

Reflections by Practitioners

Worldview Conflicts About the Role of Women in Society: Dilemmas for Third Parties

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Key messages

This workshop aimed to increase understanding of the dynamics of conflicts in worldview about the role of women in society. In particular, it highlighted the importance of conceptual clarity. This applies to the key concepts of *worldview conflicts* and of *role of women in society* separately, and even more so when they are combined. Many experts working on gender issues and women empowerment are not sufficiently aware of the particularities of worldview conflicts, while many peacebuilders are not paying sufficient attention to the implications of the role of women in society. Hence, there is a definite need to bring together the various actors who are working on such conflicts.

The key dilemma of worldview conflicts about the role of women in society is that worldview conflicts typically call for a non-judgmental third party, whereas working on the role of women typically involves the third party working towards changing societal norms. For a third party intervening in such contexts, this larger dilemma results in a series of other dilemmas when designing an approach. Firstly, the goal of an intervention can be either to bridge a worldview divide or to empower women, a choice that is both normative and strategic. Secondly, the approach of a third party can be dialogue-oriented or activist, i.e. to attempt to reach the goal by enabling conversations or through advocacy. Thirdly, an intervention can be implemented by external and/or local third parties and the process can be more inclusive or more exclusive. Fourthly, an intervention can take place at various levels within a society; notably, it can focus on the national or the local level. Lastly, any third party needs to also carefully reflect on their own worldview and identity.

By bringing together and encouraging the free exchange of ideas, thoughts and insights from experts with a wide range of backgrounds, this workshop helped to strengthen and enrich existing knowledge. Furthermore, it gave rise to an emerging realisation that working on worldview conflicts on the role of women can be fruitful if practitioners are aware of the inherent dilemmas involved. This was evidenced by many examples presented at the workshop.



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA
Directorate of Political Affairs DP
Human Security Division:
Peace, Human Rights, Humanitarian Policy, Migration



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Introduction

Worldview conflicts about the role of women in society. Behind these dense and dry-sounding words lie real humans and real suffering. When a group of men in Somalia argue that a raped teenage girl has to marry her rapist because their culture says so, but is challenged by others who argue otherwise; when secular and Islamic protesters clash in Morocco over a proposed change to the country's family code; when women's advocates argue that women in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas should have the right to inherit and possess land, but are refused that right on the grounds of tradition and religion; or when in the USA abortion clinics receive threats from Christian fundamentalists: in all of these cases there is a conflict in worldviews regarding the role of women in society. Such conflicts by their very nature are highly emotional and touch upon issues that the parties consider sacred. This presents a delicate context for third-party intervention. The key goal of this report is to discuss how third-parties can approach worldview conflicts about the role of women in society.

This report reflects on the discussions from a workshop held in October 2017, without aiming to exhaustively reproduce the event in detail. The report does not aim to evaluate specific approaches to this type of conflict, or to create a typology of all possible approaches. Instead, the report presents and structures the discussions, along with the author's own reflections.

Firstly, the two key concepts of *worldview conflicts* and the *role of women in society* are explained and then combined. This is followed by a discussion of five aspects that should be considered when intervening in disputes which involve worldview conflicts about the role of women. The report ends with a short conclusion.

The examples cited in this report, their extrapolation, and the intellectual reflection which follows are a direct result of the workshop and its participants. The sixteen participants represented four continents and were carefully selected to reflect a broad range of backgrounds, experiences, expertise and cultures. The list of participants can be found in Appendix 1.

The workshop took place in October 2017 in Zurich, Switzerland under the framework of the Culture and Religion in Mediation Program, a joint program between the Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich and the Human Security Division of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. CARIM's activities focus on mediation in conflicts with religious and cultural dimensions. The workshop was organised by Anna Hess Sargsyan (CSS at ETH Zurich) and the author of this report.

What are we talking about?

The report and workshop look at different approaches to conflicts between actors who hold different worldviews that manifest (at least partially) around the role of women in society. This chapter will clarify the two key concepts and combine them.

Worldview Conflicts

A worldview is the collective framework a group uses to make sense of the world¹. Worldview can be understood as the "lenses" through which a group looks at, and interprets, the world. The most intuitive understanding of worldview is to think of religion. A group with deeply held religious beliefs will "see", interpret and analyse the world through the lens of their religion. However, worldview is broader and not limited to religious beliefs and covers also atheism, secularism etc.

Expanding from this definition, it follows that worldview conflicts are conflicts between two or more groups who have different worldviews which come to characterise the poles of opinion in a dispute. The groups may come from different religions, different sub-sets of the same overarching religion, or may differ between religion and non-religious worldviews. Classic examples include disputes about the control over a holy site. However, worldview conflicts often also concern questions of social structure.

From a conflict-resolution perspective, it is important to note that worldview conflicts have the potential to lead to deep social and political divisions within a society exactly because they stem from deeply held beliefs. Furthermore, given that worldview influences the way we see and make sense of the world, what appears rational can differ between actors who have different worldviews. Even words may not have the same meaning and the way sense and meaning are attributed to language may differ. This makes communication among people with differing worldviews extremely difficult. These factors present a challenge to conflict resolution, which traditionally relies on voicing one's interests, positions and values in words. The different rationalities may lead to misunderstanding, and hence, mistrust among actors. In addition, the attribution of holy meaning to the issues makes them appear indivisible, which makes bargaining and negotiation more complex or even outright impossible.²

1 Adapted from Goodman, Nelson (1978), *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

2 For a more detailed discussion on worldview conflicts and conflict resolution, see Baumann Jonas, Finnbogason Daniel and Svensson Isak (2018), *Rethinking Mediation: Resolving Religious Conflicts*, CSS Policy Perspectives 6:1, Center for Security Studies, Zurich, Switzerland, available at www.css.ethz.ch.

Given that worldviews are emotional and linked to a group's identity, challenges to one's worldview are often perceived as a threat to one's own identity. Consequently, if an actor's worldview is challenged or threatened, they tend to react by reinforcing it. This occurs not only when an actor's worldview is challenged by other parties to the conflict, but also when it is challenged by a third party. Consequently, third parties seeking to intervene in disputes which involve worldview conflicts typically take a non-judgmental approach.

Role of Women in Society

The role of women in society refers to the rights and duties which are attributed to, and claimed by, women in a society. The term is widely understood and covers issues such as political rights, economic rights, social rights, health etc. The term generally refers to how a society sees the role of women, and which duties, functions and rights are attributed to women. This role, of course, is not fixed but evolves over time.

It is important to distinguish the term *role of women* from other widely used terms such as *women's issues*, *gender*, or *inclusivity*. Inclusivity in the context of conflict resolution generally refers to the inclusion of women and/or marginalised groups into peace processes. In a broader sense, inclusivity refers to the inclusion of women (or other groups) into the political decision-making process. Inclusivity touches upon the role of women in society as it refers to their role in the decision making of a society. Yet the scope of *inclusion* is narrower than that of the *role of women*, because the latter extends beyond the issue of participation alone.

Gender commonly refers to the relationships between the sexes and the constructed attributes of being male or female.³ Thus, gender is a broad term with many different implications beyond the scope of the role of women in society. Lastly, the term "women's issues" is problematic for various reasons. Almost any issue can be a women's issue, and the term also implies that certain questions are only relevant for women. Therefore, the term lacks clarity, specificity and is limited in scope.

While the term *role of women in society* is neutral as such, a vision of an "ideal" role for women in society has clear normative aspects. Third parties typically have such a normative "ideal" in mind and work with the society to modify the status quo. For this reason, the ultimate goal of working on the role of women in society is generally to change values and minds.

Worldview Conflicts About the Role of Women in Society

The workshop looked at different approaches to conflicts between actors with different worldviews that manifest (at least partially) around the role of women in society. The combination of the two concepts and their separate characteristics presents third parties with special challenges. Based on the definitions above (as illustrated in Figure 1), worldview conflicts over the role of women in society call for a third party to be non-judgmental, while advocating for certain norms at the same time. The interest of this report lies in studying this dilemma and its implications. It does so while being cognizant that no method to work in such conflicts can be a one-fit-all-solution, as working in conflicts is always highly context dependent.

In studying the presented dilemma and its implications, this report reflects on aspects which are important when intervening in a worldview conflict about the role of women. In that sense, it is a reminder that choices – implicit or explicit – always need to be made. These reflections are not necessarily limited to the specific setting of worldview conflicts about the role of women, and they do not aim to be exhaustive. They were all identified and discussed during the workshop, and in that they mirror the workshop participants with the expertise and experience.

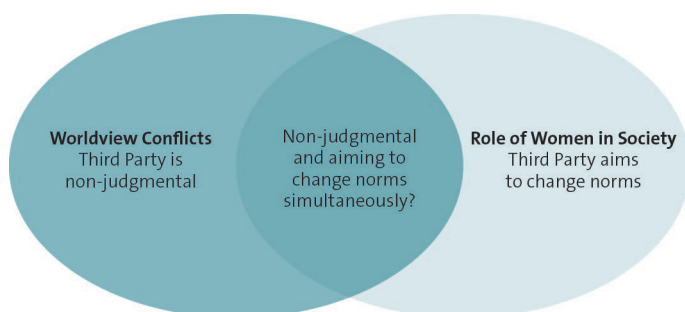


Figure 1: Dilemma of worldview conflicts about role of women in society

³ See, for example, UN Guidance on Gender and Inclusive Mediation Strategies, UN Department of Political Affairs, 2017.

What Dilemmas are There?

Goal: Women Empowerment Versus Bridging the Worldview Divide

There are different types of professions working on worldview conflicts about the role of women in society. Here, they are broadly put into two categories: people working in conflict resolution and people working on women's rights and empowerment. The workshop deliberately brought together experts from both backgrounds, and the discussions quickly revealed that in practice, the ultimate goal of their work is similar or even the same: to work towards a peaceful and just society. Thus, there is no contradiction in long-term goals, but differences in focus.

Nevertheless, there is a potential dilemma that can, in the extreme, become difficult to navigate. For example, a conflict-resolution perspective might work with an extremist actor to convince that actor to transform from an armed actor to a political actor who pursues the same aims by peaceful means. In contrast, a women empowerment perspective would rather attempt to change the mind of the extremist actor in order to shift his/her position, or alternatively, to lobby to delegitimise the actor in order to prevent him/her from gaining access to power. This dilemma, presented here in the abstract, is very real in various contexts, as illustrated by the following two statements from the workshop.

“There is no need for such groups to become mainstream and to be included in the process. Not if they cannot respect the basics of the constitution. The more space they get, the more radical they become.”

“We build bridges to cross a divide in society. We give space to the parties, all of them, to talk. What they discuss is not our responsibility.”

These two goals are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as one third party could establish a dialogue between all actors, while another third party could attempt to shift the position of a given party. Even so, each third party should be conscious of the goal of their intervention. While this decision has a normative dimension, it is also a strategic decision: not every third party is equally well positioned for both goals, and the choice of goal has implications for the design of the intervention.

How: Activist Versus Dialogue-Based Approaches

In addition to the tension discussed above between organisations working in conflict resolution and organisations working on women's rights and empowerment, there is another line of tension regarding the approach. This concerns the question of *how* to work towards the realisation of one's goal. The underlying question is whether a goal should be pursued by lobbying and activism (here called the activist approach), or by bringing opposing actors together to form a dialogue (here called the dialogue-based approach). This tension is reflected in the two following statements, both from the same participant.

“When one is a mediator one is not there to debate or to win an argument, but to understand and to make people understand. I often do that through asking the right questions.”

“Dialogue doesn't bring you further in every case.”

This tension is always present when working on questions of social structure. When there are worldview differences, however, this tension is stronger and the implications more critical. This mainly results from the highly emotional nature of worldviews which are strongly linked to a group's identity. Actors often react to perceived challenges to their worldview by reinforcing it or by distancing themselves from the challenger. Hence, an activist approach often further alienates the group one tries to convince. Not trying to win an argument but instead trying to understand, i.e. to give space and a sense of safety to the group can be more appropriate. However, the activist approach can be attempted less with the aim to convince a given group, but to convince a broader public and to isolate a given group.

In the following, these two approaches are illustrated further by examining typical methods used.

Safe Spaces

A typical dialogue-based method is to create a safe space⁴, i.e. a place or environment where parties do not have their worldview threatened or challenged. This allows participants to deal with the other side in a non-confrontational way. In light of the characteristics of worldview conflicts, this instrument has many advantages. However, the concept of safe spaces is straightforward in theory but often difficult in practice. A workshop participant raised one such practical challenge by recalling a discussion about a hijab. In this particular case, a participant of a safe space workshop was wearing a hijab, which was perceived by another participant as a threat to her worldview. This situation was

⁴ For more information on safe spaces, see Bitter, Jean-Nicolas (2013), Mediation Space and Diapaxis, in Frazer, Owen and Ghetts, Lakhdar (eds.), Conflict Transformation in Practice, Cordoba Now Forum, 2013.

resolved through a discussion between the involved persons, but it shows both how delicate and how subjective the feeling of “being safe” can be.

A further challenge to safe spaces was raised by another workshop participant who stated that:

“A safe space can become an unsafe space if one is not allowed to challenge another worldview.”

By guaranteeing that participants do not have their worldviews challenged and threatened, one at the same time takes away the possibility to challenge someone’s worldview. Not being able to challenge a worldview one fundamentally disagrees with can create a feeling of being defenceless and threatened, and hence turn the safe space into an unsafe space. Furthermore, there is a risk that safe spaces become too safe, thus limiting or hindering discussions. To avoid these problems, it is important to find good “red lines” tailored to each context and to clarify and negotiate the terms of the safe space with participants in advance.

Norms

A typical activist method is the setting and use of international norms and standards, a widely used method in women’s rights and gender equality work. Typically, key international actors such as the UN establish norms and push for them to be recognized and implemented. This is by no means new in the field of peace and conflict, and indeed some of the major achievements fall into this category (e.g. the Geneva Conventions which set norms of acceptable behaviour for armies and armed groups in times of war). In the field of women and peace, the key documents are the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and its related documents.

Such international norm-setting can have a significant impact. In Afghanistan, for example, the government’s wish to be in compliance with international norms was credited by workshop participants to have had a significant impact on improving the representation of Afghan women in parliament. Another example is the UN’s work on mediation and sexual violence, resulting in the 2012 “UN Guidance for Mediators on Addressing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Ceasefire and Peace Agreements”. This guidance was credited during the workshop for an increased inclusion of gender considerations in recent ceasefire agreements.

However, such focus on norms is also contested. Norms do not work in every context, especially in worldview conflicts. When pressured with norms seen as contrary to their values, worldview actors are likely to reject them by pointing out that they are foreign and contend that their imposition constitutes an act of imperialism or colonialism. This may hinder the implementation of such norms and may stigmatize the sections of society who agree with them.

Here, it is important to note that norm building does not need to exclusively stem from outside. Norms can be built – and international norms re-formulated and contextualised – from within, in a bottom-up process involving dialogue and the participation of all actors. If done this way, norms and norm-building are no longer uniquely an activist method, but can be a dialogue-method. Reflecting on a project of working with police forces in Somalia, one participant described a persistent question in her internal monologue:

“What in your culture or your customary laws provides for the norm we work on?”

Another successful example presented during the workshop involved a dialogue process in Morocco, which brought together actors with differing worldviews about the role of women. This process led to a realisation that both sides shared similar concerns regarding the role of women in society and that their norms of references were not far apart on substance.

Who

The previous sections discussed the goal of an intervention and how to intervene. This section looks at a third important aspect: Who? This question has two elements: Who is the third party, and who does that third party work with? In the following, those two elements are elaborated upon.

Local Versus External Third Party

In almost every process, there is a mix of local and external third parties. The mix can be either depending on the mediation tracks, or differentiated by strategic and operational level, or a mix of all these elements. The issue of the nature of the third party goes beyond the simple issue of the nationality of the people or organisation; it also relates to who the central actor driving the process is.

The first aspect to consider is the question of acceptability and impartiality. Domestic third parties have an advantage in that they are familiar with the setting and culture, whereas an external third party will not be as familiar with the context and often even lacks the ability to speak the local language. This is an important aspect, notably in worldview conflicts about the role of women in society, where references to culture and tradition play a significant role. Familiarity with the context, however, can also be a disadvantage. A local third party might be too grounded in the context. In such situations, a third party who is alien to the context may be able to add useful perspectives and ideas from other contexts. Furthermore, a local party is more likely to be (or to be perceived as) partial, either because of their previous actions, existing relationships, or simply by belonging to a certain religious or ethnic group. The external third party is often perceived to be more impartial. Obviously, this does not hold true for all third parties in all contexts, as the

relationship with external actors is complicated and multifaceted. In addition, just because a party is external to the conflict does not automatically mean they will be impartial, just as local actors will not necessarily be partial.

The experience of the workshop participants showed that it is rare for an intervention to exclusively involve external third parties, or exclusively involve local third parties. In most cases, there is a mixed approach. This raises the question of how the cooperation between local and external third parties is structured. A wide variety of models exist; at one end of the spectrum, the local party primarily provides contextualised expertise, while the external partner takes the lead role. At the other end of the spectrum, the local partner takes the key role, while the external partner contributes with finances or provides specific thematic expertise. It is important to keep in mind that the mix between local and external also has an impact on sustainability.

Another aspect is the choice of the partner. External partners need to carefully reflect on who to choose as a local partner. For example, an external partner may favour a local partner who is close to their own values and worldview, or a partner that is seen as impartial by the domestic audience. None of those choices are better or worse per se, but they will have an impact on the planned project. Of course, the same is true in reverse. Thus, the local partner should also reflect carefully before engaging with an external partner and consider whether the potential external partner could negatively affect the organisation's work and image, and whether their working styles are compatible.

Cooperation with the local partner becomes even more important in contexts where foreigners have limited access. Many of the workshop participants are working, or have worked, in such contexts. Mutual trust and the issue of accountability and control are key. A specific case in point are situations where access to certain areas is limited not due to security, but due to state-imposed limitations. A tendency to try to please, or at least not to offend the government in such contexts is understandable, as access is dependent on the goodwill of the government. However, the content, reach and quality of the project might suffer in such scenarios, which will usually not go unnoticed by the local population. One workshop participant recounted her experience of such a situation:

"This creates a narrative of external actors failing to deliver and being more interested in defending their own interests".

Inclusive Versus Exclusive Processes

The section above looked at who should intervene, i.e. the choice of third party. This section will look at which conflict actors should be included in the process. The question of inclusivity is a key topic in any process. However, there are particular challenges if the process takes place in a context of a worldview conflict about the role of women in society. Many tend to forget that while working on the role of women in society in any form, one has to not only work with women, but with the whole society, including men. One workshop participant recalled the following example:

"A women economic empowerment project in rural religious communities had to be stopped because the local men started to resist it. Not because they did not like the project, but because they felt neglected and ignored."

In that case, the international organisation implementing the project had failed to sufficiently take the local men on board. By failing to include and consult them, a project that was otherwise uncontroversial had to be cancelled.

The same problem applies to other approaches which might exclude certain key actors. Typically, those are actors with whom the third party does have strong worldview differences and with whom they are hence reluctant – or, in certain cases even legally forbidden – to work with. Other often-neglected actors are those who are difficult to reach because they do not speak an international language, are based far from the capital, or do not usually work with outside actors and hence are not thought of when designing the program.

Where: Local versus National Level

Similarly to the question discussed above on who to include in the process, a third party intervening in a worldview conflict about the role of women has to choose on which level and in which region(s) to work. The underlying problem was nicely presented by one workshop participant referring to the issue of women's political participation:

"In my country, there has been a lot of progress on women's participation in the national parliament and the national government, and in the capital. But representation of women remains very poor on a local level outside the capital."

Generally, the workshop participants agreed that the focus is too often on the national level and on the regions around the capital or other big cities, whereas rural and remote areas are often neglected. There are many reasons for this: working in or around big centres is often easier, more practical, safer, or the area may be simply better known.

When working on worldview conflicts about the role of women, the tendency to focus on the national level is delicate. Obviously, working at the national level is important. Ideally, it can reduce conflict between national actors, can influence the legislative process and can impact the implementation of law. However, third parties should keep in mind that social change can only happen in concert with society. Bearing in mind that in most countries rural areas are more conservative, the role of women in society is likely to be an important question in rural areas.

Our Own Worldview

So far, we have discussed who should include whom in what kind of approach, with what goal. There remains one aspect that is both important and often overlooked: the worldview of the third party. Third parties, particularly external third parties, often consider themselves to be impartial, or “above the context”. They focus on analysing the worldview differences between the parties, design strategies to overcome these differences, and implement programs to bring different actors together or to work on the question of women’s role in a divided society. While doing all of this, many forget or neglect that they too have an identity and a specific worldview. The worldview of the third party influences all aspects of their work, from how the situation is analysed to how a project is implemented and how its success is evaluated. Furthermore, particularly in contexts of worldview conflicts, the worldview and identity of the third party will also influence how they are perceived by other actors and if/how they will cooperate. Thus, the identity and worldview of the third party is highly relevant because it influences both the perspective of the third party and the perception of others about that third party. Consequently, working in setting of worldview conflicts also requires the ability to self-reflect. As one participant stated:

“It is not a one-way, but a two-way learning process, and I constantly remind myself that I need to reflect upon myself as well.”

Conclusion

The workshop was an opportunity for CARIM to bring together experts from different backgrounds who focus on worldview conflicts, conflict resolution, gender equality and women empowerment. Reflecting on the workshop, this report’s first conclusion is that the key concepts of *worldview conflict* and *of role of women in society* are used differently by different actors.

By clarifying these concepts and combining them, the inherent dilemma of working in worldview conflicts about the role of women in society becomes clearer. Further, it becomes evident that there is little consolidated knowledge or expertise on this specific topic. There is significant knowledge on gender equality, the inclusion of women in peace processes, women’s empowerment, as well as conflict resolution. While lots of this work is done in settings of worldview conflicts, it is often not considered to be a distinct setting. One of the key activities of CARIM is to increase recognition and understanding of worldview conflicts and their particularities. Vice versa, many of those specialising on worldview conflicts have so far paid little attention both to gender considerations and to the specific question of the role of women in society. The workshop was a first attempt to do so more systematically.

This workshop has aimed to contribute to the emergence of a field which combines worldview conflicts and the issue of the role of women in society. The reflections presented in this report are not seen as the final conclusion, and more work is needed. In particular, there are three areas where increased efforts are called for. Firstly, applied research is necessary in order to develop the conceptual framework of the overlap of worldview conflicts and the role of women in society. Secondly, the combined topic should be integrated into training on religion and mediation. Thirdly, there is a need for greater collaboration between the different experts and practitioners involved in dealing with the combination of worldview conflicts and the role of women in society, in order to develop better processes and improve practice.

Appendix: List of Participants

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Germond, Catherine, Cordoba Foundation of Geneva

Gasser, Rachel, swisspeace

Hamidi, Samira, Women Knowledge and Leadership Organisation

Hess Sargsyan, Anna, Center for Security Studies at ETH Zurich

Limo, Irene, African Center for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes ACCORD

Madenyika, Rachel Farai, Quaker United Nations Office

Marhaban, Shadia, Mediators Beyond Borders International

Nasser, Noreen, University of Peshawar

Santiago, Irene Morada, Kahayag Foundation

Torry, Gina Marie, Norwegian Nobel Institute