



**SEEKING REFUGE:
FAITH-BASED APPROACHES
TO FORCED MIGRATION**

Poverty and Peacemaking II
March 3–4, 2017 at Princeton University

Women Refugees: Conversation and Action

Katherine Marshall, Georgetown University (Moderator)
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In this session, which was structured as an open discussion, conference participants gathered to distill practical policy recommendations on the topic of women refugees for institutional and grass-root structures alike. Erin K. Wilson, Director of the Centre for Religion, Conflict and the Public Domain, and a member of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Groningen, opened the dialogue with the following framing question: How do gender/religious/racial identities intersect as part of the migration and displacement experience? “Until now global migration policy, on both the institutional and state level, has been gender and religion blind,” Wilson noted.

The institutional perspective in global migration policy was first introduced and represented by Hind Alowais, a Senior Advisor at the UN Women agency. Alowais explained that since the deadline for the 2015 Millennium Goals ended, the UN has focused on constructing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, of which 11 of the 17 goals have gender related targets or indicators and address the needs of women, as well as recognize and support the agency of women. Moreover, Post UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants, which occurred in September 2016, this institution is establishing a refugee response structure, with input from many different stakeholders. UN Women has consulted with a wide range of actors to employ “gender responsive” solutions, and focuses particularly on the economic empowerment of women as well as the provision of both legal and psychological support post trauma. Sana Mustafa, a consultant and public speaker, challenged the success of institutional structures when she noted that, “larger institutions such as the UN are often limited in their efficacy with pursuing on-the-ground action and smaller grass-roots organizations are more effective at achieving local impact.”

The second central theme to arise in this session was the tension between secular and religious approaches to migration policy. Namely how “a narrative prevails that religion is bad and secularism is good” (Wilson). Katherine Marshall explained that the US State Department National Action Plan for Women does not include any reference to religion and there is a tension in the interactions between secular women’s groups and religious women’s groups. Indeed, Marshall added that it is sometimes easier to have Buddhist and Hindus speak with Evangelicals than to cross the divide into the secular domain. “If you are not at the table you end up on the menu”, Marshall said. Although, Anindita Chatterjee Bhaumik, Senior Advisor on Immigration and Gender Based Violence at Connect Faith, asked the following rebutting question: “How often are Hindus or Buddhists consulted in informing the construction of policy?” There was a general consensus during the session that secular agencies are often privy to knowledge that religious organizations are not always able to access. One solution to this issue



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included potentially encouraging greater knowledge across parties about secular agencies unaware of their own assumptions and biases. Further, it was noted that secular agencies should be expected to assume no neutral stance on tolerance. “We need to be comfortable with not being neutral,” said Jessica Sarriot, a MPA student at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University.

The fourth theme to arise during the session concerned the use of language and communication in relation to the refugee crisis. Namely, the need more for more creative modes of communication when interacting with and when speaking about displaced populations. Hager Elhariry, a Program Specialist at the New Jersey Office for Refugees, noted that “the term ‘refugee’ can be alienating.” Moreover, issues concerning definitions of gender also entered the session discourse. The fact that gender is a broader term, encompasses a number of identities, and may have multiple meanings for different individuals was discussed. Daniel O’Neill the Managing Editor at the Christian Journal of Global Health explained that it is imperative to equip religious leaders with tools to explore issues, such as gender-based violence, and that sacred texts may be a way to engage said leaders. O’Neill noted sacred texts have staying power and, in faith-based communities, may exert the necessary influence to change cultural mores.

The concluding essential thread of conversation during the session revolved around domestic violence in the religious setting and in regard to refugees. Sandra Pinto, a Client Services Coordinator at El Centro of Catholic Charities, said that migrants often feel that they don’t trust the government and therefore turn to religious structures for support and help. Marshall replied that religious organizations have a long way to go in regards to recognizing domestic violence. Marshall explained that in religious communities it has been easier to discuss LGBTQ issues than domestic abuse issues. Moreover, Elhariry noted that speaking with various refugee women has unearthed many different experiences that need to be considered in this discussion. Many are accustomed to abuse and do not know that they may have access to help. A final point was made by Sarriot that the “affirmative consent narrative” is gaining a stronghold in the United States and noted that it is imperative to encourage the normalization of victimizers receiving help. It was noted that domestic violence is a global problem and that further investment in education revolving around rights equality and gender issues is fundamental in order to change social norms.

Final Action Items:

- Utilizing the emancipatory and enabling dimensions of diverse faith groups
- Equipping religious leaders with tools to explore issues, such as gender-based violence
- Harnessing the power that exists in mass movements (e.g. The Women’s March)
- Giving women and refugees a voice at the peace negotiation/diplomacy table
- Examining inclusivity of language and communication strategies
- Addressing domestic violence as a global problem