

# Intersectional Conflict Analysis: Religion and Gender

While different aspects of identity are increasingly understood to shape diverse experiences of, and agency within conflict, religion and gender are still often treated as separate categories. Intersectional analysis examines gender and religion as overlapping rather than parallel categories, enabling a thorough understanding of conflict dynamics and inclusive peace programming strategies.

By Cora Alder

Twenty years after UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) was passed, the international community pays significantly more attention to gender dynamics in conflict and peacebuilding. While many of the aims of the WPS Agenda remain unachieved, its focus has shifted from highlighting women's role in conflict to looking at gender in broader terms. Gender refers to the social constructions of masculinity and femininity. Masculinity denotes the qualities, behaviors, and attitudes traditionally associated with or deemed appropriate for men; femininity for women.

Analyzing how gender and other aspects of identity, such as race, class, and religion, intersect and constitute the diverse experiences and forms of agency in conflict leads to a more thorough understanding of conflict dynamics and power relations between actors and groups. The analysis of these intersections in conflict, however, remains hard to operationalize, particularly when it comes to gender and religion. Consequently, analysts often fall back into stereotypical and dichotomous descriptions of religion or gender. Many policymakers still adopt narrow understandings of the terms. When referring to "religion", they often mean "male religious leaders". By "gender" they usually mean "women". This kind of categorical thinking persists in the field of peacebuilding partially because the activities of those working on religion and those working on



A man breaks a window as a mob of supporters of former US president Donald Trump storm the US Capitol Building in Washington, January 6, 2021. Leah Millis / Reuters

gender rarely overlap as they advocate for seemingly different actor groups.

This piece lays out the advantages of analyzing gender and religion as intersecting categories in peacebuilding based on examples from Nigeria, Myanmar, and the US. Intersectional analysis is the basis for a more granular conflict analysis. It brings to light diverse experiences and agency within conflict groups that are often falsely as-

sumed to be homogeneous. Highlighting how conflict affects conflict actors differently, intersectional analysis leads to peacebuilding interventions that are more in-tune with context-specific conditions.

## Two Topics, Many Prejudices

When assessing the intersection of religion and gender in conflict, there is generally a double blindness in the field of peacebuilding: WPS advocates frequently lack the in-

terest in religion, and gender perspectives are often absent with practitioners of religious engagement. Among the former, religion was long understood as a powerful ideological tool underpinning patriarchal structures. Only recently has the field started to acknowledge that not all women of faith are passive “victims” of religious ideologies but are actively creating their religious and political lives. Nevertheless, the idea of religion as being inherently against women’s equality has persisted.

Understandings of religion, on the other hand, have rarely included activities that were carried out by women. What was “religious” centered around scriptural interpretations and on religious institutions. Areas of religiosity occupied by women, which were often outside of religious institutions, have remained largely invisible. However, ritual, performance, and everyday pious activities are all areas of religious life. As a result, religious engagement, such as interreligious dialogue, has often focused on male clerics. Meanwhile, women’s contribution to building peace, such as psychosocial support and community reconciliation, have frequently gone unrecognized and received little financial support.

A way of overcoming this categorical thinking is to look at intersecting aspects of identity, such as gender, age, marital status, class, caste, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability.

## Not all women of faith are passive “victims” but are actively creating their religious and political lives.

Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in critical race studies in the US as a framework to reveal layers of discrimination, the concept of intersectionality has become widely recognized. In the field of peacebuilding, it is used to analyze the construction of conflict-related identities.

Intersectional analysis highlights the complex ways in which aspects of identity cross and constitute individual and collective roles. It brings forth how different actors and groups experience conflict, but also what space for action they might have. Thus, experiences, perception, and agency in conflict can vary significantly for men, women, and sexual and gender minorities of different ages, classes, and religions. As such, intersectional analysis highlights

overlooked actors in conflict and points to potentially neglected power dynamics.

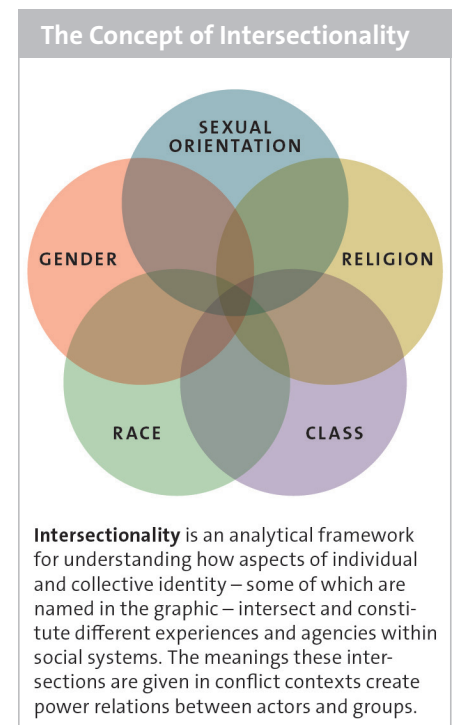
The following cases illustrate different ways in which religion and gender intersect. In Nigeria, *Boko Haram* promotes gender-specific religious offers, such as Islamic education, to increase its attractiveness to women. In Myanmar, Buddhist nationalist groups invoke narratives of religion and gender to construct the Buddhist self and the Muslim “Other”. Lastly, in the US, religion and gender serve as a basis to construct a militant notion of white Christian masculinity in opposition to movements of racial justice and gender equality.

### *Boko Haram* in Nigeria

Nigeria has long suffered from economic stagnation and the absence of employment opportunities. In addition, for over a decade, the group *Jama’atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda’Awati Wal-Jihad*, otherwise known as *Boko Haram* (which translates to “Western education is forbidden and deceitful”), has terrorized north-eastern Nigeria. While initially comprising a few hundred members, the jihadi movement has grown into a large group, now shaping conflict dynamics in Nigeria and neighboring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.

In Nigeria’s north, *Boko Haram* is waging war against the Nigerian government and its perceived allies of liberal democracy. Particularly the US’ War on Terror and other counter-terrorism approaches are seen as a long Western campaign against Islam. While *Boko Haram*’s objective to establish a “pure” Islamic state ruled by their understanding of sharia law has largely remained the same, their tactics have changed and women have played a significant part therein.

*Boko Haram* has abducted women and children for a variety of reasons – to use as fighters, wives, child bearers, and “human shields”. The seizure of more than 200 schoolgirls near Chibok in 2014 was a globally reported instance of that wider trend. While many international observers are quick to see women’s victimhood in *Boko Haram*’s practices, some Nigerian women have also chosen to join the group, seeing active membership as a means of empowerment. In its early years, *Boko Haram* promoted women’s access to Islamic education and emphasized the need to protect “their sisters in Islam” from secular communities. The group offered them fi-



financial support by obliging men to pay the customary wedding dowry directly to their wife instead of her parents. Considering the lack of socioeconomic opportunities and widespread illiteracy, plus the negative perception of the state and its security forces, some women have seen a life as part of the jihadi group as an opportunity to reduce their hardship and develop a kind of social status. Women have also contributed to spreading *Boko Haram*’s version of Islam among fellow women.

There are accounts of women voluntarily or forcibly joining and being trained by *Boko Haram* to fight at the front lines. In mid-2014, *Boko Haram* started to strategically use female suicide bombers to enhance their operational effectiveness. More than half of their over 430 suicide attacks between 2011 and 2017 were carried out by women. Because women were not considered a threat, they could circulate in government-controlled areas more easily, as recruiters, messengers, spies, and smugglers.

Seeing women only through the lens of victimhood thus limits the understanding of *Boko Haram*’s attractiveness for certain women and the larger social deficiencies the group addresses. Looking at the interplay of religion and gender does not diminish the focus on the violence women suffer under the jihadi group. Instead, it acknowl-

edges the many practices women and girls are subjected to, such as abduction, rape, and forced marriages, but it also sheds light on the variety of roles women play in the insurgency's operations and spread of its ideology. An intersectional conflict assessment highlights the appeal for some women to join the group, such as social status, access to Islamic education, and greater financial means. Such deficiencies that the group addresses need to be taken into account in peacebuilding by stepping up context-sensitive efforts to improve women's access to education and economic resources in the long term.

### MaBaTha in Myanmar

Long ruled by an authoritarian, isolationist regime, Myanmar has been affected by numerous entangled conflicts, from a nationwide struggle for democracy to ethnic armed conflicts in multiple states such as Kachin, Shan, and Chin. The atrocities committed by the Burmese military in Rakhine state in 2017 were widely reported. Following the violent clashes, over 745,000 Muslim Rohingya fled to Bangladesh.

Violence against Muslims in Myanmar, including the Rohingya, the Kaman and other Muslim minorities, is partly rooted in the country's colonial past and a complex ethnic system linked to recognition and citizenship. It is set in a context of rising Buddhist nationalism and is further fueled by widespread anti-Muslim sentiment, also occurring in Sri Lanka and Southern Thailand. In Myanmar, the most prominent group of Buddhist nationalism is the monk-led Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, commonly referred to as *MaBaTha*, strands of which were known as the 969 Movement until it was banned in 2013. The group sees itself as a religious movement pushing for the protection of an exclusively Buddhist nation, in a time of "unparalleled change" – a narrative in Buddhism, which sees time evolve in cycles and in which Buddhist culture is currently in decline. This fear of looming decline is often cited as a motivating factor for Buddhists in Myanmar to protect their religion from its recession by any means necessary.

*MaBaTha's* activities focus on topics such as religious education and protection of Buddhist women. Prominent monks such as U Wirathu strongly advocated for national parliament to pass four "religious protection" laws. These laws included, among other things, restrictions on interreligious marriages to prevent Muslim men from marrying Buddhist women. *MaBaTha* en-

gaged in outreach trips around Myanmar to inform rural Buddhist women about their marriage rights. The movement benefits from great female support: nuns and laywomen led marches and campaigns in favor of the "religious protection" laws to increase support among civil society. The laws were eventually passed in 2015.

Gender and religion, in addition to the existing ethnic divides, are used systematically to construct the Muslim "Other" in relation to the Buddhist "Self" and society. Anti-Muslim stereotypes, for example that Muslim men beget many children, fuels the fear that Buddhism is under siege and in grave danger of being wiped out. Furthermore, the claims that Muslims steal Buddhist women, rape them, or seduce them into marriage and subsequently forcibly convert them to Islam construct Buddhist women as actors in need of protection. These gendered narratives serve to justify Buddhist monks' defensive counter-violence, as taking lives and harming others would otherwise be forbidden by the Buddhist precepts.

Intersectional analysis shows that *MaBaTha* focuses on the protection of women as a way of protecting both Buddhism and the nation. Buddhist nationalist identity is constructed in opposition to the religious "Other". Anti-Muslim actions are thus dif-

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icult to separate from pro-Buddhist notions. Peacebuilding interventions on the issue of Buddhist nationalism, including intra-Buddhist dialogue, should consider the gendered self-construction and justification for violence that drive support for Buddhist-inspired political movements.

### Militant Masculinity in the US

On 6 January 2021, the US Congress met in a joint session to confirm Joe Biden's presidential election win. On that day, supporters of Donald Trump gathered in the capital, seeking to "stop the steal" and overturn the election results. They stormed the US Capitol building and five people died as a result. In the aftermath of the riot, the Biden administration decided to conduct a national review of domestic violent extremism threats, including right-wing militia groups such as the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, and the Three Percenters.

### Further Reading

Hilary Matfess, *Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses* (London: Zed Books, 2017). Provides a rich account of the many roles Nigerian women hold within Boko Haram based on extensive fieldwork and interviews.

International Crisis Group (ICG), "*Buddhism and State Power*," *Asia Report* 290, 2017. Outlines the historical roots and contemporary drivers of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar, including MaBaTha's origins and rise to popularity.

Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020). Traces back the historical developments that led to today's white evangelical masculinity and Christian nationalism in the US.

The mix of conspiracy theorists, white supremacists, and far-right militia groups on January 6 consisted of an overwhelmingly white male crowd and was, at least partially, a manifestation of an increasingly violent Christian nationalism with a particular image of masculinity, which many saw represented in Trump. The understanding of Christian militant masculinity emerged during the Cold War – a period highly influential for today's US evangelical Christianity. It is founded in the notion to defend the Christian nation and the integrity of the family against the perceived threat of communism. Passages from popular evangelical books from this time, referencing the humiliation during the Vietnam War, advise fathers to arm their boys at a young age to eventually nurture their sons into American soldiers.

Moreover, the feminist and the civil rights movements are perceived to pose a risk to the hyper-masculine ideology of the "brave, powerful, stern male head of the household" and to white men as primary arbiters of political power. The demand for equal rights has resulted in a serious crisis of traditional masculinity in the US. Already in the early 1980s, many conservative Christians felt that both movements challenged the idea of two God-given genders and the "natural" social order. They feared the removal of men's obligation to protect the family and the state. Evangelical organizations for men, like the Promise Keepers, urged men to "take back their manhood".

The patriarchal backlash to feminism resulted in an increasing adoration of the strong and powerful Christian alpha male figure. Support for Trump can be explained partially through his portrayal of masculinity: a seemingly unapologetic man who is going to do what needs to be done to achieve order. Defining and sometimes militarily defending these distinct gender roles provided white far-right men with a clear identity against secularists, feminists, and others perceived as too liberal.

While the polarization in the US is not new, an intersectional analysis of the sea of

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flags and rallying cries during the breach of the US Capitol points to a central aspect of polarization in US society: increasingly different understandings of gender roles, including ideas of a militant white Christian masculinity that is informed by a perceived threat from movements such as Black Lives Matter, and a backlash against key concerns of feminism. Militant groups

in the US enjoyed significant growth after the storm of the Capitol and domestic terrorism incidents performed by right-wing individuals have soared to a new high. To counter these trends and possibly enter into a dialogue on societal cohesion, a thorough understanding of the discursive self-construction of militant groups in the US is needed.

### Context-Specific Peace Efforts

While intersectional conflict analysis is a fairly recent tool in the field of peacebuilding, it is gaining traction and becoming more widely recognized. As the case studies in Nigeria, Myanmar, and the US have shown, intersectional conflict analysis brings the experiences and motivations of different conflict actors into sharp focus. It also makes dynamics and perspectives visible that are otherwise obscured. These are important to underline as they challenge existing assumptions about roles and narratives in conflict. In some contexts, applying an analytical lens focusing in on religion and gender highlights gendered motivations for joining religious armed groups (Nigeria). In other contexts, it becomes apparent how religion and gender contribute to images of the “Other” while simultane-

ously strengthening one’s own identity (Myanmar). In yet other instances, intersectional analysis reveals how religiously shaped gender roles provide a sense of militarized security in a changing world (US).

Besides religion and gender, intersectional conflict analysis encompasses many more aspects of identity that can shape the experiences and agencies of actors in conflict. This type of analysis allows for designing context-specific preventive measures and peacebuilding initiatives. It points to intersecting aspects of individual and collective identity that matter most for conflict transformation. Without providing simple answers or suggesting a one-size-fits-all approach, an intersectional perspective on religion and gender in conflict sheds light on overlooked risks and opportunities for constructive engagement.

For more on Mediation and Peace Promotion, see [CSS core theme page](#).

**Cora Alder** is Program Officer in the Mediation Support Team at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zürich, working on conflicts with religious dimensions.