



Women's Interfaith Leadership Development

Report on Workshop held in Amman, Jordan
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WOMEN'S INTERFAITH LEADERSHIP

Background and Theoretical Approach

"If you start by developing trust, you can avoid endless dead-end discussions."

-- Workshop participant

Over the past four years, Jewish, Christian and Muslim women from the Middle East/ North Africa (MENA) region of the United Religions Initiative (URI) have formed a virtual community, communicating through email, phone calls, and at professional meetings. Participants have benefited greatly from mutual support and sharing information. This workshop was designed to provide structured time to deepen relationships and explore potential working partnerships.

Building an interfaith action network of women across the Middle East requires bridging religious and national differences. Ongoing conflict and a complex political scene complicate the task. In addition, it is often difficult for women to assert leadership in this region, where patriarchal structures dominate. While participants in URI groups have all had interfaith experience, there have been few forums for women's interfaith dialogue across national boundaries, and there are few established curricula or programs that address this need. The Amman workshop was intended to pilot-test an approach designed specifically for building women's interfaith leadership. It also moved into new terrain by involving women from multiple countries in the Middle East and from a variety of leadership roles. The model used in this project incorporated the following conceptual approaches:

Leadership development based on women's empowerment. Participants were brought into the process as co-creators of the workshop experience. Opportunities were created for participants to share their experience and wisdom and to teach, coach and learn from each other. Exercises were examined for their impact on participants and also for their potential use in local interfaith work.

A model of interfaith work consistent with women's strengths. This workshop adopted a model of interfaith work consistent with the natural strengths of women. Experiential exercises emphasized women's natural abilities: relationship building, working collaboratively, and sharing emotions and personal experiences. Political discussion and debate were deferred until a basic level of trust was established - a naturally feminine approach which values experience over conceptual debate and builds personal relationships before engaging in dialogue.¹ The workshop also encouraged sharing of religious beliefs and traditions in order to understand and appreciate the diversity of religious traditions – not attempting to diminish differences or move

¹ Blanch, A. (2005) Beyond the conflict: Women spiritual peacemakers in the Holy Land. *Elixir, 1*, 55-74.

towards unified practice, but allowing the discovery of commonalities within differences. This is particularly important in areas where religious identity is strong and differences need to be understood, acknowledged, and accepted. Finally, although women do not play formal leadership roles in religious hierarchies in the Middle East, and male clerics are the authorities on religious matters, the workshop was premised on the belief that women's religious experience and knowledge are equally valid and need to be fully respected. The roles women play as teachers and communicators make them a profound religious force.

Recognition of the unique role that women play in building sustainable peace and their wide range of leadership positions. Women's unique role in peacemaking has often been noted – their ability to form networks, their focus on human needs, their teaching of values and defining narratives to the next generation.² In addition, women increasingly yield influence from a variety of formal and informal leadership positions – as heads of organizations, professionals, writers and editors, politicians. The strategic planning aspect of the workshop was intended to test a process for encouraging participants to build new alliances and to get into action in their home communities.

The Workshop

Goals, Objectives, and Participants.

This project had three overall goals:

1. To expand women's leadership in building sustainable peace,
2. To move from interfaith dialogue into action;
3. To nurture and support women of the three Abrahamic religions in taking leadership positions in the Middle East.

The specific objectives of the workshop were to:

1. Build a core group for a regional women's interfaith network
2. Create a safe environment in which women of different faiths from MENA countries could explore difficult issues together.
3. Learn about each other's religions and share or observe religious practices.
4. Test exercises designed to explore personal religious identification, stereotypes and beliefs about other religions, relationships between religious and national identity, and ways in which each religion contributes to peace/conflict.
5. Develop action plans for local work in home communities
6. Develop leadership skills for working in interfaith settings.

Women were recruited through formal and informal networks, including women's organizations and the URI Middle East/North Africa regional email list. Application forms were filled out describing experience with interfaith activities, evidence of previous leadership roles, credentials, what the applicant hoped to get from the workshop, and how they planned to use what was learned. Additional considerations in the selection process included an equal mix of Jewish, Muslim and Christian women, a broad range of ages, as many countries represented as

² Marshall, D.R. (2000) *Women in War and Peace*. Washington, DC: U.S Institute of Peace.

possible, and at least two participants from each country. The total number was limited to 15 to insure an intimate working group. Final selections were made by an interfaith planning team.³

Participants ranged in age from 27 to 65 and represented four countries – Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Egypt. Two Muslim women from Iraq planned to attend but were prevented by an upsurge of violence in Baghdad; two Muslim women from Jordan attended in their place. One Christian woman was unable to attend at the last minute. Women included teachers, social workers, psychologists, media and communications experts, lawyers, administrators, a former Knesset member, a filmmaker, a political candidate, graduate students, conflict management practitioners, writers, and others. Although many had previous interfaith experience, for some it was the first time they had participated in such a group.

Participation was risky for some participants. Almost a third of the women asked that we not use their names, their pictures, or any identifying information in reports about the meeting.

Workshop Format. The workshop was facilitated by a team including representatives from the three religions. Elana Rozenman (Jewish, from Israel) was the convener and lead facilitator; Nada Abandah (Muslim, from Jordan) was co-facilitator; and Andrea Blanch (Christian, from the United States) was the documenter/evaluator. The workshop began with an afternoon of relationship and team building. Exercises helped people to focus on inner qualities rather than outer achievements and to strengthen intuitive capacities. The first evening, the group celebrated International Day of Peace by joining in an interfaith prayer and candle-lighting ceremony with children at a local home for troubled, homeless and orphaned youth run by Catholic nuns..

The second day explored religious identity and beliefs. The day opened with the building of a group altar with items of personal and spiritual significance contributed by each member. These objects were a powerful reminder of the personal suffering of the women in the region. The heartfelt prayers offered in response were dedicated to the transformation of suffering in the region and in the world. The group then moved into an exercise that used guided imagery, and paired and group discussion to examine what it is like to be a member of your own/another religion, and to look at the relationship between religious and national identity. These exercises were designed to uncover stereotypes and misconceptions about religions. The next set of exercises entailed discussion in faith groups, then in the group as a whole, about how each religion fosters tolerance/ intolerance.

The third day opened with women introducing themselves again, this time with reference to their careers, educational and work experience, and hopes for the future. This discussion allowed participants to recognize others as potential working partners, and set the stage for the planning session to follow. Planning was based on a goal-setting process used by the facilitator in her capacity as a career coach. After watching the process modeled, women broke into teams or worked by themselves to develop their own goals and action plans, then reported back to the group. In the evening, a group social event was held at a coffee house in downtown Amman.

³ The planning team included Elana Rozenman (Jewish, from Israel); Andrea Blanch (Christian, from the United States), and Rim Nour (Muslim, from Tunisia). Consultation on the design of the workshop was also provided by Dr. Khanssa Diab (Muslim, from Israel.)

Sharing of religious traditions and practices was interwoven throughout the workshop. On Friday afternoon, the Muslim women demonstrated their prayers, and on Friday evening the Jewish participants led a group Shabbat ceremony. On Sunday morning the Muslim women described key elements of their faith, and Christian participants read from their scriptures and talked about the essential elements that tie the different branches of Christianity together. The final morning also included discussion and evaluation of the workshop, including an “appreciation circle.”

The Results

In addition to the closing evaluation session, the workshop included time for reflection after each exercise. Participants were encouraged to discuss the impact the exercise had on them as individuals as well as how useful it would be in their own work as leaders. A pre- post written evaluation was also conducted.

Pre-Post Evaluation. A questionnaire evaluated changes in participants’ attitudes about interfaith work and perceptions about their own leadership capacity. Although the number of participants was too small for statistical testing, pre-post differences were all in the expected direction. Participants rated their own leadership capacities in working with people of different religions, their comfort in talking about religion in a mixed group, and their preparation to work with different religions higher on the post-test than on the pre-test. On the other hand, they rated the difficulty of doing interfaith work as higher on the post-test, probably reflecting that this was the first interfaith experience for several participants, who may have gained a more realistic view of the challenges involved. There was no change in the rated likelihood that participants would initiate a project.

On a question rating the role of religion in creating/addressing the current problems in the Middle East, the pattern of results was fascinating: Most people saw their own religion as equally or *less* responsible for causing the conflict, but equally or *more* responsible for addressing it – a pattern that was stronger at post-test than pre-test. Questionnaire results also showed a high level of satisfaction with facilitation (4.5 out of 5), moderate ratings for logistical coordination (3.5) and average-poor ratings for the hotel facilities (2.8).

Action Plans. During the action planning session, teams proposed an interfaith conference and training programs in Egypt, workshops on coaching, Hebrew and Arabic classes for women, employment assistance for women in refugee camps, pursuing advanced degrees and career changes, community organizing in Palestinian villages, development of a peace cafe in Jerusalem, integration of gender issues in Palestinian educational system, replicating this workshop for women in Amman, reconvening this group for an advanced workshop, and creating an ongoing network for communication and collaboration on projects.

Principles of Women’s Interfaith Peacebuilding

This workshop was designed as an initial exploration of a model of women’s interfaith peacebuilding that directly incorporates elements of religion and spiritual identity. Results of the workshop suggest the following principles:

1) Building trust among women is key in team-building. Women who “step out of role” by getting involved in interfaith or social justice work, or by demonstrating leadership in some other domain, are often criticized and may feel vulnerable or anxious in a mixed group. The exercises that focused on people’s strengths and on valuing one’s intuitive powers were helpful in overcoming this feeling of vulnerability. The time spent in face to face conversation and the frequent changing of partners also contributed to a feeling of intimacy among participants. Without these exercises setting the stage, it would have been difficult to go as deeply as the group did in the later exercises.

2) It is important for leaders to explore their own religious identity at a deep level.

Exploring religious identity led participants to a better understanding of themselves and of others. As one participant stated: “This caused me to look at issues I haven’t looked at before. Leaders can benefit from this.” This discussion also led to recognition of similarity of experience across religions and to a distinction between religion and politics. Participants noted that “there is no difference except the hijab,” “the only difference is the day of prayer,” and “as a religious person, the internal essence is the same.” Others reflected a struggle to “maintain the purity and essence of our original religion” and to “reject aggressive and extreme manifestations.” This led to the question: “So why do we fight if the religions are so similar?” One person responded, “Real differences come from government, where differences are emphasized.” Another noted that “Every religion does feel similar to the others. But each feels they are superior, that they have the truth. This is the kernel of the problem.” Looking at the juxtaposition of religious and national identity was particularly difficult – several participants noted that thinking about their identity as a woman, as a religious person, and as a Palestinian or Israeli (or other national identity) led in very different directions. Several participants noted that they didn’t enjoy this exercise, and all felt that it needed more time.

3) Examining how the three religions contribute to tolerance/intolerance is hard but valuable. Participants enjoyed looking at the positive role their own religion plays in fostering peace and tolerance, and were able to identify moral lessons, scriptures, and religious traditions that support peace and harmony between the religions. Naturally enough, they had a harder time looking at the negative side. However, several excellent points were made about how religions contribute to violence, including religious texts being taken out of context, cultural rules and restrictions being misunderstood as religious law, and theology being used to justify behavior that is driven largely by history or politics. Participants commented on how hard it was to acknowledge your own religion’s faults and vulnerabilities. This discussion also brought up factors outside the three religions that also contribute to violence and intolerance, including the “fourth religion, of materialism” and the “hidden theology of the United States.” Examining the three religions also raised the issue of “how little we know about each other.” For example, one Muslim woman noted her surprise at the concept of a secular Jew: “I thought *all* Jews were religious.” The issue of whether people need to prepare ahead of time or have (male) clerics available to share definitive interpretations of religious texts also came up.

4) An international mix creates a whole new perspective on problems. The workshop experience was profoundly affected by the inclusion of women from four different countries, each with a different political situation, different religious groups and different interfaith

dynamics. Issues that might have gone in a more political direction with more limited participation (i.e., if the group had included only Israelis and Palestinians) focused instead on the challenges of doing interfaith work and/or providing leadership as a woman in a male-oriented society. Participants also learned much about the situations faced by their sisters in other countries. For example, participants were not uniformly aware of the tensions faced by Christians in Egypt, where they are a tiny minority within the Muslim population..

5) Developing and maintaining a balance of power is critical. It is both crucial and difficult to develop a true balance of power between the religions. The loss of the Iraqi women (the two most experienced Muslim women, one a member of Parliament and one a leading women's advocate) affected the balance of leadership experience. Also, the cultural differences between groups needs constant attention. Steps need to be taken to ensure balance between the religions on a number of dimensions, including age, leadership experience, English language fluency, advanced preparation, etc. This issue also needs to be addressed directly with the group at the beginning of the workshop.

6) It takes time and commitment to do deep work on personal and group identity. Many participants commented that there was not enough time for the exercises, especially for delving into personal and group religious identity. Some participants reflected ambivalence about going deep: "It's sensitive to go deep." But another observed: "Its the role of the facilitators to separate religion and politics (so we can go deep safely)." Participants uniformly felt that each exercise could use an hour (or a whole day), and that more time for discussion on every topic was needed.

7) Women need more forums to discuss leadership dilemmas and they need resources to support local action. Participants were enthusiastic about the "action orientation" of the workshop. As one woman stated: "This was not the typical dialogue format, with people talking about the conflict and getting their baggage out. It allowed us to get to sharing and collaborating." It was clear that women need more forums to support each other as they move into leadership roles and local action. Although women had excellent ideas for local projects, few had ongoing interfaith groups at home to support them. Several mentoring relationships emerged between more experienced participants and the younger members of the group, but it was not clear that these relationships could be maintained in the home situation. In addition, resources to support local action are scarce. Although the planning model encouraged people to think about what they could do without large amounts of financial support, the lack of resources necessary to take even small steps was discouraging.

8) Women's interfaith work needs to reach new audiences. A number of the women in the group hold positions of significant influence in government and in civil society. Several had never had the opportunity to engage in an interfaith experience before, and were struck by the power of this model to break down barriers. One former Knesset member spoke eloquently about the need to develop alliances between progressive religious and secular women. Taking women's interfaith experiences to new audiences – women leaders in government, education, business, industry, the professions, and civil society – could have major impact.