking," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 3 (2008), pp. 351–373.

<sup>13</sup>See John D. Brewer, Gareth I. Higgins, and Francis Teeney, "Religion and Peacemaking: A Conceptualization," *Sociology* 44 (December, 2010): 1023; available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038510381608>.

<sup>14</sup>See Dag Wollebæk and Signe Bock Seggaard, "Sosial Kapital—Hva Er Det Og Hvor Kommer Det Fra?" in Dag Wollebæk and Signe Bock Seggaard, eds., *Social Kapital i Norge* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm akademisk, 2011), p. 26.

lens that enables us to see how social relationships are nurtured and restored across conflict divides.

In this essay, I will first present some of the possible connections between religion and peace in order to establish the backdrop to the discussion of how religious women engage for peace. Introducing Harpviken and Eggen Røislien's conceptual understanding of religion and peace, I substantiate why I find their understanding applicable to the peace endeavors of religious women. I then discuss social capital as a perspective that can shed light upon what takes place when religious women engage for peace. I emphasize the somewhat blurred connections between social capital and peace but still substantiate why an acknowledgement of social bonds can shed light upon both the ambition of and the contribution of religious women to peace. I also discuss whether an understanding of spiritual capital might deepen our understanding of what women do when they engage in peacebuilding. Examples from Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine, and Sierra Leone will show how religious women draw upon identities, norms, and organizational structures that are available in their social context when engaging in peacebuilding and, finally, how their efforts can be considered through a social capital lens.

### **Connections between Religion and Peace**

In order to understand why religious actors, both women and men, engage in religious peacebuilding, a quick look at the possible connections between religion and peace is useful. For many religious actors, working for peace is an imperative, a part of their interpretation of their faith. This connection between religious norms and engagement for peace has been noted by the scholarly community as well. Scott Appleby, for one, in his book on the *Ambivalence of the Sacred*, underlined that religion has the capacity to contribute to both violence and peace.

His text on these connections in many ways paved the way for an ensuing, vibrant discussion on how religion, in a broad sense, can contribute toward diminishing intergroup violence. Douglas Johnston has, in his suggestions to this discussion, underlined the possible role of diplomats of faith in creating common understandings of pressing issues.<sup>15</sup> Johan Galtung has argued that religion has both “soft” and “hard” dimensions. The soft dimensions of religion emphasize what is common and shared across religious traditions, whereas hard dimensions point to differences and oppositions between religions. Galtung argued that enhancing the common soft qualities of religion is an important peacebuilding measure.<sup>16</sup>

Although most authors who are working on the connections between religion and peace acknowledge that religion has the capacity for both peace and violence,<sup>17</sup> the discourse on the possibilities for religious actors to contribute to less violence in otherwise violent contexts has frequently been characterized by an optimistic focus on opportunities for religious leaders to contribute to peace.<sup>18</sup> In recent years, there has been an increasing call for sharper analytical understandings of what such endeavors actually entail and how they contribute to peace.<sup>19</sup> For example, Reina Neufeldt has called for a better understanding of the “theories of change” that are embedded in religious peacebuilding.<sup>20</sup> Brewer, Higgins, and Teeney have provided a conceptual framework for understanding religious peacebuilding as embedded in the state-civil

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<sup>15</sup>See Douglas Johnston, *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>16</sup>See Johan Galtung, “Religions Hard and Soft,” in Lee Marsden, ed., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Religion and Conflict Resolution* (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2012), pp. 248–249.

<sup>17</sup>See, e.g., Little, “Religion, Nationalism, and Intolerance”; and Appleby, *Ambivalence of the Sacred*.

<sup>18</sup>See, e.g., Steen-Johnsen, *State and Politics in Religious Peacebuilding*, Palgrave Studies in Compromise after Conflict (London: Palgrave Macmillan U.K., 2018 [1st ed. 2017]); based on “Oil on Troubled Waters: Religious Peacebuilding in Ethiopia,” Ph.D. diss., University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway 2014), pp. 24–27.

<sup>19</sup>See *ibid.*, pp. 27–31.

<sup>20</sup>See Neufeldt, “Interfaith Dialogue.”

society nexus.<sup>21</sup> Their points have been further developed in empirical studies underlining the need to understand how state politics carve out the social space available to religious peacemakers. According to this work, religious actors cannot be viewed as autonomous agents but, rather, as operating in a civil sphere that is both restricted and enabled by state policies on civil society.<sup>22</sup>

### **Norms, Organization, and Identity as Conceptual Lenses on Religious Women's Building Peace**

The discussion of female religious peacebuilders is located in a critical realm, as recently described, calling for a sharper analytical lens to understand the inner workings and significance of religious peacebuilding. Harpviken and Eggen Røislien provided such a critical, analytical lens through their article on religion and peacebuilding, in which they described the tools available to religious peacebuilders, who are most commonly men. I will argue that their conceptual framework can also be applied to religious women who are building peace and, as such, also give insight into these types of activities. Harpviken and Eggen Røislien suggested that religion could become activated in peacemaking through its normative system, through its organizational structure, and through using religious identities to identify common grounds between groups in conflict.<sup>23</sup> This perspective will form a red thread in the discussion as I investigate how these resources can be applied by women engaged in religious peacebuilding.

When Harpviken and Eggen Røislien referred to the normative system of religion, they were talking about the ethical and possibly also the political discourse of religions. Such norms

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<sup>21</sup>See Brewer, Higgins, and Teeney, "Religion and Peacemaking."

<sup>22</sup>See Appleby, *Ambivalence of the Sacred*; and Tale Steen-Johnsen, *State and Politics in Religious Peacebuilding*.

<sup>23</sup>See Harpviken and Eggen Røislien, "Faithful Brokers?" pp. 362–365.



can be found in sacred texts, interpretations of which are proffered and sustained through discourse. The normative systems of religions, they suggested, can be utilized to mobilize alternatives to violence.<sup>24</sup> When discussing norms as a resource in peacebuilding, however, it might be important to note that there are differences in the adherents' dependence upon and willingness to follow the normative directions of a religious system.<sup>25</sup> Whereas some religious communities will take the normative messages of formal or informal religious leaders to heart, others will engage in more critical deliberations and launch alternative, often political, interpretations of the messages that are offered.<sup>26</sup>

Utilizing the normative resources of religion to proffer peace is a well-known strategy. I have shown elsewhere how religious leaders are keen to proffer peace by referring to the religious ethos of love.<sup>27</sup> When faced with conflicts between religious groups, religious leaders turn to the most convenient and noncontroversial normative religious resource there is—the call to love your neighbor—in order to diminish expressions of violence between such groups.<sup>28</sup> Such a call might be what Galtung termed a soft dimension of religion, with its stress on the commonalities between traditions—in this case, an ethos of love.<sup>29</sup> However, referring to love without touching upon deeper questions of injustice could lead to prolonged conflict.<sup>30</sup> Normative religious resources for peace are not, therefore, an automatic quick fix. In some conflict contexts, religious actors have made an effort to plunge into other, more complex normative resources of religion to grapple with such questions as human rights and

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<sup>24</sup>See *ibid.*, p. 362.

<sup>25</sup>See *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>See, e.g., Steen-Johnsen, *State and Politics in Religious Peacebuilding*, p. 139.

<sup>27</sup>See Tale Steen-Johnsen, "The Rhetoric of Love in Religious Peacebuilding," *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2020), pp. 433–448; available at doi:10.1080/13537903.2020.1810972.

<sup>28</sup>See Tale Steen-Johnsen, "Methodological Challenges to the Study of Religious Peacebuilding," in Pål Repstad, ed., *Political Religion, Everyday Religion: Sociological Trends*, International Studies in Religion and Society 33 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 84–103.

<sup>29</sup>See Galtung, "Religions Hard and Soft," pp. 248–249.

<sup>30</sup>See Steen-Johnsen, "Methodological Challenges."

reconciliation.<sup>31</sup> And, as Harpviken and Eggen Røislien suggested, norms should be considered as a go-to resource available to religious peacebuilders, women and men alike. It can be activated to start making social connections across conflict divides.

The organizational structure of religions is another resource that might be used as communication and mobilization channels in peacebuilding efforts. Harpviken and Eggen Røislien emphasized that the potential of religious organizations to use their organizational resources will vary between denominations and contexts. Some religious communities have flat and informal structures with diffuse leaders, while others are hierarchical organizations with clearly identifiable religious elites.<sup>32</sup> There are numerous examples that religious communities use their organizational structures as resources in peacebuilding. One such corporate resource might be to involve elected religious leaders who are situated at the pinnacle of hierarchical religious organizations—for example, in starting processes of peace education or peace conferences. Religious leaders might also use their contacts across denominations to work together with other elected religious leaders to enhance their messages of peace.

One such process wherein religious organizations are mobilized at the top level is found in South Sudan, where local tribal leaders and church leaders sat down together to negotiate how to build peace during a period of civil war.<sup>33</sup> Another example in which organizational structures at a more meso-level are being used as dissemination channels for peace messages is found in Ethiopia, where religious organizations use their local denominations to mobilize people for joint prayer sessions or reconciliation conferences in the aftermath of interreligious violence.<sup>34</sup> Organizational religious resources that can be used in peacebuilding can be formal

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<sup>31</sup>See, e.g., Megan K. Shore, “Christianity and South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” in Lee Marsden, ed., *The Ashgate Companion to Religion and Conflict Resolution* (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2012), p. 279.

<sup>32</sup>See Harpviken and Eggen Røislien, “Faithful Brokers?” p. 365.

<sup>33</sup>See Stein Erik Horjen, *Lang Vei Til Fred: Om Konflikt Og Forsoning i Sudan Og Sør-Sudan* (Oslo: Verbum, 2014), p. 7.

<sup>34</sup>See Steen-Johnsen, *State and Politics in Religious Peacebuilding*, p. 172.

or informal. They can be general synods, church choirs, women's groups, or diaconal initiatives. Religion often has an expression in rich organizational life, and these social structures can be considered as resources for religious peacebuilding initiatives.

The last resource for peace that Harpviken and Eggen Røislien depicted, one that is particularly valuable for religious actors engaged in religious peacebuilding, is the possibility of drawing attention to religious identities as inclusive rather than exclusive. If religious groups in conflict have faith-based identities, references to religion can be used to highlight commonalities between and among them.<sup>35</sup> Religious identity is a fairly stable element and can be seen as a form of social compass managing the kind of group to which one feels loyalty. This constitutes an enormous potential for mobilizing around goals based on shared identity. Identities can be sustained by discourses stressing “this is who we are” as opposed to “the others.” As such, identities can be used as a resource for mobilization around shared goals. This has relevance to discussions of the significance of bridging social capital—social ties that can span across divides in order to diminish antagonism between social groups.

Relying upon previous debates on religious peacebuilding, I have identified several resources available to religious individuals when engaging for peace. In what follows, I will depict why a social capital perspective should be added in order to arrive at a more nuanced and complex understanding of what religious women do when they engage in peacebuilding.

### **A Social Capital Perspective on the Peace Work of Religious Women**

Social bonds are often recognized as one of many elements that can be helpful to ensure social integration.<sup>36</sup> In situations of conflict, where deep divisions have been created, the significance

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<sup>35</sup>See Harpviken and Eggen Røislien, “Faithful Brokers?” p. 364.

<sup>36</sup>See, e.g., Robert D. Putnam, “Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 28 (December, 1995): 664–665.

of renurturing and reestablishing broken social relations can be of the utmost importance. Social capital is, according to one very useful understanding of the concept, resources in the form of networks of trust.<sup>37</sup> In a conflict or post-conflict scenario, social ties might be broken, and reestablishing these has been considered a key to coexistence. Hence, social capital has gained enormous popularity in the past decade, not least among scholars trying to understand and explain the connections between social interaction and peace.

Social capital in many ways is a fluid concept. There are multiple ways of understanding what it is, from Pierre Bourdieu's juxtaposition of social capital and other forms of capital to Robert Putnam's discussion of the linkages between local-level social bonds to the level of democracy in a given context.<sup>38</sup> Social capital has gained in popularity for its potential to explain social phenomena, but it can also be criticized for being a concept that explains "too much with too little."<sup>39</sup> For example, Putnam was blamed for being imprecise in his understanding of the significance of social bonds, since he put the focus on the grassroots construction of social capital and the significance of such bonds for the level of democracy in a society. Critics claimed that it might be the other way around, that a high level of democracy would be conducive to social capital. In short, Putnam was criticized for confusing means and ends when discussing the connection between social capital and democracy.<sup>40</sup> Scholars have also warned against ignoring the adverse effects of social capital on social cohesion.<sup>41</sup> Despite vibrant and ongoing discussions of the significance of social capital, the popularity of the

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<sup>37</sup>See Wollebæk and Seggaard, "Sosial Kapital," p. 26.

<sup>38</sup>See Pierre Bourdieu, "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups," *Theory and Society* 14 (November, 1985): 723–744; and Putnam, "Tuning In, Tuning Out," pp. 664–665.

<sup>39</sup>Michael Woolcock, "Social Capital and Economic Development: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis and Policy Framework," *Theory and Society* 27 (April, 1998): 155.

<sup>40</sup>See Wollebæk and Seggaard, "Sosial Kapital," p. 26.

<sup>41</sup>See, e.g., Stephen Baron, John Field, and Tom Schuller, *Social Capital: Critical Perspectives* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 10–12.

concept persists. As a result of the ongoing discussions, theorists have attempted to develop rigid operationalizations of the concept to make it easier to explain and to discuss empirically.<sup>42</sup>

Brewer, Higgins, and Teeney are among the theorists who have attempted to put the concept of social capital to concrete use by engaging it in discussions of religious peacebuilding.<sup>43</sup> They have suggested that the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital can be useful when we try to understand how religious peacebuilding initiatives contribute to more peace. The distinction between bonding and bridging social capital was originally coined by Michael Woolcock to describe the exclusive or inclusive quality of social bonds.<sup>44</sup> “Bonding” social capital denotes intragroup solidarity wherein social categories such as ethnicity, caste, class, or location contribute to social ties within a quite homogenous group. “Bridging social capital” refers instead to inclusive solidarity and denotes social bonds that transcend group boundaries and span between groups with different identities and backgrounds.<sup>45</sup> It is the concept of bridging social capital that is most relevant to social peace processes according to Brewer, Higgins, and Teeney, as such bonds can transcend divisions created or aggravated by violent conflict; for them, bridging social capital was so important that they deemed it a prerequisite for positive peace.<sup>46</sup>

Religious groups have often been perceived as having a high level of bonding social capital, referring to the internal strength of social relationships. The bridging quality of religious

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<sup>42</sup>See, e.g., Anirudh Krishna, *Active Social Capital: Tracing the Roots of Development and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>43</sup>See Brewer, Higgins, and Teeney, *Religion, Civil Society, and Peace*.

<sup>44</sup>See Woolcock, “Social Capital,” p. 186.

<sup>45</sup>See Baron, Field, and Schuller, *Social Capital*, p. 11; and Michael Woolcock and Deepa Narayan, “Social Capital: Implications for Development Theory, Research, and Policy,” *The World Bank Research Observer* 15 (August, 2000): 225–249.

<sup>46</sup>See Brewer, Higgins, and Teeney, “Religion and Peacemaking,” p. 1024. Positive peace is in itself an ambitious vision of peace, originally coined by Galtung, where social groups exist in equality and harmony; see Johan Galtung, *Peace with Peaceful Means: Peace Research in a Changing World*, vol. 1, PRIO Inform (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, 1991), p. 31.

communities has traditionally been lower.<sup>47</sup> However, religion has the potential to transcend its own boundaries and reach out to other social groups, which is a common ambition of many religious peacebuilding efforts. It is this specific ability of religious communities, often mobilized in religious peacebuilding initiatives, that is of particular interest when we try to conceptualize how religious peace initiatives may contribute to peace.

Before analyzing how and whether religious peace initiatives initiated by women might contribute to bridging social capital, it may be worth considering the question of what within religion makes it apt at creating social bonds between groups in conflict. Brewer, Higgins, and Teeney suggested that the term “spiritual capital” might be useful to understand the role of religious institutions in creating social bonds between and among groups in conflict. Relying on the Metanexus Institute’s website, they described spiritual capital as the effects on individuals, communities, and society of spiritual and religious practices, the networks and institutions of religious organizations.<sup>48</sup> They seemed to emphasize that religious communities, even though they might have different dogmatic orientations, often share the experience of being religious, that is, the practice of religious rituals as well as the experience of participating in religious organizational structures.

This, according to Brewer, Higgins, and Teeney opens the possibility to interact, to meet, and to develop social relationships spanning across other dividing lines in a conflict context. They seem to have been quite enthused by the concept of spiritual capital, seeing the concept as offering a “conceptual stride” toward understanding how the specific nature and resources of religious faith and institutions can enhance social connectedness, trust, and a sense of community.<sup>49</sup> It is possible to envision that these features of religious faith and institutions

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<sup>47</sup>See Brewer, Higgins, and Teeney, “Religion and Peacemaking,” p. 1024.

<sup>48</sup>See Brewer, Higgins, and Teeney, *Religion, Civil Society, and Peace*, p. 22.

<sup>49</sup>See *ibid.* In making this argument, they made explicit reference to Putnam’s arguments that church attendance enhances these dimensions of social capital; see Robert D. Putnam,

make it possible to create bonds with other faiths due to shared understandings, for example, of human dignity. Their understanding of spiritual capital as facilitating the construction of bridging social capital mirrors Galtung's previously presented understanding of how soft components of world religions open up cooperation between religious actors and communities that want to emphasize these in a search for peace.<sup>50</sup> The specific nature of religious faith and institutions can thus be scrutinized as possible resources in the establishment of bridging social capital between groups in conflict.

It is possible to find preliminary empirical expressions indicating that religious organizations have a role in strengthening social ties. A study of networks between religious groups in India, for example, suggests that religious groups that are well connected through networks have a greater opportunity for peaceful coexistence. The existence of networks between religious groups—according to, for example, Karenjot Randhawa—helps to engage members of civil society in relationships, as well as creating spaces for dialogue.<sup>51</sup> The findings in this study can be seen as sharing the openness of Brewer, Higgens, and Teeney to the significance of such bonds to build peace and their assumption that religious institutions might have a specific possibility to stimulate the creation of such bonds.

However, there are some notes of caution against assuming that bridging social capital paves the way for less intergroup violence. Audra Mitchell, for example, has highlighted in her study of social peacebuilding activities in Northern Ireland that activating initiatives aimed at altering behaviors, attitudes, and patterns of interaction might replace traditional forms of

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*Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), p. 67.

<sup>50</sup>See Galtung, "Religions Hard and Soft," p. 256.

<sup>51</sup>See Karenjot Bhangoo Randhawa, *Civil Society in Malerkotla, Punjab: Fostering Resilience through Religion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), p. 94.

violence not only with peaceful activity but also with other forms of structural conflict.<sup>52</sup> She claimed that boundaries between groups, rather than being transcended, might be more clearly demarcated when thematized through a peace project aiming at creating connection.<sup>53</sup> Mitchell's critique could certainly be relevant for some of the religious peace projects presented in the present essay as well, and it suggests that, even though bridging social capital might be established through these projects, they might not necessarily contribute to more peaceful interaction between groups in the long run. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the establishment of bridging social bonds through religious peace initiatives is not a one-way street to more peaceful societies. Efforts to strengthen social bonds could succeed in ameliorating conflict, but there is also the danger of its having the opposite effect—namely, to demarcate more clearly boundaries between groups.

### **Religious Resources and Social Capital in Women's Religious Peacebuilding Efforts**

I suggest that the role of women in religious peacebuilding could be considered as engaging religious norms, religious texts and rituals, participation in religious organizational structures, and reference to religious identities in their engagement for peace. In addition, I propose that applying a social capital perspective on the peace work of religious women would add a broader understanding of how they engage when working for peace. Through referring to existing studies of female religious peacebuilders, I will underscore how this conceptual understanding is applicable to what religious women do when they work for peace.

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<sup>52</sup>See Audra Mitchell, "Conflict-in-Transformation: Ethics, Phenomenology, and the Critique of the 'Liberalizing' Peace," *International Peacekeeping* 16 (November, 2009): 667; available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533310903303297>.

<sup>53</sup>See *ibid.*, p. 681.



One example where religious women engage sacred texts, rituals, and norms for peace comes from Afghanistan. David Little described how Sakena Yacoobi, Director of the Afghan Institute for Learning, has strategically utilized her deep knowledge of the tribal codes and customs and religious provisions that inhibit women's status and access to education in Afghanistan.<sup>54</sup> The reasoning behind this is that education and inclusion of women is an integral component of a peaceful society. She engages with these religious and cultural norms and identifies ways in which they open people for transformation. She promotes education as a sacred duty that corresponds with Islam, as she engages religious institutions in the struggle to provide education to women and girls, including in areas controlled by the Taliban. By teaching women values of equality that are found in the Qur'ān, she empowers them, according to Little, to negotiate their position in religious frameworks. He claimed that women who have participated in these educational programs refer to religious values when negotiating for a stronger position in relation to men. He noted signs that men's attitude toward the participation of women is improving.<sup>55</sup>

Javier Fabra-Mata and Muzghan Jalal also conducted an in-depth, mixed-method study of religious women in Afghanistan who are engaged in peacebuilding.<sup>56</sup> Not surprisingly, they found what was earlier suggested in the present essay—that women do not have access to the same peacebuilding arenas as men, but they utilize the social spaces available to them, to the best of their ability. Even though it carries a social risk, the women go out to teach others about peace.<sup>57</sup> They gained approval for their work from the men in the community, as they use the Qur'ān actively in their peace work.<sup>58</sup> The women described by Fabra-Mata and Jalal also used

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<sup>54</sup>See Little, *Peacemakers in Action*, p. 392.

<sup>55</sup>See *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup>See Javier Fabra-Mata and Muzghan Jalal, "Female Religious Actors as Peace Agents in Afghanistan," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2018), pp. 76–90; available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/15423166.2018.1472031>.

<sup>57</sup>See *ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>58</sup>See *ibid.*, p. 85.

their religious resources to coordinate or cooperate in their peace efforts with the male religious peacebuilders, a finding that adds nuance to the understanding that female religious peacebuilders operate solely on the margins of the formal peace arenas dominated by men.<sup>59</sup> They do use religious resources strategically as a form of social capital in order to connect with male religious peacebuilders.<sup>60</sup>

The female religious peacebuilders studied by Fabra-Mata and Jalal found motivation in religious norms or values for engaging in peacebuilding.<sup>61</sup> This suggests that the religious resource of norms might be involved at the outset of religious women's peace work as a motivational factor for their efforts. In Islam, the authors claimed, there is an inherent call for social engagement and care for those in need. The women referred to these moral codes as a motivational starting point for their engagement for peace and emphasized that all of this happens in the context of war that has affected them.<sup>62</sup>

Fabra-Mata and Jalal noted that these women had access to gendered social spaces, but the role of religious female peacebuilders goes beyond gender and activates resources such as religious literacy, a resource close to religious norms. I suggested above that religious norms might be considered a resource for female religious peacebuilders. Note that Fabra-Mata and Jalal used the term "religious literacy"<sup>63</sup> in reference to knowing the texts and values of religion and activating them as resources when engaging for peace.<sup>64</sup> They referred to how religious knowledge is a significant resource when reaching out to others in the peace work that these women carry out.

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<sup>59</sup>See *ibid.*, pp. 85–86.

<sup>60</sup>See *ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>61</sup>See *ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>62</sup>See *ibid.*

<sup>63</sup>See *ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>64</sup>See *ibid.*, pp. 84–85.

There is a clear social capital perspective in the study of Afghan religious women who are building peace, even though the authors did not use this analytical term explicitly. In their study, there is frequent mention of how female religious peacebuilders reached out through peace education in schools and on traditional and social media.<sup>65</sup> There is also mention of teaching about peace in the madrasas, indicating that religious organization, another religious resource mentioned in the theoretical section here, is activated as the religious women engage in peace work. It is not stated that the social capital that the female peacebuilders engage when building peace has a bridging quality, meaning that it spans across divisions created by or through the violent conflict in which they are situated. Constructing social bonds as a way of dealing with violence is one of the strategies employed by the female religious peacebuilders described by Fabra-Mata and Jalal.

Women also engage in religious peacebuilding efforts by mobilizing their religious identities. Cynthia Cockburn described how this was done in the Beit Shalom network established between Israeli Jewish and Israeli Palestinian Arab women.<sup>66</sup> These women have campaigned together to end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory in order to protect the rights of Arab-Palestinian individuals. The way in which identity work forms an integral part of Beit Shalom is that the network gathers women from different religious identity groups to form a joint platform for action.

Cockburn explained how any ascribed identity, such as the nation-state identity, might feel at odds with the women's sense of self. She outlined how what she calls "identity pain" might arise when the ascribed identity and the women's sense of self collide.<sup>67</sup> To counter such identity pain, the religious identity of the women is evoked as a measure to build bridges

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<sup>65</sup>See *ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>66</sup>See Cynthia Cockburn, *The Space between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict* (London: Zed Books, 1998), pp. 129–156.

<sup>67</sup>See *ibid.*, p. 10.

between groups in conflict. An interesting feature of the Beit Shalom collaboration is that they affirm differences and do not try to make various groups into one.<sup>68</sup> The network sees identity as fluid, and they allow in their program activities for gender and religious identities to be multifaceted and in flux. A key to achieve this is, according to Cockburn, that the women of Beit Shalom define their agenda in group processes where they assume that, in meeting face-to-face, destructive processes will be counteracted.<sup>69</sup> In Beit Shalom, a comprehensive and flexible understanding of religious identity is engaged as a vehicle to build social bonds and open communication in a context marked by divisiveness. These women activate religious identities to form bonds across identity lines and can be seen as activating one of the religious resources available to them when engaging in peace work.

The social capital perspective of this work also warrants attention. The chapter describing the Beit Shalom project is called “Israel/Palestine: Across an Abyss,” denoting the divisive and violent context in which this peace project is located.<sup>70</sup> Involving women from both sides of the conflict line can be seen as an example of the establishment of bridging social capital. By focusing on shared troubles and questions of identity, the Beit Shalom initiative has been able to create social spaces for meeting people from other identity groups. A strong point is that this process has continued over time, allowing social relations to be slowly established and nurtured. Perhaps this should not be called a gendered way of doing peace work, but it carries a willingness to be in a problematic social space over time with other people from other identity groups. Therefore, it should be noted as an effort where female peacebuilders are contributing to bridging social capital through their activation of religious resources for peace—in this case, identities.

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<sup>68</sup>See *ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>69</sup>See *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup>See *ibid.*, p. 99.

One of the religious resources that it is possible to activate for peace, according to Harpviken and Eggen Røislien, is religious organization. An example of women who activate resources available to them through their participation in religious organizations comes from Liberia. Robert Press described how Liberian women of different faiths rallied to participate in peacebuilding during two waves of civil war lasting from 1989 to 1999.<sup>71</sup> This peace movement started with a few women in the early 1990's, and, by the time the war ended, the number of women had grown to thousands.<sup>72</sup> The Liberian women organized public marches. At one stage in the peace process, they even sat down outside the venue of the formal peace talks to pressure the men to come to a solution. Press suggested that the peace activism of the Liberian women could be seen as a form of social movement in which the women forged strategic alliances with other women's groups.<sup>73</sup> Many of the women's groups participating in the peace efforts already existed under the auspices of religious organizations. These networks might have contributed to the possibility of mobilizing broadly. The peace efforts of Liberian women can thus be seen as partly activating organizational religious resources as an integral part of their peacebuilding efforts.<sup>74</sup>

Press's example of Liberian women's using organizational resources to build peace also holds a social capital perspective. Inviting women from different religious organizations to meet together opened up the mobilization of social bonds, which enabled them to forward their message of peace. Whether the social capital of the Liberian women should be noted as having bridging or bonding qualities is an open question. These women brought together participants in different religious communities, so the social bonds can also be considered as having a

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<sup>71</sup>See Robert M. Press, "Individual and Organizational Human Rights Activism in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Kenya," *Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2013), pp. 447–468; available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2013.812466>.

<sup>72</sup>See *ibid.*, p. 455.

<sup>73</sup>See *ibid.*, p. 457.

<sup>74</sup>See *ibid.*

bridging quality. However, the bonds established in the Liberian case can be seen as having a bonding quality, uniting woman with the same type of agenda, that of ensuring that the formalized peace processes stayed on track.

At this point, it seems reasonable to conclude that the roles of peacebuilding women in a religious context are best understood when approaching them as active agents who explore social spaces available to them and who draw upon religious resources when doing so. The examples I have shared here have shown that these women are able to draw upon a variety of religious resources while engaging in peacebuilding, including religious norms, religious texts and rituals, participation in religious organizational structures, and reference to religious identities. Furthermore, a social capital perspective on their activities helps us to understand how these initiatives might not only exploit religious resources but also help to establish social bonds of both bridging and bonding quality as they engage for peace.

### **Discussion and Conclusion: Toward a Better Understanding of Women in Religious Peacebuilding?**

Many authors have pointed to the need to understand the peacebuilding activities of religious women in their own right, not only as efforts on the margins of the more visible activities of men.<sup>75</sup> The rights of women to be included in formal peace processes remain important, but, while we are working for inclusion, we must pay closer attention to what religious women actually do when engaging for peace. This way, the peace work of religious women receives attention for its dynamic and its contribution to peace, and the cycle of exclusion from attention may be broken.

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<sup>75</sup>See, e.g., Hayward, "Women, Religion and Peacebuilding," p. 322.

As noted in Fabra-Mata and Jalal's study from Afghanistan, a gendered perspective on the peacebuilding activities of women is also relevant. They noted that Afghan religious women needed the endorsement of men in order to conduct their peace activities; they were allowed to operate only in ways acceptable to the men. The women also reported being exposed to reprimands and social sanctions when they failed to comply with male provisions.<sup>76</sup> Although viewing the peace work of women in the blunt light of patriarchy becomes reductive to our understanding of what these women do, the gendered nature of the social terrain in which they operate still remains important to recognize in order to arrive at a nuanced understanding of what religious women do when they engage for peace.

The religious dimension of the peace work that the women presented here do should not escape our attention. It is possible that religion itself has an empowering quality for these women. Meena Sharify-Funk and Christina Woolner noted this dimension as they argued that women in religious communities are far from passive and victimized. They suggested that religion can empower women in subtle yet significant ways. Religious discourses have the potential, according to them, to engage rather than to reject women's empowerment. Sharify-Funk and Woolner stated that operating within a framework of religious norms might give women legitimacy, which has the potential to enable them to work across denominational dividing lines. Women can engage religious culture and identity to oppose those who marginalize them, they claim. However, they admitted that sometimes the efforts of women might gain even more legitimacy through being endorsed by religious organizations and men's leadership, a point similar to what Fabra-Mata and Jalal made of the Afghan religious women engaging in peace work.<sup>77</sup> Seeing religious women engaging for peace as operating in a rich terrain packed with potential resources for peacebuilding is important for understanding how

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<sup>76</sup>See Fabra-Mata and Jalal, "Female Religious Actors," p 87.

<sup>77</sup>See *ibid.*, p. 84; and Meena Sharify-Funk and Christina Woolner, "Women, Religion, and Peacebuilding," in Marsden, *Ashgate Companion to Religion and Conflict Resolution*, p. 143.

they engage in this type of work. However, recognizing the limits to what women can do when men are in charge remains important in order to understand the scope of opportunities for religious women who are building peace.

Acknowledging that women are often engaged in other arenas than the official ones, scholarly activities in this field require methodological attention. Capturing the role of women would possibly require that scholars spend much more time on arenas that are not visible at first sight. The resources that I suggest female religious peacebuilders apply in peacebuilding activities are the same as the ones men use. This is no coincidence, as the resources that religions offer to build peace are apparent. Norms, identities, and organizational structures are assets that could be used by both women and men to create connections between groups as a countermeasure against violence. However, the arenas where the women apply these resources are often much less visible than men's arenas. That is why they must be intentionally sought beyond the formal hotspots often receiving attention when peace is being discussed and pursued.

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