

SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN INTERFAITH SPACES

Highlights and Conclusions of a Discussion on March 15, 2021

This invitation-only virtual meeting was convened by the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, the FaithTrust Institute, the International Academy for Multicultural Cooperation, Religions for Peace, and World Faiths Development Dialogue.

The meeting's purpose: An exploratory conversation, aimed at understanding the various aspects of the challenges that religious institutions share with society at large, in dealing with issues of sexual harassment. The objective includes recognizing and acknowledging the nature and patterns of harassment within interfaith work, exploring difficulties in addressing them effectively, and discussing paths forward.

In line with the Chatham House Rules adopted at the meeting, no attribution is made in the highlights captured below.

To begin: Perspectives from Religious Leaders

“Any act of disregard, disrespect let alone humiliation of another human being -- female or male -- is ultimately an act of disregard, disrespect and an offense against the Creator himself. Individuals come into multi-faith spaces with such hope for the peacebuilding work that some experience “betrayal blindness” -- a sense of fear that if they exposed these travesties, they are betraying their own communities or the multi-faith space”.

“The number of women [in interfaith spaces] is too few, and their roles are not high and powerful enough. And worst of all, too many of them are subject to harassment [which] has been permitted to continue because no one talks about it. But what hurts one hurts us all.”

“Women tend to internalize and see themselves (particularly in the world of religion) as “objects” if that's how the male leaders are speaking to them, or treating them as, or interpreting scripture to make them as. We must not value the reputations of Institutions or religions over the actual lives and hearts of the people serving the institutions.”

“Sexual harassment takes place on account of the suppression and exploitation of women and the abuse of power where women are crushed into silence, denied words

and credibility. We must live up to the ordained Divine equality and treat all with utmost dignity at all times and places.”

“The sacred roles that we have within each of our faith traditions -- the sacred roles that faith leaders have -- impel us, compel us -- to respond to this horrendous pandemic of violence. We must seek ways in which sacred injury might become sacred healing.”

Why focus on Interfaith Spaces?

“Our willingness to be transparent, our courage to face sensitive issues and to acknowledge ways in which healing can take place are important steps toward healing wounds. Healing is important to the cultivation and development of our individual and collective hearts of love, compassion, kindness, and caring for each other.”

Interreligious organizations have some particular advantages but also some distinctive challenges; this is true specifically in relation to facing issues of harassment and related interpersonal problems.

Advantages:

- More open to different ideas, participation
- More fluid set of organizations
- Diversity -- so many different perspectives and experiences
- Strong ethical foundations and aspirations

Challenges:

- Lack some of the formal codes and processes that have been elaborated elsewhere
- Not as much history
- Fewer women; many leadership roles have been held by men
- Complex issues around power structures.

Observations made:

- Issues arise both on relationships within organizations and personal codes of conduct, and for forums and conferences and events with diverse participation, including young staff or interns and volunteers.
- Lack of articulation of problematic and unacceptable behaviors, that may range from insensitivity and misunderstandings to abuse of power and abusive behaviors.
- Patterns and expectations shaped by historically male dominated leadership among interreligious organizations.
- Absence of both principles and infrastructure among interfaith communities to allow individuals or groups to contest or complain when faced with problematic behavior.
- Reluctance to date by institutions and leaders to commit formally on principles and procedures, including articulation of expectations.

- This conversation, a first, could barely scratch the surface of needed action to address this issue. It highlighted the need to be accountable to each other when we meet in these interfaith platforms and share with each other how we're faring or dealing with these issues, sharing best practices or what others are doing
- People are not fully aware of what measures they can take if they encounter or witness sexual harassment. And what those measures entail.
- Challenges at individual level need to be recognized: these include situations where in an exciting Interfaith opportunity an unfortunate interpersonal incident arises; individual (commonly a young woman) is placed in a highly problematic situation. Many come to interfaith work with positive visions, serving with love, and both their hopes and work are disrupted.
- The space is fairly new, with hopes to get to know each other's religions and to establish personal connections across boundaries. When something unpleasant happens, there is a desire not to ruffle the feathers because the whole point of coming together is to build trust and learn, holding interfaith as something positive. The resulting silence dampens both personal and professional commitment to the cause.
- There is a need for a more collective responsibility within interreligious organizations to deal with these issues. This means protecting our colleagues and people we care about, but also a collective willingness to deal with problems at the institutional level.
- Sexual harassment does not occur solely in sacred spaces, religious spaces, and interfaith spaces, nor does it differ there. It occurs everywhere. We should de-sacralize sexual harassment, treating it as an unacceptable phenomenon no matter who is involved or what justification they might offer for the behavior.

Different Cultural Perspectives

“We understand very deeply that to speak about these issues in and of itself is an act of courage and therefore also an act of Grace.”

- There is a range of behaviors that are deemed ‘acceptable’ or normal in different countries - in fact, sometimes even within different families. These are defined, or nuanced, by socialization processes in different cultural contexts. For example, touching – including things like patting on the back, touching the shoulders, holding hands, hugging - or not touching at all, are done (or not). In addition, there are different ways of speaking to and with one another, not to mention language(s) and meaning(s). All of which means that in global interfaith spaces, the very possibility of ‘misunderstandings’ comes with the territory, so to speak.
- Therefore, within organizations that span multiple countries, cultures, and diverse religions, it can be quite a challenge to establish a common understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment, including boundaries between “(un)acceptable”, and “threatening” behaviors.

Responsibilities of Faith Communities

“We cannot value the reputations of institutions or religions over the actual lives and hearts of the people serving the institutions.”

- Faith communities, especially religious institutions and NGOs but also social groups, are first responders when a crisis or trauma or abuse occurs, and people seek support. This positions faith communities on the frontlines as both spaces where violence happens, but also as responders to violent incidents.
- Responses need to shift from protecting an institution from liability and exposure, to protecting the person who is aggrieved or recipient of unacceptable behaviors.
- In conservative and pious societies (Egypt was shared as an example) real change cannot happen without religious engagement about the issues of violence against women in general.
- Fortright statements and actions from religious leadership have the potential to create meaningful change.
- As a diverse site for engagement with high ideals, interfaith spaces, and faith communities, should be setting the standard for both healing, as well as holding each other accountable.
- Faith communities must listen to survivors and be attentive to their stories. Men especially must listen first – that is a way to overcome the “boys club” tendency to stand in solidarity and protect one another despite harm being done to women. It is also important to hear the stories, and thus honor the sense of injury and pain, in order for healing to begin.
- Many religious traditions, and practices, promote the power of men over women. As long as those messages are not challenged and deeply reassessed, women will continue to experience abuse in many forms. Seeking to create equality between men and women, from the leadership level down to the grassroots, means facing this fundamental challenge.
- There is a need to look at communities in congregations as a whole. Dealing with violence against women, and sexual harassment, is dealing with whole families, whole communities, and whole congregations. Perpetrators are part of communities – including with fathers, uncles, Pastors or Imams. There is a need to acknowledge the wrong committed/the harm done by people, and doing so respectfully and with consideration.
- Sexual harassment affects the entire community. When it occurs in organizations, the entire organization is affected.
- Witnesses to sexual harassment, including those who have listened to the stories, should (and do) ask themselves: “what is my responsibility as a witness?” What is my responsibility as someone who caretakes and is responsible for that space? How can I follow up with the person that appears to be targeted by that behavior? This points to an obligation to “check-in”, to find out how those women who have been harassed, are doing. Equally important is to follow-up with the alleged offender, seeking to address the harm done.

Power and Responsibility

“Sexual harassment takes place on account of the suppression and exploitation of women and the abuse of power, where women are crushed into silence, denied words and credibility.”

- Faith communities need healthy boundaries. Spiritual leaders hold power and, therefore, need to be respectful of that power as they work with their constituents, followers, or students.
- Men must step up to be accomplices for justice, rather than simply allies who are privileged to be able to step out of the issue and place.
- Faith leaders and leaders within Interfaith spaces, need to be aware of how power - perceived or real –impacts people’s sense of comfort or security.
- For young people new to interfaith spaces, mentorship can sometimes be abused, including with sexually harassing behavior.
- Even where there are codes of conduct, they may not be known to all, and some may not have signed onto them or appreciate their import.

Common Challenges

“There is a code of silence, and measured choice that many men have made to protect other men in the name of friendship; it is absurd.”

- *The conspiracy of silencing:* this includes non-disclosure agreements which victims of sexual harassment also may have been obliged to agree to. Too much harassment has been permitted to continue because no one talks about it. But what hurts one hurts us all. The well-being of the people serving religious and interreligious spaces needs to be valued above the reputation of any institution. Otherwise, religious spaces “become just as “polluted” as any other spaces.
- *Concern about institutional credibility:* Institutions want to do the right thing, but taking bolder action on sexual harassment which might damage or destroy the institution, is often a cause for concern.
- *Failure to hear, and to believe, victims/survivors:* Many find it difficult to entertain the idea that a respected leader could really do something as egregious as what is described. This underlines the need to address the culture of complicity that protects sexual harassers. This is deeply problematic because we can’t then take the next steps to hold people accountable because people will not be honest.

- *Acknowledging men’s specific obligations*: taking responsibility for male behavior, by other men, is a necessary part of the long term prevention. Some male leaders appear to have chosen to protect their male friends in the name of their shared faith, instead of honoring the voice of truth of women survivors, thus effectively honoring relationships that they have with one another, above the dignity of women. This violates the truths of all faith teachings. Transforming those cultures of complicity, and uncovering truths, is part of necessary changes in behaviors.
- *“Betrayal blindness”*: refers to a sense that some are blinded by a sense of fear, that if sexual harassment is exposed, this betrays one’s own religious community, or the multi-faith spaces.

Voices of Women and of Victims/Survivors

“Any act of disregard or disrespect, let alone humiliation of another human being—female or male—is ultimately an act of disregard, disrespect, and an offense against the Creator himself.”

- With too few women in these spaces, their roles tend not to be senior or powerful enough and their witness is insufficiently heard.
- Diverse reports indicate that harassing behavior is common and rarely acted upon.
- Women tend to internalize and see themselves (particularly in the world of religion) as “objects”, whether because male leaders speak to them and treat them that way or interpret scripture to justify such treatment.
- We must end this culture of blaming and shaming the victim, and truly create a space in which the women are honored, heard, respected, and loved, such that they know within their faith that that is the truth of who they are.
- It is Important to explore why the word of women is greeted with skepticism -- how does that skepticism come about? What are the root causes of the skepticism about a woman's voice, and women's word, and women's lived experience? Where that skepticism exists, the ground is fertile for harassment of all types. We must also be conscious of that skepticism—acknowledging it in and of itself. That does not mean not to trust women, but we must appreciate the context in which these accusations are leveraged and try to understand and counter the skepticism about a woman’s voice and narration of experience.
- Sexual harassment and related traumas cut us off from language so that we cannot describe what's happening to us.

Codes of Conduct

“The victim never wins. The victim is shamed and has very few protections in today's society, so recognizing and finding counters to that is important.”

- Institutions and organizations must have a code of conduct, but also make that code of conduct known, by ensuring that at every level of an organization, the Code is understood and signed on to. It must be made clear that sexual harassment is not condoned in any way, shape, or form and this cannot be implicit, but indeed be made explicit. This also requires having clear definitions of what exactly is considered as sexual harassment.
- If the code of conduct is public, those who may have been perpetrators in the past will have a clear understanding of what will not be accepted, in any way.
- There is a need to develop a code of conduct that involves not just staff, and executive or Board leaders and affiliated religious bodies, but all others connected to the work, and others involved, including consultants and other vendors.

Reporting and Response

“[They] may not know who to trust. In fact, that's often the case because we know sexual harassment [and other] traumas actually cut us off from language... so that we actually can't describe what's happening to us.”

- Reporting processes in organizations are essential to release the stress and anxiety around this topic.
- Reporting processes need to be both clear and streamlined. There is much to learn from experience, for example child abuse situations that garble facts and stories: for example, when a child goes to their teacher with a story; the child would be sent to the school nurse, the school nurse would send the story to the principal, and the principal would call home; these people all end up being part of telling the story of the child's narrative. When the child is questioned the adults are often given the power, with the child silenced. Even in cases where the case actually comes to court, the perpetrator uses the mixed-up story recounted by the teacher, the nurse, and the principal to say that the child didn't know what they were talking about. Mandatory reporting can streamline the process to remove the doubt so the victim is trusted, without multiple layers of accountability.
- It is often assumed that when a victim reports the offence, the system takes care of everything. However, commonly the institution has actually protected

themselves and not advocated for the survivors. We should be more skeptical of the systems and Institutions, especially ones that seem to be practiced at dealing with such matters, as experience points to deeply engrained cultures that tolerate misbehavior. Institutions have created well-run systems that support such cultures.

- Sexual harassment impacts the entire community. If I witness a colleague showing harassing behavior to someone else, what is my responsibility as the witness? What is my responsibility as someone who caretakes and is responsible for that space? How can I follow up with the person that appears to be targeted by that behavior? We need commitments to check-in, find out how they're doing.
- There is a tendency among those who harass women sexually in interfaith spaces to do other forms of misconduct. If we transgress against one another's most sacred sexual being, we are probably very capable of transgressing against many other things that are even less foundational, so a predisposition to other forms of misconduct is likely. Bused by the conspiracy of silence that buries sexual misconduct, we miss instances where the same people may be culpable in other forms of misconduct. It can be more convenient to accuse people of sexual misconduct, then other forms of misconduct that have taken place by the same individual. As sexual misconduct can be officially silenced with a non-disclosure agreement or another silencing modality, other forms of misconduct can be silenced.

A Space to Tell and Hear the Stories

- It's essential that we create a space in which truth is heard and embraced. No one should ever be told that they should be quiet, to sweep the matter under a rug.
- We can find more ways for people to share stories, because it is the stories that show people what happens in the dark.
- Safe space must be truly safe but also creative and proactive. How do you listen and try to understand different perceptions and competing realities, but at the same time honor basic human rights, basic human dignity, and respect?
- The agents of cultural transformation are really the stories of survivors. If our trainings and our policies have an actual person that someone can hear or see and know, then the hurt and the suffering in the tragedy in trauma is before their eyes and they make that link.
- How can we put survivors' stories first, in all of our training and all of our policies? And do so, so that, at the center of any response and cultural change, is an acknowledgement of the pain and a transformation of the trauma experienced, such that we can no longer run from it, and can muster the courage to face it.
- The many different kinds of survivor stories need to be listened to as we seek to understand.
- A risk is to treat perpetrators' stories as binary: they are simply bad and wrong or innocent and good. Complexities must be understood and respected.

- Healing and transformation is broader than responding to survivors or listening to survivors' stories. We must desacralize the sexual harassment as part of any violence. Violence is not sacred. At the same time, there is a need to make more sacred the spaces of learning and sharing of experiences, as well as dealing with the complexities and the confusions that take place when and where sexual harassment takes place.
- Women need to be listened to. Urging them to come forward with such issues, requires a commitment to listen without judgement. That in and of itself is a critical means of empowerment.
- Men also suffer harassment. Equal opportunities and spaces to listen and to deal with circumstances are needed. Hearts and minds need to be open to those realities just as they must be to women's experiences.

Ways Forward

“I trust this is the beginning -- I would like us to continue. This is the first time we've come together to have this conversation which I hope we can continue to have -- let's commit to it.”

- Many institutions seek a quick fix. They have a false illusion that with policies, a template, codes of conduct, abuse will go away.
- Prevention needs to happen at every level—structural, policy, community, individual, and family—in order to create the essential and deep-rooted culture shift we need. It's not just about having policies in place.
- We need to appreciate how abuse is enabled by all of the parties involved.
- We need to pay attention to other marginalized identities that are harmed. We recognize that women are the victims in most of what's happening, but we should care about people living on the margins who are left out of this conversation.
- Reflection on sacred texts and experiences can in and of itself offer a means of healing. We should be more intentional in interfaith spaces about this dimension.
- But we know from sad experience that the victim rarely if ever wins. The victim is shamed and has very few protections in today's society. Recognizing and finding counters to that is important.
- We must look not just at the symptoms but also the root causes of violence and harassment, which is the human mind. Educating, taming and controlling the human mind is emphasized over and over again in sacred scriptures. Very few people are able to control the mind, but that is where the problem lies. Religions have a great opportunity to take the lead and come up with solutions here.
- There is a gray area between the interfaith spaces where sexual harassment may occur and the member participating religious entity to which the perpetrator belongs. How does accountability and perhaps even discipline occur given that gray area?
- At interfaith conferences where we open with an intention or set time for prayer or address sacred text – can we use those tools in responding to people who

have been affected and have a conversation with the victim, to affirm that what they're saying is sacred and has spiritual value.

- How we make space personally in conversations within the greater conversation in interfaith conferences? As we speak about spiritual matters, our reaction to these issues should be spiritual.
- We have an opportunity to imbue the infrastructure of response with the full philosophy, deep sense of purpose, and aspirations that we want to achieve through interfaith work. This gives us a touchstone, a center, where a victim can know what will happen if she chooses to bring up the topic or raise her own situation.

“There is much that we can bring into the light, of conduct that has been kept behind closed doors for far too long. As religious/faith leaders -- whether as communities of faith or heads of faith-based organizations -- we should take the lead, and also give voice to our hopes and aspirations that can help to make us all better members of the human family and global society.”