

SEXUAL REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS, RELIGION AND FAITH-BASED ACTORS AT THE UNITED NATIONS

Interview with Dr Azza Karam, Senior Advisor on Culture and Social Development, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

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Humanitarian Issues. She represents UNFPA as Coordinator/ Chair of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging Faith-Based Organizations for Development; and coordinates engagement with members of a Global

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Prior to UNFPA, Dr Karam served in various capacities in the academic, NGO and international inter-governmental sectors. She served as the Senior Policy Advisor in the Regional Bureau for Arab States at the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) where she coordinated the Arab Human Development Reports and managed

regional programmes on Higher Education, Math and Science Learning, and Information and Communications Technology for Development.

With the support of the Ford Foundation, she founded the first Global Women of Faith Network during her tenure at Religions for Peace, while advising on interfaith development work in Muslim-majority countries. During this time, she also served as President of the Committee of Religious NGOs at the United Nations.

She was a Senior Programme Officer at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) in Sweden, where she instituted projects on democracy and human rights in the Arab Region, Western Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa. Dr Karam was an international consultant to several developmental programmes with UNDP and the OECD as well as a number of NGO initiatives between the European Union and the Arab and Central Asian regions.

She taught at a number of universities, and has published widely on international political dynamics, including: democratization, human rights, gender, and religion and development. Her books include: Religion and Development Post 2015 (2014: UNFPA); Religion, Development and the United Nations (NY: SSRIC, 2012); Transnational Political Islam (Pluto, 2004); Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers (IIDEA: 2004); A Woman's Place: Religious Women as Public Actors (WCRP: 2002); and Women, Islamisms and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt (Macmillan/Palgrave, 1998).

The United Nations was founded in the era that witnessed a general secularisation of the political discourse, which also meant that religion was not considered as an important element of the UN agenda. When did religion start gaining significance at the UN?

The United Nations is rich in diversity of entities, offices and mechanisms. Each of them has approached or been confronted with the issues of religion in a different way. Therefore it is difficult to give a general response as to when religion gained importance at the UN. It really depends on the particular UN body, office, mechanism and structure, and its thematic and geographic scope of operations. Undoubtedly religious

values underline the notion of human rights upon which the United Nations is based and accountable to. In this regard values which are common in all religions have always been part of what the UN is committed to. However, we have become very tempted to see human rights as a secular notion that somehow began to disengage from religion. What we do at UNFPA is to remind both the secular and religious world that common religious values are human rights and vice versa. By presenting human rights as everybody's value system, regardless of where they live, their gender or race, or their religious, cultural or ethnic background, we also counter the view that human rights is a distinctively Western concept.

How would you classify the range of faith-based actors active at the UN?

There are many religious actors at the UN and they are very diverse. There is an institution like the Vatican which is de facto a Member State that has a similar status to many Governments and Member States. It is the most centralised religious institution and represents millions of Christian- Catholics worldwide. There are also religiously inspired NGOs accredited either through the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) or the Department of Public Information (DPI) which means that the UN acknowledges them as legitimate NGOs. In addition, there are religious leaders who are engaged by various UN entities in different countries on diverse issues. There are also interfaith NGOs, some of which are accredited and some of which might not be accredited by the UN. The diversity of religious actors that are involved with different UN entities and bodies is enormous. This reality represents both an opportunity and a challenge. It is an opportunity because it provides us with multiple perspectives and reflects the practical, ideological as well as service-oriented richness of the world of religion. It is also a challenge because it presents us with enormous difficulty in being able to simplify, let alone quantify, the range of activism, positions and perspectives which are fundamentally religious. We would much prefer to have one religious position on different issues. Instead we have a multiplicity of perspectives within one religion or denomination alone. For example we have different positions on diverse human rights issues and sexual and reproductive health and rights, many of them quite contradictory. Such contradictions are hard to deal with in any context.

Speaking of faith-affiliated (anti) SRHR lobbyist at the UN, I have recently come across an opinion which claims that conservative faith-based actors join forces with conservative secular actors and similarly liberal FBOs seek allies amongst liberal secularists. Therefore, it is inaccurate to speak of a “secular” versus “faith” division on SRHR at the UN. Would you agree with this assessment?

I am not sure which secular voices are conservative about sexual and reproductive health and rights. The voices that are conservative about SRHR are usually religious. I have never heard of secular opposition to sexual and reproductive health and rights. What we see is opposition to certain aspects of SRHR, particularly abortion and LGBT rights, which is articulated by supposedly secular governments. However, we all know perfectly well it is articulated on the basis of religious or cultural positions. There is no such thing as a secular disagreement with sexuality. There are very well documented tensions between religious communities around the issues pertinent to human sexuality and reproduction such as; sexuality

education, access to safe abortion, homosexuality, amongst others. This is the reality we are confronted with when we deal with sexual and reproductive health and rights. You can find many areas of commonalities around almost all the development issues such as; poverty reduction, environment and climate change, peace building and good governance, democratisation and human rights, etcetera. However, the real litmus test of religious commitment to international human rights and development agenda is around the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights, and especially the most contentious issues such as homosexuality and abortion. You can really tell how, for lack of a better word, “progressive” religious leaders and religious organisations are when you check out their perspectives on some of these issues. Until about fifteen years ago under this list of contentious issues, which served as a litmus test, was also HIV/AIDS. However, the secular and faith-based communities have worked together so extensively on the issue, and we have resourced this area of work relatively well globally, regionally and at the national level, therefore we can now say HIV/AIDS is no longer considered one of those contentious topics. It is now widely recognised that HIV/AIDS is a disease like any other and needs to be treated without stigmatisation, though this was not the case just fifteen years ago.

How is religion reflected in UNFPA’s work on sexual and reproductive health and rights? Are other UN agencies, for example UNAIDS, also addressing the nexus between religion and SRHR?

Sexual and reproductive health and rights was first and most clearly articulated as a development issue in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). The ICPD Programme of Action is an international agreement, signed by 179 UN Member States in 1994, which elaborates specific areas of interventions in sexual and reproductive health and rights. The ICPD Programme of Action is UNFPA’s mandate; it is the instrument, programme and language for which UNFPA is accountable to governments. This is why UNFPA has led the UN system around the issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights as well as population and development. UNAIDS came into being specifically around HIV/AIDS. Over the years however, and especially in the last few years, UNAIDS has also become engaged on diverse aspects of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Though, no other agency in the UN system is expected that kind of accountability on sexual and reproductive health and rights as UNFPA. This is a very specific dimension of UNFPA’s work that should be made clear because people often do not understand what UNFPA does. Our mandate is the entire population agenda as laid out in 1994. This is why we have had the blessing and the curse to work in this particular area of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The strength of UNFPA within the UN system is that sexual and reproductive health and rights has increasingly been seen as integral to other development issues. This has been a relatively recent trend which resulted in greater involvement of various UN entities on the issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights. However, due to its longstanding mandate, UNFPA has the strongest track record of engagement with religious actors because there is no way we could have worked on sexual and reproductive health and rights without coming face to face with religion. We are an operational agency that delivers services, just like UNICEF or UNDP, which means that even if we did not want to get involved in religion, religion would always find us. We have therefore felt it is very important to become more systematic in our approach towards religion.

We have led this initiative within the UN system on engagement with faith-based organisations and religious leaders, simply by virtue of the fact that we have the history of partnership and wanted to make sure that we, the UN system, are all on the same page. We started this process in the year 2000 when the Millennium Development Goals were adopted, recognising it is the right time to be clear how, with whom we are working, and what are some of the lessons learnt. We were the first UN agency to begin mapping our engagement, to find out in which countries, with what actors, on which issues and with what results we are engaging. This is something that now many UN agencies begin to undertake and, having built on our experience, they are doing much better job than what UNFPA did. Our outreach with religious groups has been instrumental in informing the rest of the UN system and the wider international development community around why, how and with whom to work.

What are some of the lessons learnt from UNFPA's engagement with faith-based actors?

We continue to learn a great deal in this process for example, we realised that we have to be very clear what we mean when we say "faith-based actors". We simply cannot afford to just lump all of them under one heading. Are we talking about religious leaders, religious institutions such as churches, mosques and synagogues or are we talking about faith-based NGOs working in service delivery? Another lesson we learnt is that when we want to convene faith actors, we should strike the right balance between religious leaders and faith-based service delivery organisations. From our experience conversations become much less tense and much more action-oriented when we gather together a few religious leaders, who can speak in a supportive fashion on behalf of their faiths, and more of the religiously inspired NGOs that are delivering services on the ground and can give a reality check on the rhetoric articulated by religious leaders.

When you gather a group of religious leaders, it is very difficult to monitor their deliverables, whereas if you convene a good number of faith-based NGOs that are working on the ground, you have the capacity and the means to assess their efficiency. In the international development world, we need this capacity to monitor and hold accountable because we have the obligation to report to our donors whether the resources we invested incurred some returns. While, as a government or an international body, you can hold an NGO accountable, there are no similar mechanisms to hold individuals to account. Across international development world there is a tendency to just invite religious leaders; archbishops, imams, muftis, rabbis, with a view to having all major religions of the world represented, rather than trying to learn about much bigger and complex world of faith-based NGOs. In the UN system the approach of UNFPA is much more strategic, we acknowledge that we must engage religious leaders, just like we have to engage the presidents and prime-ministers, but we must also engage with the civil society and this is exactly why we involve religiously inspired NGOs.

Secular civil society organisations tend to treat FBOs with suspicion and constraint, and vice versa. How successful has UNFPA been in bringing secular and faith-based actors together to advance SRHR agenda?

We have had many successes in convening religious and secular civil society representatives around the problematic notion of sexual and reproductive health and rights. The reason why we have been successful is because we developed clear guidelines on how to engage faith-based entities. We, as the international civil servants, clarified amongst ourselves; why we need to engage with religious actors, whom we mean by these actors and how to engage them. We published our ideas in the form of guidelines on engaging faith-based organisations as cultural agents of change which were developed based on our partnerships with religious communities. We placed religion in the broader domain of culture, recognising that culture matters to development. We explained whom exactly we can engage, outlining some very clear principles; these have to be actors, whether religious leaders or faith-based NGOs who are committed to the human rights agenda and have no concerns over it.

Does this also mean they should use the same human rights language which is characteristic of the UN and the secular development community?

They should at least be cognisant and comfortable about human rights language if not to say they should use the same language themselves, with the respect for religious nuance needed in their own mission statement and outreach. Many of our partners,

interestingly enough, also work on bridging the language and ways of communicating as part of their advocacy work. They do so by highlighting the areas of commonalities between human rights and the teachings of, for instance, the Bible or the Quran.

A good number of FBOs and religious leaders that are outspoken in their support for the entire SRHR agenda do not represent the mainstream of faith-based world. They are based in the West and tend to focus exclusively on policy and advocacy rather than service delivery.

We have many examples of partnering with very locally rooted religious agencies around the issues of human rights, and sexual and reproductive health and rights more specifically. Take, for instance, Al-Azhar University, one of the oldest Islamic establishments in the world, where in 1975 UNFPA co-founded the International Islamic Center for Population Studies and Research.

Are these partners also supportive of the more contentious aspects in the SRHR agenda, such as LGBT rights and other sensitive topics?

LGBT became a notion in the last few years and sexual and reproductive health and rights has been on the development agenda for much longer. This is an emerging area of concern, just like for instance, carbon emissions is a new discussions item on the environmental agenda. If you look, for instance, at harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage, they were not listed as specific issues earlier on. A few years ago FGM was called female genital circumcision, now we cannot say that anymore because we are renegotiating the parameters of engagement around the notion. Whenever new issues emerge, we, the UN, end up renegotiating with our partners, starting with the governments, our terms of partnership, messages of engagement and desired results.

What is very problematic, however, is to use emerging issues to denounce and eradicate decades of partnership, engagement and collaboration, though this is often happening in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights. At the end of the day it is going to be a process of negotiations and over time we might reach a consensus. When we started addressing HIV/AIDS it used to be a contentious topic and some of our faith-based partners would point out fingers at HIV positive people, saying they deserved this because they did what God forbade them to do. However, from the perspective of the UN, a partnership with anybody other than governments might not necessarily be a marriage for life, which is what we also mention in our guidelines for engagement. Therefore in every partnership agreement that we sign with anyone from the civil

society sphere, be it an NGO or FBO, there are exit clauses written into it.

By and large, as times change we renegotiate and this takes place not only whenever we are confronted with challenges. There are also instances when our partners positively acknowledge the need to address emerging issues and take the lead in this process. Let me highlight one example. We have partnered for many years with Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and just ten or fifteen years ago, the extent of our engagement with YWCA was around the issues of gender equality, young women's empowerment, intergenerational dialogue, women's movements, building bridges between the secular and Christian religious women's rights, etcetera. When the issues of sexuality and reproductive rights started to become very pertinent and very topical, YWCA reached out to us saying they would like to partner specifically around these topics and know what the right messaging should be. They were ready to develop the faith-based conversations and argumentations on sexual and reproductive health and rights, including the language around comprehensive sexuality education, which is still taboo for many governments, and the importance of ensuring women's rights over their bodies and sexuality. All of this happened when we were very careful and apprehensive about approaching our faith-based partners on these issues which, at that time, were still relatively new. This illustrates that the negotiations with our partners around emerging issues can also be a positive sign of recognition, appreciation and a desire to act by faith-based actors.

The Faith to Action Network interview series aims to provide a multiplicity of perspectives on family health and wellbeing¹, presented in a non-partisan manner that invites open and thorough exploration. It intends to promote knowledge exchange and conceptual debate on diverse approaches to family health and wellbeing, recognizing diversity of opinions and promoting productive engagement across the differences. The opinions expressed in the interviews might not necessarily reflect the views of the Faith to Action Network, its Members or its Secretariat.

Credits

This interview was conducted by Dominika Jajkowicz

- 1. Our operational definition of family health and wellbeing includes: birth spacing, fertility awareness, safe motherhood, prevention of mother to child transmission, maternal and child health, age appropriate sexuality education, gender equity and prevention of female genital cutting, early marriage and all forms of gender based violence.*