Women Engaging in Islamic Charity as ‘Development Agents’

A key element of Kaja Borchgrevink’s doctoral project ‘Private Islamic Charity and Approaches to Poverty Reduction in Pakistan and the Diaspora’ is the gender dimension of the links between Islamic charity and development. Borchgrevink is doing her PhD at the Department of International Environment and Development Studies at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU).

Borchgrevink’s doctoral project, which started in 2012, is also part of the larger PRIO project ‘Private Islamic Charity and Approaches to Poverty Reduction’ (ISPOR), led by PRIO Director Kristian B. Harpviken and including PRIO Senior Researcher Marta Bivand Erdal. As part of the doctoral project she looks specifically at women who engage with Islamic charity, both as individuals and through religious-political aid organisations. With the project now coming to end, Julie Marie Hansen met Borchgrevink to learn more.

Can you please introduce your project to our readers?

My project is part of a larger PRIO project about religion and development. It is a study of how Muslim practices of charity are related to ‘development’. In this study we understand development broadly as what people do to help improve peoples’ lives. There are some very central institutions in Islam that give concrete directions about how to help the poor, such as zakat, the obligatory Islamic ‘tax’, but also other forms of voluntary alms. We have studied people’s religious practices, and how they relate to ‘development’, in the context of Pakistan and the Pakistani diaspora in Oslo, Norway.

This is a qualitative study primarily based on interviews with women and men in Pakistan and within the Pakistani diaspora in Oslo. The latter were recruited through mosque-based and diaspora development organisations, but we also included participants not directly associated with any of these. I then followed the transnational networks of the mosque-based organisations in Norway to Pakistan and looked at the organisations there that are funded by people in the diaspora. These are aid organisations associated with the Minhaj-ul-Quran and the Jamaat-e-Islami, two religious-political movements in Pakistan.

The project studies men and women that in different ways are involved in Islamic charity, as individuals and as part of these religious aid organisations. We look at what they do in practice and how they talk about and give meaning to what they do. One dimension of this is how it is gendered.

Why did you choose to study women’s involvement in these kinds of organisations?

The reason for looking at women as de-
velopment actors in these kinds of ‘Islamist’, or religio-political, organisations, is that these organisations have mainly been studied from a political science perspective. This means they have been studied as part of social movements with political aims, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, similar to the Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan. The welfare activities of these kinds of organisations have consequently been seen as a way of strengthening the organisations’ political position and power, to get votes, rather than being studied as part of broader civil society, which alongside other non-governmental organisations are part of the landscape that provides welfare and longer term development in Pakistan.

I think the reason they have been studied this way is partly because these organisations have notions of an ideal society very different from those of many mainstream development actors. These organisations are at the margins of the international aid system, but they are part of a trend where Muslim NGOs are growing in number and becoming recognized as aid providers. They are also increasingly engaging in different types of collaboration with mainstream donors and in international settings.

How is women’s engagement in Islamic charity gendered?

These religious environments are commonly gender-segregated. This is reflected in the way Islamic charity, welfare and development work is organised, both in Pakistan and the diaspora. Both men and women are engaged but through different arenas. Men are more often involved in small yet formal organisations, like registered NGOs. Women mostly come together in much less formal ways, for example Koran study groups and spiritual gatherings where they meet regularly. Part of what they do there is to collect money for charity, for instance to send money to individuals in Pakistan, to a widow in need, or pay for someone’s education. Other women have formalised it more by supporting organisations or have started up organisations themselves together with women in Pakistan in order to work on issues longer-term, providing support in different ways such as running a school.

Men and women support many of the same things. Education is highly valued in Islam, and helping others get education is strongly encouraged. The women I have interviewed also tend to support orphans and widows, which are seen as particularly deserving recipients of alms or special support. There seems to be a kind of solidarity among women, especially among those who have migrated to Norway. These women know what it is like to be a woman in Pakistan and seem to have a particular solidarity with women there who have lost their husbands, for example, knowing it is difficult for widows to manage on their own. So I found that women tend to focus on helping other women, both in Pakistan and elsewhere.

You mentioned that the organisations these women are involved in have ideas about development that differ greatly from mainstream development actors. Can you say a bit more about that?

In contrast to mainstream development actors’ focus on material development, these women organisations are concerned also with spiritual and moral development. In their view a good society is a moral society, and religion provides a frame for almost everything they do. This is reflected in how they work to improve individuals’ lives and to create social change. They offer access to services in health and education, but equally important are teaching Islam and the moral and spiritual grooming of the individual.

Women’s participation in conservative religious organisations, like the Jamaat-e-Islami, is often presented as a paradox: Why do women engage in work that advocates women’s subordination? This paradox intrigued me when I started studying the women in the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Minhaj-ul-Quran in Pakistan, especially. I wanted to move beyond this paradox and listen to these women directly. I was curious about who they are, what they see as an ideal society and how they work through welfare and development work to promote that vision.

The women I met are not oppressed, inarticulate, uneducated, backwards women living in the dark ages. Many of them are well educated but are part of ideological movements that have very different ideas about what is an ideal world. Their understandings of ideal gender roles, women’s rights and empowerment are very different to what you find in mainstream gender and development dis-
course. Their ideals conflict with the norms of gender equality understood as sameness. Instead their ideal gender roles reflect ideas of gender complementarity: that men and women have different and complementary roles, rights and responsibilities. This is not so different from the ideal gender roles found among some fundamentalist Christians, also in Norway.

One thing these women do, for example, is provide vocational training skills to women, like stitching. As do many other development actors, but for these women, it is not only about giving other women a source of income – which they recognise that women sometimes need. Their aim is also to help women to earn this income with dignity. To them, this means women working at home or where they do not have to socialize with men or ensuring they do not have to do work seen as inappropriate for women. Also, I should add here that the norms for women’s public participation are changing. In the diaspora in Oslo, women are very active, engaging in different forums. In the much more socially conservative environment in Pakistan, women are also taking on more public roles as social activists, but they find ways of doing it that they find appropriate and in accordance with their interpretations of Islam.

I think religion was an important motivation in their work. Of course, human motivations are complex, but I think there are strong motivations to help others to be found in Islamic teaching. To invest in improving other people’s lives benefits others here and now, but for the giver it is also an investment in their afterlife. These transcendental dimensions were clearly important. Our study has clearly shown how Islam can be a very strong motivational and organizational factor for women’s social activism both in Pakistan and in Norway. I think this study reveals a side of Muslim migrant women in Norway that challenges stereotypical images.

Recommended Reading


Is there anything you found during the project that has particularly surprised you?

I knew little about the women in the Pakistani diaspora in Norway before the project. I had never talked to any of the older generation before. I learned a lot, and what surprised me most from getting to know these women – especially the older ones – is how much of their time and resources they spend on helping others. They live simple lives. Of course they are well established in Norway now, with their own homes and so on, but they are not among the richest in Norway yet at the same time I am sure they are among the individuals that give the most. Their generosity and dedication was overwhelming.

Christine Chinkin Gives Keynote at Launch of PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security

On 15 February, Christine Chinkin, Emerita Professor of International Law and Director of the Centre on Women, Peace and Security at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), visited PRIO. At the formal launch of the new PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security (GPS Centre), Chinkin gave the keynote address ‘Women, Peace and Security: What Does It Mean in the Contemporary World’.

Chinkin emphasised the need to take the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda more seriously and for the United Nations to do more to fully implement it. Implementation at national level has been disappointing. Simply creating National Action Plans on WPS is not enough, she said, taking the UK as a case in point. The British government works on the implementation of the WPS agenda largely alongside its ‘Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict’ (PSVI) initiative.
Condemnation of sexual violence is easy enough and technical support is easy to provide, but the British government’s work on PSVI and WPS does not go far enough in tackling the difficult, structural issues, she argued. Also, taking the WPS agenda seriously means recognizing that implementation is time-consuming, long-term and “messy”. There is no quick fix, remedied with the launch of a National Action Plan. Rather, implementation should be seen as an ongoing process.

On the question of academia’s role and impact on WPS policy and practice, Chinkin suggested that research should have the dual aim of transformation and resistance. Firstly, research on WPS issues helps keep the agenda alive, which can contribute to securing women’s rights and ultimately transforming their lives. Secondly, she urged academics to resist what she sees as the ‘take-over’ of the WPS agenda by other security agendas – as witnessed for instance in the links currently being made between the WPS agenda and efforts to counter violent extremism. While such links help maintain attention on WPS issues, securitizing the WPS agenda will only lead to more insecurity on the part of women, Chinkin argued. The WPS agenda is and should be seen as an end in itself and therefore be kept separate from other security agendas.

The launch event was opened with remarks from PRIO Director Kristian Berg Harpviken and Norwegian State Secretary Tore Hattrem. PRIO Senior Researcher and GPS Centre Director Torunn L. Tryggestad then gave an introduction to the new GPS Centre. Read more about the establishment of the centre in the PRIO Gender, Peace and Security Update, Issue 3 (2015).

After her keynote address, Christine Chinkin was joined by Yannick Glenmurec (Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director at UN Women), Roslyn Warren (Research Partnerships Manager, Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security) and Inger Skjelsbæk (PRIO Research Professor) in a panel discussion on the role and impact of research on policy and practice in advancing the Women, Peace and Security agenda, moderated by Torunn L. Tryggestad. The launch closed with a reception and remarks from Espen Lindbæk, Deputy Director of the Section for Peace and Reconciliation, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Mediators Visit PRIO for Seminar on Including Women in Peace Processes

On 29 March, Norwegian members of the newly established Nordic Women Mediators’ Network (NWMN) visited PRIO to participate in a seminar on ‘Including women in peace processes: What influence do facilitators and mediators have?’

The seminar kicked off with presentations from PRIO researchers on what research tells us about armed conflicts and peacemaking. Research Professor Henrik Urdal gave an overview of trends in armed conflicts. Torunn L. Tryggestad, Senior Researcher and Director of the PRIO GPS Centre, discussed gender and mediation with a particular emphasis on findings on women’s participation in peace processes from the Global Study on UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

To illustrate gender issues in peace mediation in practice, network members shared first-hand knowledge of gender issues in the peace processes in Sri Lanka, Colombia and Afghanistan. First, Norwegian Secretary of State Astrid Noklebye Heiberg presented her experience of mediating talks between Sinhalese and Tamil women’s groups in Sri Lanka and the “female culture” of non-competitive-ness that she found helped facilitate dialogue. Next up was Rita Sandberg from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA) who talked about the Gender Commission in the Colombia process and the expectation that the peace agreement there will be a model for other processes in terms of women’s inclusion and gender language. Finally, Lisa Golden, also of the NMFA, reflected on the recent gains women have made in Afghan society and their subsequent role as high-risk stakeholders in the peace process.

The seminar was organised by the Norwegian operational partners of the NWMN – PRIO and the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF) – with Torunn L. Tryggestad (PRIO) and Laura Mitchell (NOREF) moderating presentations and discussions. The NWMN was established as a joint Nordic initiative in autumn 2015. Read more about the network in the PRIO Gender, Peace and Security Update, Issue 4 (2015).

60th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

Representatives from United Nations entities and Member States, non-governmental organisations and the private sector met from 14–24 March for the 60th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW60) to discuss women’s empowerment and its links to sustainable development. The aim of the session, held in New York, was to ensure that women and girls are at the forefront of efforts to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

During the session, a new global training programme on Women, Peace and Security was launched. The programme will be rolled out over the next few months and will offer “workshops, trainings and guidelines for civil society and military to ensure that leaders in on-the-ground conflict responses make gender equality and the needs of women and girls – from access to education and sexual and reproductive health and GBV services to representation in government – an integral part of their efforts during conflict, peacebuilding and post-conflict situations,” according to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), which is leading the programme together with the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) of the UN and the UN Peacebuilding Commission (UNPBC).
Several side events also dealt with topics related to peace and security, narrowing down the theme of the session to the link between women’s empowerment and, in particular, SDG 16 on ‘Peace, justice and strong institutions’. Topics covered at these side events included women’s participation in peace and security in Nigeria; the link between gender, education and peacebuilding; and peace processes as a catalyst for women’s leadership in public institutions. A full overview of side events is available online; as are statements and webcasts from the official meetings of the session.

Research Supports Need for More Women in Myanmar Peace Process

On 8 March 2016, women’s organisations across Myanmar celebrated International Women’s Day with events aimed at drawing attention to gender equality issues in the country. One of the issues raised was the low participation of women in the formal peace process. Women peace advocates from the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process (AGIPP) also organised a strategic dialogue in February 2016 with civil society leaders on the theme ‘More Women in the Peace Process Equals Sustainable Peace in Myanmar’.

The current peace process began in 2011 when, after decades of armed conflicts between ethnic armed groups (EAGs) and successive military regimes, the newly elected President Thein Sein invited EAGs to peace talks following the start of a democratic reform process. Bilateral ceasefire agreements have since been signed between several EAGs and the quasi-civilian government and in October 2015 a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement was made – though with many EAGs excluded or refusing to sign.

While women have been largely absent from the peace process, they have also been active in making important contributions to peace at the informal level, according the recent report ‘Why Gender Matters in Conflict and Peace: Perspectives from Mon and Kayin States, Myanmar’. Published in 2015, the report presents findings from a joint study by UN Women, Swisspeace and the Gender and Development Institute Myanmar, and includes PRIO’s Julie Marie Hansen as a co-author.

The report shows the many ways women in conflict-affected areas of Mon and Kayin States in southeast Myanmar use informal strategies to mitigate conflict, protect others from violence, recognise and respond to early warning signs of conflict, and drive community-based initiatives for long-term peacebuilding. Findings also reveal the gendered experiences of armed conflicts in the two ethnic-minority states: Women and men were found to have experienced differently the risks and consequences of forced labour, sexual and gender-based violence, displacement and migration, and loss of livelihood.

The report provides evidence to support the argument that greater inclusion of women at the formal level can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of the Myanmar peace process. Women can make a potential difference to peacemaking by bringing their “experiences, local knowledge, attributes and skills, leadership abilities and networks [...] to contribute to a better understanding of peace”, concludes the report.

Conference on Women’s Empowerment, Multitude and Democracy

On 19–20 February, PRIO in collaboration with Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development (OKDISCD) organized an international conference in Guwahati, India on issues of democracy, sovereignty and representation in Nepal and India’s North East. The conference, entitled “Women’s Empowerment, Multitude and Democracy”, gave special attention to women’s empowerment, examining how the issue of women’s representation and gender inequality has been addressed by the nation state as well as by its contesting movements.

The keynote speaker of the conference, Professor Sanjib Baruah of Bard College, New York, spoke on the ambiguities of sovereignty in India’s North East, highlighting the particular dynamics of the politics of peace in the area. The rest of the conference consisted of three sessions with the second session devoted to issues of women’s empowerment. Among the speakers in this session were Assistant Professor Papori Bora of Jawaharlal Nehru University, who spoke on the dynamics of gendered violence in Assam under the present Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act. Other contributors included Dr Rakhee Kalita Moral of Cotton College Assam, who spoke on issues of agency among female ex-combatants in the United Liberation Front of Assam and PhD student Aruni Samarakoon from Agder University, discussing Tamil women’s roles in the peacebuilding process in Sri Lanka.

The conference was organized as a part of the PRIO project Making Women Count for Peace: Gender, Empowerment and Conflict in South Asia, led by Research Professor Ashild Kolås.
International News

The Political Settlements Research Programme launched the Women and Peace Agreements Database (PA-X Women) in November 2015. The database lists all peace agreements since 1990 that contain provisions on women, gender and sexual violence.

A Journey of A Thousand Miles: Peacekeepers is a documentary film, released in November 2015, about women in a UN peacekeeping unit in Haiti.

The Transitional Justice Institute and the International Conflict Research Institute hosted a postgraduate conference on ‘Masculinities, Violence and (Post-) Conflict’ at Ulster University, Northern Ireland on 14 January.

UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific launched the Global Study on the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in Bangkok, Thailand on 21 January.

Zainab Bangura, UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, received the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security’s 2016 Hillary Rodham Clinton Award for Advancing Women in Peace and Security on 22 February. Watch Bangura’s talk ‘Human Security in the Face of Violent Extremism’ online.

Alissa Rubin, New York Times journalist, received the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security’s 2016 Global Trailblazer Award on 22 February for work highlighting women’s experiences of conflict.

International Affairs published the special journal issue The Futures of Women, Peace and Security, launched at Chatham House in London on International Women’s Day, 8 March.


The 60th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW60) took place at UN Headquarters in New York on 14–24 March. The theme of the session was women’s empowerment and its links to sustainable development (see separate story).

The Sorensen Centre for International Peace and Justice at CUNY School of Law, WILPF, Madre, the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) and the Nobel Women’s Initiative held a symposium for civil society on ‘Implementing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: A Roadmap for the 1325 Global Study Recommendations’ in New York on 15 March. Watch the discussions online.

The UN Security Council held an open debate on 28 March on the role of women in conflict prevention and resolution in Africa.

News from Norway

Nora Mehsen, former MA student at the University of Oslo’s Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, won the University of Oslo Centre for Gender Research Master Thesis Prize in 2015 for her thesis ‘Preventing Sexual Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo: A Study of a Western Development Project Targeting the Congolese State Military’. Mehsen was supervised by PRIO Senior Researcher Kjersti Lohne.

The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted a meeting in February with civil society groups and researchers working on Women, Peace and Security issues to discuss new guidelines for the Norwegian Foreign Service on ‘Implementing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda’. Senior Researcher and Director of the PRIO GPS Centre Torunn L. Tryggestad attended the meeting.

Health and Human Rights Info (HHRI) and Human Rights Human Wrongs Documentary Film Festival held a seminar on ‘Hope in Action - Dealing with Sexual Violence in DRC’ and screened the film War in Eastern Congo in Oslo on 21 February.

The UN Women Nordic Office has launched the Nordic Partners Update, a monthly newsletter for UN Women’s partners including updates on gender issues in the Nordic countries, the work of the UN Women Nordic Office in Copenhagen, and UN Women’s work globally on issues including Women, Peace and Security.

The Institute for Social Research held a seminar on ‘Gender and culture in a Europe marked by the refugee crisis [Kjønn og kultur i et Europa preget av flyktningskrisen]’ where Anne Phillips, Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics, presented her new book The Politics of the Human, in Oslo on 2 March.

Kvinnefronten (The Women’s Front) and the International Humanitarian Law Group at the Norwegian Red Cross in Oslo held a seminar on ‘Gender and culture in a Europe marked by the refugee crisis’ on 7 March.

International Women’s Day on 8 March was marked in Oslo with a march calling for the protection of refugee women.

Helen Clark, Administrator of the UN Development Programme (UNDP), spoke at the event ‘Women - The Key to a Sustainable World’, organised by United Nations Association of Norway, FOKUS and the Nobel Peace Centre in Oslo on 8 March. Read Clark’s speech online.

Michael Kimmel, Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies at Stony Brook University, New York, gave his inaugural lecture as Adjunct Professor at the University of Oslo’s Centre for Gender Research on ‘Extremist Masculinities: How does Gender Studies help us understand
how young men get into extremist movements – and how we can help them get out’ on 16 March.

Health and Human Rights Info (HHRI) held an introduction seminar on the training manual ‘Mental Health and Gender-Based Violence: Helping Survivors of Sexual Violence in Conflict’ on 31 March.

News from PRIO

A new PRIO project Gender Equality, Peace and Security in Nepal and Myanmar (WOMENsPEACE) started in February, led by PRIO Senior Researcher Wenche Iren Hauge and including PRIO Senior Researcher Åshild Kolås.

PRIO launched its new Centre on Gender, Peace and Security in Oslo on 15 February. Professor Christine Chinkin, Director of the Centre on Women, Peace and Security at the London School of Economics, gave the keynote address ‘Women, Peace and Security: What Does It Mean in the Contemporary World?’ (see separate story).

The PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security (GPS Centre) and the Human Rights Human Wrongs Documentary Film Festival organised a debate on ‘Stopping Rape in Eastern Congo: Does Celebrity Activism Work?’ and screened the film We Will Win Peace in Oslo on 16 February.

PRIO co-organised a conference on ‘Women’s Empowerment, Multitude and Democracy’ in Guwahati, India on 19–20 February (see separate story).

Norwegian members of the Nordic Women Mediators’ Network met at PRIO for a seminar on ‘How to include women in peace processes’, organised by PRIO and NOREF on 29 March (see separate story).

Torunn L. Tryggestad, Senior Researcher and Director of the GPS Centre, gave a talk on ‘Gender in Peace and Conflict Studies’ for MA students in Peace and Conflict Studies from the Universities of Bradford and Uppsala visiting PRIO on 15 January.

Pinar Tank, Senior Researcher, held the seminar ‘Liberation through the barrel of a gun? Kurdish women in the fight against Daesh’ at the University of Oslo on 29 January.

Jenny Lorentzen, Doctoral Researcher, went to Rwanda in February to prepare for fieldwork for her doctoral project ‘Women’s Empowerment and Multicultural Challenges in War-to-Peace Transitions: Rwandan Experiences’.

Torunn L. Tryggestad, Senior Researcher and Director of the GPS Centre, hosted and chaired the official launch of the GPS Centre at PRIO on 15 February (see separate story).

Inger Skjelsbæk, Research Professor, participated in a panel discussion about the role and impact of research on policy and practice in relation to the Women, Peace and Security agenda during the launch of the GPS Centre at PRIO on 15 February.

Inger Skjelsbæk, Research Professor, moderated the panel debate at the ‘Stopping Rape in Eastern Congo: Does Celebrity Activism Work?’ event organised by the GPS Centre and Human Rights Human Wrongs Documentary Film Festival in Oslo on 16 February.

Ragnhild Nordås, Senior Researcher, participated in the panel debate on ‘Stopping Rape in Eastern Congo: Does Celebrity Activism Work?’ organised by the GPS Centre and Human Rights Human Wrongs Documentary Film Festival in Oslo on 16 February.

Torunn L. Tryggestad, Senior Researcher and Director of the GPS Centre, gave a talk on ‘Women and Peace Processes’ at a seminar for Norwegian members of the Nordic Women Mediators’ Network held at PRIO on 29 March (see separate story).

Henrik Urdal, Senior Researcher, gave a presentation on ‘Trends in Today’s Conflicts’ at a seminar for Norwegian members of the Nordic Women Mediators’ Network held at PRIO on 29 March (see separate story).

Recent PRIO Publications


Rustad, Siri Aas, Gudrun Østby & Rag-
Other Recent Publications


Coming Events

The Office of the President of the UN General Assembly will organise a General Assembly debate on synergies from the three reviews in 2015 on UN peace operations, peacebuilding architecture and Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, to take place in May 2016.

2016 Women Peacemakers residency, Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, University of San Diego, 10 Sept–19 Nov 2016. Applications are open, deadline 25 April 2016.