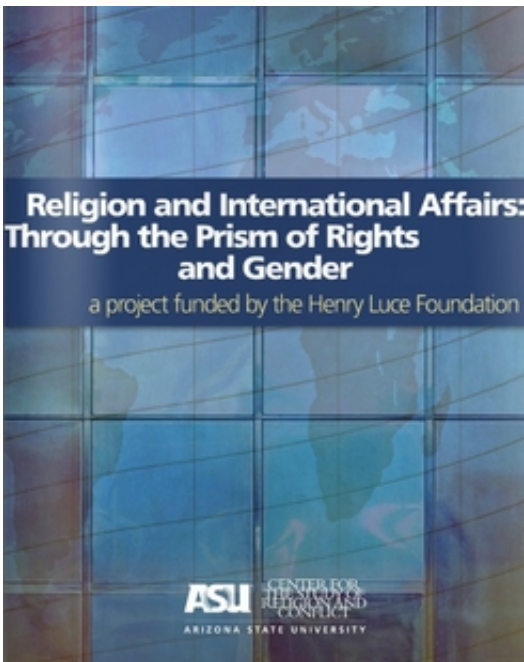


# Report sheds light on conflicts over religion, women's rights in global affairs

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Funded by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation, the multi-year project "Religion and International Affairs: Through the Prism of Rights and Gender," explored the relations of human rights, religion and gender with an interdisciplinary focus.

Women's education, reproductive rights, female genital cutting/mutilation and women's dress. These are just a few of the topics commonly used to support the idea that the world is locked in a clash of civilizations.

While gender issues often are at the center of debates concerning religion and contemporary society, there is an ongoing need to investigate how polarized narratives about clashing civilizations can affect and limit the pursuit of human rights and gender justice.

A new report issued by the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict highlights a critical need for flexibility and adaptability in addressing [women's](#) rights on the ground.

The report, "Religion and International Affairs: Through the Prism of Rights and Gender," contains a series of reflective essays that grew out of a multi-year research project that was funded by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation. The project, which was co-directed by Linell Cady, director of the center, and Carolyn Warner, professor and head of the political science faculty, explored the dynamics of human rights, religion and gender with an interdisciplinary lens.

"Although we are all speaking about the critical importance of rights to gender justice, the different reflection pieces in the report consider some of the challenges, obstacles and limitations – particularly in relation to religion – as they play out in national and international contexts," says Cady.

A common challenge in many places in the world can often be found in how people at local levels perceive the international pursuit of gender rights.

For example, Zilka Spahić-Šiljak, a professor at the University of Sarajevo and one of the project's international fellows, explains some of the legal and conceptual issues that are specific to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"Gender equality is formally accepted by state institutions," according to

Spahić-Šiljak, "but the mindset of ordinary citizens doesn't find it natural and applicable in their own lives. It is perceived as something imported from the West and imposed by the state, and not an authentic or local initiative."

Because of views like these that are common in many parts of the world, many contributors to the project see potential solutions to advancing women's rights in approaches that use multiple frameworks.

One example of the type of flexibility that is needed was articulated by Marzia Basel, a former judge in Afghanistan who spent a month on campus giving lectures and speaking with students as an international visiting fellow with the project.

"A functional legal system in Afghanistan, one that can be both applied by the professionals and accepted by the population, will require incorporation of certain aspects of Islamic and customary law, within the limits imposed by human rights considerations," says Basel.

This concept of legal pluralism suggested by Basel was supported by other scholars who see a need for being adaptable in order to take advantage of all the resources available to pursue gender justice.

"I think when we're talking about development and policy we need to be able to engage with a plurality of actors and a plurality of spaces," says Mariz Tadros, a former journalist from Egypt who is now a fellow at the Institute for Development Studies in the UK and one of the project's visiting scholars.

"In cases where the Sharia advances women's rights, let us use the Sharia. In cases where it's the international human rights convention, then let us use the international human rights convention. In cases where it is the national constitution, let us use the national constitution," says

Tadros.

Basel's and Tadros's views were also echoed by visiting scholar Hauwa Ibrahim, a human rights lawyer from Nigeria who successfully appealed a series of important cases for women who had been sentenced to death through her deep understanding and use of Sharia law.

Scholars involved in the project also discuss how some people achieve goals related to women's rights without making an appeal to the universality of human rights discourse.

"Rather than assuming human rights can or must bear all of the burdens to improve women's lives, these findings demonstrate the need for alternate discourses of human dignity that can refine, reform or, when necessary, replace human rights," says John Carlson, a member of the project team and associate director of the center.

"The human rights community seems to have fallen into the trap of thinking that religious traditions, doctrines and practices are static and permanent, and that they cannot be reformed," observes Carolyn Warner. "Those who have traveled from Afghanistan, Nigeria and other countries to contribute to our project make clear that religious beliefs and traditions can be vital to supporting women's rights."

Yasmin Saikia, professor of history and the Hardt-Nickachos Chair in Peace Studies, suggests that one way to reframe these debates is to recognize concepts of human rights that are found in religious traditions that predate international human rights languages.

"Notions of 'the human' and 'rights' are embedded in Islamic thought and tradition," says Saikia. "Reconnecting with the Islamic roots of human rights is essential for the human flourishing and development of Muslims – women especially."

These constructive statements about the need to broaden the resources available to address gender rights speak to another key finding, and that is the recognition of women's agency.

"Women are not always victims or passive 'sites' of human rights abuses," says Miki Kittilson, associate professor of [political science](#). "Rather, women often play critical, active roles in both shaping understandings of [human rights](#) in their societies, as well as living, interpreting and contesting the multiple dimensions of their religious practices and identities."

Overall, the findings expressed in the report challenge those working in academic and policy arenas, as well as the more general reader, to move beyond simplistic popular narratives about religion and gender, and appreciate a fuller range of strategies for addressing the intersections of rights, women and religion.

**More information:** [genderrightsandreligion.csrc.asu.edu/](http://genderrightsandreligion.csrc.asu.edu/)

Provided by Arizona State University

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