

Transcript: Architects of Change: How Women of Faith Are Transforming Communities

Narrator: Around the world, women of faith play critical roles in identifying and addressing problems in their communities, and particularly problems related to societal violence.

Domestic violence, early childhood marriage, and female genital mutilation persist, and in recent years, efforts to address these issues have led to organized pushback.

At the 70th UN Commission on the Status of Women, Religions for Peace collaborated with Unicef and United Women in Faith to facilitate discussions on the critical roles women of faith play as architects of change within their communities. These events were made possible through the generous support of the Gates Foundation and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.

Ms. Bani Dugal, Principal Representative Emeritus Bahá'í International Community UN Office: Transformation is in the being and doing. As human beings, when we practice our faith, we are encouraged to embody the principles of our faith, but also then to put those principles into practice. And I think in that is where we find transformation and the capacity for every individual to be able to transform the lives of those around them.

Ms. Rachel Bayani, Principal Representative to the UN Bahá'í International Community: Faith actors need to highlight the importance of transformative action and the fact that it's slow. I think it would be naive to think that we can have quick fixes.

Narrator However, progress in reducing societal violence is increasingly being met by organized pushback. Some are using strategic narratives to rebrand harmful practices as essential cultural identities to evade legal and social reform.

Ms. Alessia Radice, Social & Behavior Change Specialist, UNICEF: It's becoming much more organized and it's becoming more strategic. So we see that there is partnership as an organization on that side, and it's very important that we have it on our side too. We see how communities themselves are using evasion tactics to try and continue the practice. It goes to show that partnership is really important.

We also know that religious leaders are faith leaders, and women in faiths are on both sides of the aisle. We are not -- faith leaders are not a homogenous group. So what is very important is that we seek out partnerships. We seek out allies.

Narrator: Dialogues like these discussions at CSW70 are critical in addressing the pushback. Women are uniquely positioned to be the most effective agents in addressing societal violence, just as women are the primary reference points for community stability and moral guidance.

Mr. Linus Nthigai, Executive Director, Interreligious Council of Kenya: When you look at women as the first teachers, you look at women as the first disciplinarians. You look at women as the first friends, you look at women as, the first moral compass.

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From my experience with Interreligious Council of Kenya. Working with women of faith, seeing women as the first has made it very possible for Interreligious Council of Kenya and the women to become changemakers in the society.

Rabbi Diana Gerson, Associate Executive Vice President, The New York Board of Rabbis: Women of Faith do not only hold moral authority in their communities, they hold moral proximity to the realities people live every day. And that proximity is what allows them to transform values into action.

Narrator: The leadership of Women of Faith entails centering the voices of the vulnerable in the most prominent sacred spaces. Through their leadership, real progress against societal violence is being achieved.

Rabbi Gerson: Too often our communities have remained silent in the face of someone's being victimized. And it happens in so many places and in so many ways. It's the mother who says, don't tell. It's the parent who says, you know, nobody knows what happens behind closed doors. It's what will the neighbors think if somebody finds out this happened? It's going to destroy your chance of marriage. Destroy your opportunity in the future.

There's so much silence. There's so much shame. And women have borne this isolated. Without help, without guidance, without community. And I honestly do believe that is starting to shift. It really is. When I look around the world today and I see advocacy groups, women helping women, women lifting up women, women talking about the things that we never spoke about. I mean, I remember sitting at the dinner table and my mother would say, something happened to the neighbor.

I want to see and hear these conversations centering the voices of women and children who are victims on their pathway, their journeys to survivor and thriver.

Narrator: In addition to fighting to reduce societal violence, Women of Faith are engaged in their communities, building social cohesion and promoting planetary stewardship.

Prof. Dr. Amany Lubis, Rector, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University: Mainly, in the community, Women of Faith actively work to prevent domestic and, communal violence, challenge harmful cultural practices, protect the vulnerable women and children, provide social support and community mediation, promote peace and dialogue across differences.

So many examples for harmonious -- of religious harmony in Indonesia -- of harmonious co-existence in Indonesia, like, non-Muslim neighbors extending Ramadan food packages to Muslim families and also Muslim communities, assisting security during Christmas celebrations, etc.. So, we are used to having this cooperation in society.

Rev. Protopresbyter Dr. Nicolas Kazarian, Director, Department of Inter-Orthodox, Ecumenical & Interfaith Relations, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America: I think today of Jane Goodall. Most of you know her, but maybe the one thing you don't know about her is the fact that one of her very last public engagements took place in New York in September of last year, 2025. She spoke words with power about the divorce between humanity and nature, the divorce between humanity and nature through engagement of technology.

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And, in her words, and what speaks to us when we consider the notion of Shared Sacred Flourishing is to reengage and reclaim the unity -- even the marriage -- of humanity and nature. With that, I wanted to call on her as an example of leadership reconciling, unifying, and uplifting the sacredness of nature, the sacredness of humanity, and the sacredness of our shared vision and our shared vocation.

Narrator: Increasingly, in communities large and small, Women of Faith are the guardians of dignity – in a world where women and girls often carry the greatest burdens and suffer the greatest, particularly due to conflict and societal breakdown.

Sister Jane Wakahiu, LSOSF, Ph.D., Associate VP of Program Operations & Head, Catholic Sisters, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation: Our partners at Religions for Peace, and us -- the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation -- has long understood, the wisdom of supporting the leadership of Catholic Sisters -- just like all women.

Our founder, Conrad N. Hilton, was a man of deep faith in God, which permeated his life and entrepreneurial activities. He held a special place in his heart for the Catholic Sisters, for they had profoundly impacted his life. You may not know Catholics Sisters are among the most entrusted, committed and deeply embedded figures in the margins of their communities. With over 700,000 members worldwide, this vibrant network around the world continues to promote dignity and hope for children, youth and families. Their moral authority and strong connections to communities experiencing this advantage enable them to engage in constructive dialogue and forges a trust from community members and other religious leaders.

Today, as we celebrate Women of Faith who persistently continue to contribute to building bridges and creating pathways for transformative change in society, we are here because we believe that there is work that remains to be done within our faith communities, across government and within society at large, breaking cultural barriers to recognize, appreciate, promote and engage women.

Narrator: To increase recognition and visibility of the contributions of women of faith, Religions for Peace launched the Women of Excellence in Multi-Religious Action Award. The award raises awareness of the significant efforts Women of Faith are making towards addressing social challenges and societal violence.

Dr. Francis Kuria, Secretary General, Religions for Peace: This event will also highlight the recipients of this year's Religions for Peace Women of Excellence Award in Multi-religious Action, which recognizes women of faith who are the backbone of faith communities and religious institutions.

Rev. Doyeon Park, President, Buddhist Council of New York: It is a great honor to be here with you all today as a member of the Women of Excellence in Multi-Religious Action Award Selection Committee. It was such a hard job, and the selection committee carefully reflected on their work, and especially their deep engagement with local communities; their ability to build bridges across faith; and their creativity; and their contributions; and their strengthening interfaith understanding and social cohesion.

We gathered at the Unicef House to recognize and celebrate these this year's awardees. We have Madame Cisse Mariama Sow today here. And then we have the second, Grandmother Rankin-Tardif. And Miss Nageebah Hassan Tegulwa. So we have three recipients this year.

H.E. Ms. Patricia Adeline Lamah Minister of Women, the Family and Solidarity, Republic of Guinea:

This prize reminds us that faith, in all of its diversity, can be a strong lever of unity, social cohesion, and durable peace.

Dr. Francis Kuria: I've known Madame Sow for quite some time now. More than 10 years. She has been an inspiration for all of us. Her work in Guinea is, really, quite a testament of, what women of faith can do. She has fostered not just the Muslim women in Guinea, but also the interfaith movement, bringing together all the religious leaders and also creating a bridge between the religious leaders and the government of Guinea. And really, we appreciate your service. We thank you for your service. And we hope that God will continue to give you life and give you strength so that you can continue serving the women in Guinea, the women across Africa, and the women globally. With your words and with your actions. So thank you so very much.

Ms. Cissé Hadja Mariama Sow, Women of Excellence Awardee, Republic of Guinea: Because without women, there is no joy; without women, there is no development. Without women, life does not exist. And I fight for the rights of women and girls. So, I thank God for all this.

Sister Jane Wakahiu: Our faith should not divide us, but it should be able to bring those differences to the uniqueness of supporting the communities. Ultimately, everyone want to live a better life. Everyone dreams where they can thrive. Everyone want where they can have resources and be able to care for their families regardless of your faith, background and *Religions for Peace* does that work in those communities -- bringing different religions together.