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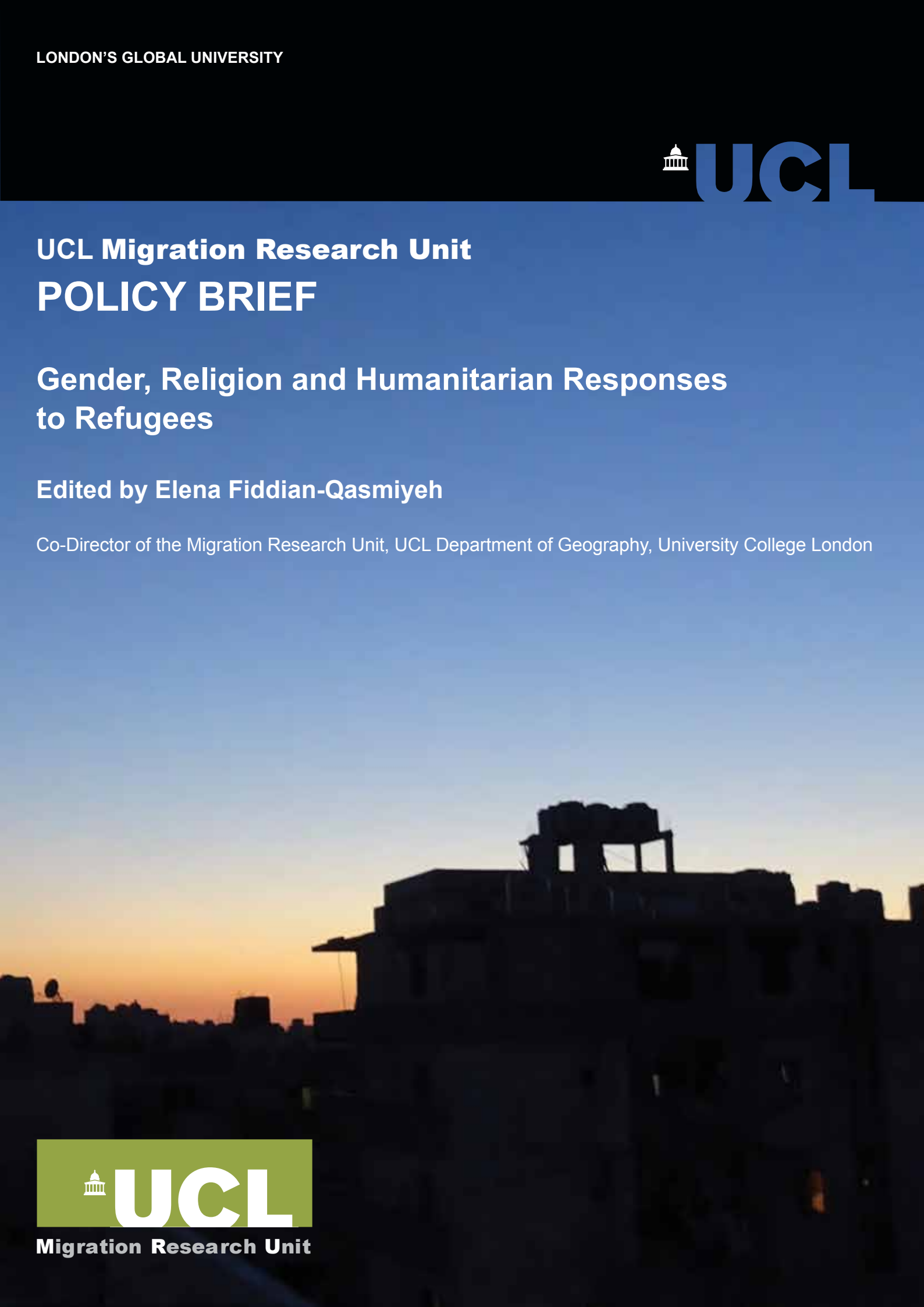
POLICY BRIEF

Gender, Religion and Humanitarian Responses to Refugees

Edited by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

Co-Director of the Migration Research Unit, UCL Department of Geography, University College London



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Introduction

There is increasing interest in the roles played by faith-based organisations (FBOs) and local faith communities (LFCs) in providing assistance and protection to refugees and asylum-seekers. However, this interest is often accompanied by concerns about the nature and impacts of faith-based and local community responses to displacement. Such concerns frequently stem from a series of largely negative assumptions about the relationship between religion and gender. These include the assumption that FBOs are more 'conservative' and 'patriarchal' than secular organisations and agencies; that LFCs and faith leaders will hinder the participation of women and girls as decision-makers, as aid and service providers and as beneficiaries alike; and that FBOs will refuse to engage with individuals and social groups who do not comply with dominant norms regarding gender and sexuality.

In order to reflect on these and other assumptions, on 13 May 2016 a Workshop on *Gender, Religion and Humanitarian Responses to Refugees*, funded by a special grant from The Henry Luce Foundation and convened at University College London (UCL), brought together 30 academics and humanitarian practitioners from secular and faith-based organisations. This Policy Brief summarises key points and recommendations for policy, practice and research emerging from the debates and discussions that took place at the Workshop.[1]

This Policy Brief refers primarily to refugees and asylum-seekers, although the points and recommendations presented here are also of relevance to situations of internal displacement and the experiences, needs and rights of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

[1] **Authors:** This Policy Brief has been jointly authored through an interactive process by a subgroup of the Workshop attendees (in alphabetical order): Sharifa Abdulaziz, Omayma El Ella, Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Ellen Hansen, Elisabet Le Roux, Marie-Claude Poirier, José Riera-Cézanne, Helen Stawski, Olivia Wilkinson and Erin K. Wilson, and edited by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh. The views and recommendations presented in this Policy Brief are those of the authors in their personal capacities and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of their respective organisations. The full Workshop Report will be available for download from October 2016 from: **www.geog.ucl.ac.uk/research/research-centres/migration-research-unit**

A note on faith-based organisations and local faith communities

LFCs are religious groups based at the community level, while FBOs are organisations that operate on a national or international level and are affiliated with a particular faith. LFCs and FBOs offer different capacities in the humanitarian response to displacement.

Within the humanitarian sector, there can be a tendency for one actor to be privileged over the other. At times, humanitarian organisations prioritise LFCs over FBOs as potential partners because they represent 'local', 'indigenous' perspectives, while at other times FBOs may be prioritised over LFCs because they are seen as more professional, efficient and accountable, and able to abide by the rules of neutrality. However, privileging either LFCs or FBOs runs the risk of portraying one type as offering 'good religion', while the other offers 'bad religion'. This oversimplifies the vast complexity of organisational beliefs present in humanitarian response.

A Time for Open and Equal Dialogue

Open and equal dialogue between organisations using mainstream secular humanitarian frameworks and those guided by religious norms and faith-based values is key to building meaningful operational partnerships.

Dialogue should 1) search for common ground between religious and secular actors' concern for displaced people, and also 2) reflect critically on a series of assumptions within mainstream humanitarian discourse that might prevent meaningful partnerships between organisations and agencies with different worldviews, and also between organisations and local communities, including refugees. This should include consideration of the intersection of refugee protection issues with gender, ethnicity, and religion.

1. A dialogue to explore the positions of religion and gender in peoples' lives

We should not automatically prioritise the roles of faith-based actors over secular actors, or artificially centralise the roles of religion and spirituality. Rather, we should create a space to understand how people – refugees, local community members, and humanitarian aid providers – inhabit religious and secular traditions, religious texts and practices, recognising that at times these texts, practices and traditions will defy categorisation as either clearly 'religious' or 'secular'. Such a space will enable us to better understand how people engage with and respond to the challenges they are facing throughout displacement.

At times, for instance, refugees may prioritise "saving a way of life" over "saving a life".[2] It is essential to better understand how different elements of refugees' lives are intertwined, including the relationship between physical and spiritual needs, and what forms of support might help overcome barriers for refugees to live meaningful lives. Both marginalising religion and spirituality, and over-emphasising religion in relation to the needs of refugees, generate significant problems.[3] These extremes must be avoided (see point 7 below).

Gender, religion, and basic needs
'Basic needs' in humanitarian situations are often highly gendered and intimately related to the religious identity and belief system of refugees and IDPs, with local conceptualisations of 'basic needs' often transcending secular organisations' perceptions. For instance, UNFPA noted that many Muslim IDP women affected by the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004 held that headscarves were essential to maintain their dignity and were a prerequisite to be able to access other services in public spaces.[4]

Recommendations:

- Religion should neither be viewed as the ultimate problem, nor the ultimate solution in displacement situations. There is a tendency to ascribe agency to religion, rather than seeing people as agents. Religion itself does not have agency – it is people who act on the basis of different beliefs, identities and interpretations of religious principles. With this in mind, FBOs and LFCs should be recognised, and approached, as actors who play diverse roles in these complicated situations.

2. A dialogue with local communities and refugees as active humanitarian partners

Providing meaningful support to refugees can only be achieved by working directly with refugees and with members of local communities and local organisations, including LFCs, as active partners rather than as 'beneficiaries'.[5] The need to develop 'people-centred approaches' to humanitarian action is Sphere's First Core Standard,[6] and yet these approaches are not consistently implemented in practice.[7]

Indeed, with the world facing the highest levels of displacement ever recorded since the Second World War, the international humanitarian system is in flux and is often unable to respond to these unprecedented needs. Against this background, now is the time to foster open and equal dialogue with refugees, local communities and other relevant parties. This is particularly crucial in order to better respond to refugees' needs.

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[2] Allen, T. and Turton, D. (1996) "Introduction: In search of cool ground." In T. Allen (Ed) *In search of cool ground: War, flight and homecoming in Northeast Africa*. Geneva: UNRISD in association with James Currey, London, 1–22.
[3] Wilson, E.K. (2016) *Religious Identity and the Refugee Crisis*. The Religion Factor, 20 June 2016. Available at: **https://religionfactor.net/2016/06/20/religious-identity-and-the-refugee-crisis/#_ftnref8**
[4] Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. and Ager, A. (eds) (2013) *Local Faith Communities and the promotion of resilience in humanitarian situations*, RSC/JLI Working Paper 90, p. 29. Available at: **https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/files/publications/working-paper-series/wp90-local-faith-communities-resilience-2013.pdf**
[5] *Charter For Change* (2016), available at: **https://charter4change.org/#post-592**
[6] *The Sphere Project Handbook* (2011). Available at: **www.spherehandbook.org/en/core-standard-1-people-centred-humanitarian-response/**
[7] *Recommendations from the Irish Humanitarian Consultative Process: World Humanitarian Summit* (2015), p. 9, available at: **http://cha.ucd.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Recommendations-from-the-Irish-Consultative-Process.pdf**

Partnerships and beyond… Solidarity, cooperation and integration
It is increasingly recognised that LFCs are key responders in humanitarian situations. However, it is important to move beyond using LFCs as a way to achieve the short-term goals set out by international actors, or perceiving LFCs as recipients of aid to achieve programmatic outcomes. Rather, the potential to partner with LFCs needs to be meaningfully explored and implemented. Partnership models – whether by faith-based or secular actors – strengthen the potential for humanitarian assistance to be provided as a form of solidarity and support, rather than charity.

Placing refugees and their priorities at the core of these partnerships is essential for many reasons. Indeed, while it is essential to recognise the capacities and agency of refugees, the real and potential 'economic value' of refugees has often been prioritised over and above other aspects of the human condition. Focusing on refugees and their priorities is also a way to counter the increasing tendency to view refugees as a security risk to the State. Instead of focusing primarily on State security, the primary goal of refugee policy would instead be supporting the well-being and dignity of refugees themselves. Given that faith, spirituality and religious practices are a central feature of life for a large proportion of displaced people – women, men, boys and girls – a focus on dignity must include supporting the spiritual needs of displaced people, and better understanding the contribution of religious rituals and faith-based social networks as sources of personal and communal resilience (see also point 7 below).

Recommendations:
In order to maximise organisational accountability towards refugees, humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) should create meaningful spaces:
- To engage refugees' perspectives and to prioritise what *different* groups of refugees want.
- To establish how refugees analyse and respond to their own situations.
- To determine what types of support refugees wish to receive from different actors on local, national and international levels, including from religious leaders and local faith-based social networks.

3. A dialogue around values, worldviews and approaches

Placing refugees at the centre of humanitarian action also requires us to develop a conversation around the values and modes of engagement that can help lift the structural barriers and inequalities that limit refugees' ability to make decisions, act upon these decisions, and lead dignified lives.

This will require combining different approaches:
- Alleviating suffering by providing life-saving and life-sustaining assistance[8];
- Removing the root causes of the violation of human rights[9];

[8] Ferris, E. (2011) "Faith and Humanitarianism: It's Complicated." *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 24(3): 606-625, p. 16.
[9] Barnett, M. (2011) *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*. New York: Cornell University Press, p. 10.

- Promoting the creation of a space for refugees to live their lives in dignity;
- Developing a cooperative approach to strengthen local and national capacity for refugees to withstand different forms of suffering;
- Maximising refugees' self-sufficiency on individual, communal and national levels[10].

Since the 1950s, it has been assumed that secular worldviews and organisations are best suited to achieving these and other aims. However, an open and equal dialogue – among and between refugees, LFCs, FBOs, intergovernmental agencies, secular humanitarian organisations and other key stakeholders – will provide a space to examine key assumptions that exist on the relationship between religion, gender and ways of supporting refugees.

4. A dialogue to acknowledge the connections between secularism and religion in humanitarian responses to displacement

Religious discourses, doctrines and actors were pervasive in colonial and development programmes before and during the 19th and 20th centuries. However, from the birth of the professionalised aid industry in the post-Second World War era to the early-2000s, conceptualisations of development and humanitarian action prioritised secular approaches as the strongest means to secure democratic political structures, good governance, and women's rights.

This reminds us that:

- Humanitarian organisations around the world are often deeply related, both historically and/or today, to religious beliefs, principles and practices;
- The secular nature of international humanitarian organisations today can be recognised as a rejection of the religiosity of humanitarian organisations in the past;
- The exclusion of religion from humanitarian discourse on the grounds of universalism has unintentionally prevented dialogue and collaboration with many local organisations based in societies where religious identity, belief and practice are widespread;
- The paths of religious and secular worldviews and organisations are interlinked, including because of their common commitment to meeting the needs of refugees;
- Many international faith-based humanitarian organisations continue to draw on both faith-based and secular sets of values across their work and identity, although secular values tend to guide interactions with refugees.

Indeed, it is important to recall that secularism is complex and often has many adaptations in place to accommodate religious diversity. However, secular worldviews are not neutral; secular worldviews also carry biases that must be acknowledged and critically examined.

[10] Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2015) *South-South Educational Migration, Humanitarianism and Development: Views from Cuba, North Africa and the Middle East*, Oxford: Routledge.

Recommendations:

Combine training sessions for humanitarian actors with open discussion spaces relating to religion, secularism and gender. These sessions could productively:

- Provide religious literacy training to humanitarian actors, focused on techniques for understanding religions in context, not only on the content of religious doctrines. This would encourage humanitarian actors not to make and reproduce assumptions about 'religions' and their doctrines, but to develop an understanding of the position and roles of religions in local, national and international contexts.
- Encourage humanitarian actors to recognise the diversity that exists within and across religions, including in terms of how different religious identities and traditions are represented, embodied, and practiced in diverse contexts.
- Alongside religious literacy training, introduce humanitarian actors to the ideas and values connected with secularism and secular worldviews, raising awareness that secularism is not neutral and universal, that different types of secularism exist and that secularism is viewed differently around the world.
- Encourage humanitarian actors to examine how gender and religion are framed by refugee and host communities.
- Encourage humanitarian actors to examine how to use frameworks relating to gender and religion to help lift the barriers that limit refugees' ability to lead dignified lives.
- Facilitate discussions among humanitarian staff across international, national, and local staff levels on issues they have observed around religion and gender.
- These discussions may also help humanitarian actors recognise the ways in which institutional and personal biases and positions might be preventing fruitful partnerships with LFCs, FBOs and refugees.

5. A dialogue to acknowledge the connections between secularism and religion in humanitarian responses to displacement

The dichotomy between 'secularism' and 'religion' is largely the result of one particular worldview: the Western worldview has increasingly moved religious observance and affiliation from the public sphere to the private sphere. However, in those contexts where religion remains interwoven with public life and local culture, many local organisations do not deem it necessary to explicitly identify themselves as 'faith-based'. This is even the case when their values and actions are understood through religious frameworks, which are effectively the norm in their local context. While this may be unproblematic in itself, when this is translated through a secular humanitarian framework, the 'faith' and 'religious' elements of the local organisation and the impact that 'religion' has on its work with refugees, remains invisible and unanalysed.

Controversial conversations

FBOs may be more likely to discuss controversial issues with other faith groups, rather than with groups from within their own religious traditions. This may be because they fear being rejected and reprimanded by co-believers for expressing unorthodox beliefs. Many religious groups have changed their perspectives on gender dramatically over the last few decades; however, change comes with risk and local organisations should be supported to make sustainable change at their own pace to ensure 'buy-in' from members. This often requires a longer timescale than short-term projects can offer. When creating a space for

dialogue on these questions, the presence of mediators may offer opportunities to defuse any potential grievances and tensions in these discussions.

It is important to responsibly select FBOs and LFCs to critically ask the questions:

- Who is being engaged in frank discussions around religion and humanitarian work, and for what purpose?
- Who is excluded (or remains on the margins) in these processes, and why?
- What are the potential consequences if these individuals and groups remain excluded and marginalised?

It is also important to recognise that humanitarian practitioners do not necessarily work in entirely religious or entirely secular frameworks but may move fluidly between these. For instance, staff who are familiar with local cultures may be particularly fluid in these transitions, drawing both on religious and secular frames as and when it is useful. Further research is needed to examine the ways in which humanitarian practitioners draw on secular and religious frameworks throughout different parts and spaces of their work with and for refugees.

Organisational and lived priorities

In a frank reflection, a former-Oxfam practitioner who worked with Sri Lankan IDPs in 1990, recalled his reluctance to 'allow' IDPs to use plastic sheeting for the floor of the new mosque when the sheets had officially been provided for IDPs' dwellings. He recalls that:

"By way of contrast, when I was in Somalia in late 1992, we willingly provided shrouds to enable people to bury, with due religious observance, the many people dying of violence and starvation. A far more extreme situation but, somehow, recognising the importance of religion in death seemed easier for an avowedly secular organisation, and staff member, to actively respond to than the importance of it in life".[11]

6. A dialogue to transcend assumptions relating to secularism, religion and gender in contexts of displacement

It is clear that religion is often "used to legitimize patriarchal hierarchies",[12] and yet secular worldviews and organisations have their own forms of "gender trouble".[13] This is precisely why secular organisations and international agencies have been constantly encouraged to more meaningfully engage in gender-sensitive planning, programming and implementation through the Gender and Development (GAD) agenda.[14]

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[11] Herson, M. (2014) 'Not In Our Remit,' *Forced Migration Review*, 48: 32.
[12] Tadros, M. (2010) *Faith-based Organizations and Service Delivery: Some Gender Conundrums*, Geneva: UNRISD. p. 14.
[13] Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Oxford: Routledge.
[14] Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2015) "Engendering Understandings of Faith-Based Organisations: Intersections between religion and gender in development and humanitarian interventions," in A. Coles, L. Gray, and J. Momsen (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Development*, London: Routledge. pp. 560-570.

Beyond assumptions: Gender-limiting beliefs and practices
Neither FBOs *nor* secular organisations are automatically 'conservative' or 'progressive' with regards to gender roles and relations. Both secular organisations and religious organisations can carry gender-limiting beliefs and practices.[15]

For example, a survey of attitudes toward LGBTI asylum-seekers conducted by the NGO Organisation for Refuge, Asylum and Migration (ORAM) concluded that FBOs' views on providing services to LGBTI people are no better or worse than the attitudes held by secular institutions.

Nonetheless, discussing LGBTI rights and visibility can at times raise barriers to cooperation and dialogue between different groups of secular and faith-based actors. A sensitive approach is required to promote dialogue and create spaces for free expression of perspectives.

While local faith leaders and LFCs are often assumed to be more conservative than secular actors, leaders and LFCs are often well positioned to engage with issues within their communities that are considered too sensitive or taboo to openly share with external actors.[16] For instance, a study of female internally displaced Kikuyu victims of sexual and gender-based violence in Kenya highlights that LFCs were the only actors able to provide trauma counselling in that context.[17]

UNFPA has also championed the value of working with religious leaders to end the practice of female genital mutilation. Its approach has shown how sensitively handled partnerships with local religious leaders have led to a fundamental shift "among religious leaders, many of whom have gone from endorsing the practice to actively condemning it" within their communities.[18]

This leads to the broader question:

> *What are the gender-based power structures that hinder or enable action on gender equality, gender diversity, sexual orientation, and addressing sexual and gender-based violence in a given process of displacement?*

These may be power structures between men and women, but also between both male and female elders over members of the younger generations, and frameworks espoused by males and females of different generations over gender non-conforming individuals and groups.

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[15] Cited in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. and Ager, A. (eds) (2013) *Local Faith Communities and the promotion of resilience in humanitarian situations*, RSC/JLI Working Paper 90. p. 42.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Parsitau, D. S. (2011) "The Role of Faith and Faith-Based Organizations among Internally Displaced Persons in Kenya," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24(3): 493-512.
[18] UN Population Fund (2015) *Female genital mutilation (FGM) frequently asked questions: UNFPA Approach.* Available at: **http://www.unfpa.org/resources/female-genital-mutilation-fgm-frequently-asked-questions#unfpa_**

Discussions around gender-limiting beliefs and practices should not focus exclusively on religious beliefs and practices, but on all the intersecting gender-limiting beliefs and practices that inform and are mobilised by different stakeholders in diverse displacement situations, including generational, national and ethnic identities.

Listening rather than assuming: Gender-segregated spaces and empowerment
It has long been documented that there can be a large disconnect between the expectations and objectives of aid organisations, and the priorities and preferences of refugees and IDPs themselves.

For instance, many organisations assume that female empowerment can be achieved by promoting the gender *de*-segregation of all spaces in the private and public spheres. However, gender segregated spaces can be perceived as safe spaces that provide key opportunities for female participation. This is increasingly recognised in relation to access to services for refugee women and girls.

In Jordan, for example the World Food Programme offers segregated waiting areas for Syrian refugee women to collect food vouchers "in recognition of the cultural preferences of Syrian women and men",[19] and UN Women directly recommend the establishment of "multi-purpose women-only spaces for refugee women and girls" from Syria in Serbia and FYR Macedonia.[20]

Beyond access to services, UNFPA has also developed "women and girls safe spaces" "as a key strategy for the protection and empowerment of women and girls affected by the Syrian crisis", identifying ways for women and girls to develop skills and access training in gender-segregated spaces.[21]

It is important to determine – on a context-specific basis – whether, and why, the right to segregation may be a means of achieving the rights to safety, well-being and dignity.

Equally, it has often been assumed that providing women with a greater range of responsibilities is 'empowering' for women.

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[19] WFP (2015) *CERF Application for Grant Funding, 24 February 2015*. Document number15-UF-WFP-012. Available at: **http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/op_reports/wfp273437.pdf**

[20] UN Women (2016) *Gender Assessment of the Refugee and Migration Crisis in Serbia and FYR Macedonia*, Istanbul: UN Women.

[21] UNFPA (2015) Women and Girls Safe Spaces: *A guidance note based on lessons learned from the Syrian crisis.* UNFPA Regional Syria Response. Available at: **http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/woman%20space%20E.pdf**

However, refugee women from Syria who participated in a study by ABAAD and Oxfam in Lebanon reported that they were unhappy with the new gender roles and responsibilities arising as a result of displacement.[22]

It is important to identify, on a situation-by-situation basis, what roles and responsibilities refugee women and girls want, and what the relationship is between their own priorities and those assumed to be desirable by NGOs, host and donor States and agencies.

Recommendations:

Carefully consider the roles of gender and religion when identifying and selecting potential partners:

- All potential partners must be vetted on the different issues relating to gender, with neither faith-based nor secular organisations assumed to be 'better' for gender equality or more supportive of the rights of people and communities who do not conform to norms relating to gender and sexuality.
- At the same time, donor governments and agencies should think strategically and with a longer term vision about the partners they work with. They must determine whether a partner who is supportive of some areas of gender and LGBTI rights, but not others, may be a suitable partner for a specific project. They must also recognise that organisations are not static, and their views and attitudes on specific gender and LGBTI issues will undoubtedly change over time.

7. A dialogue to enable refugees to decide how to manage the visibility (or invisibility) of faith in displacement situations

Recognising that religion is neither the ultimate problem nor the ultimate solution must also be accompanied by the acknowledgement that organisations and agencies may strategically adopt 'blindness to faith' on the assumption that this will minimise discrimination in the distribution of services and protection opportunities. There may also be a strategic distancing from religion by LFCs and FBOs since refugees may be reluctant, or even fearful, to approach organisations that self-identify as 'faith-based' due to the sectarian basis of persecution in their country of origin.

Religion – and assumptions about religion – often dictates how refugees are viewed and treated by different stakeholders. Identifying people on the basis of their 'religion' (or on the basis of what their religion is assumed to be) can lead to assumptions about what their needs are, and yet individuals, families and communities may not prioritise those needs. Many people are spiritual and have spiritual needs, but many people are not and do not identify this as being important to them.

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[22] El Masri, R., Harvey, C., and Garwood, R. (2013) *Shifting Sands: Changing gender roles among refugees in Lebanon*. Oxford: ABAAD and Oxfam International. Available at: **https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/rr-shifting-sands-lebanon-syria-refugees-gender-030913-en_3.pdf**

It is also essential not to make assumptions about the religious identity and subsequent religious needs of refugees purely based on their country of origin (as has sometimes happened with regard to refugees from Muslim-majority countries).[23]

Humanitarian organisations should know about religious identities and needs, in order to support the dignity and resilience of refugees. However, secular and faith-based organisations alike often assume the position that 'we don't talk about religion', often because of a commitment to serve all people regardless of religious affiliation and for fear for being accused of proselytisation. This fear is often particularly acute for FBOs.

Insights from the gender and development agenda
When thinking about 'how to talk about religion' with refugees, there is potential to learn from the history of developing approaches to gender mainstreaming: what can be learned about how and why we ask about gender? Throughout the work of the Gender and Development agenda, we have learned that it is important to have information, and that not asking about gender (or religion) is more dangerous; this is because *not* asking questions leads to avoidable mistakes being made. However, another lesson learned from GAD is that 'mainstreaming' can at times mean that whatever is 'mainstreamed' is actually ignored, ghettoised or overlooked.

Recommendations:
- There should be space for refugees and IDPs themselves to request specific support/ services in the areas where they are hosted and/or resettled.
- Governments, humanitarian organisations and agencies should develop greater flexibility to listen to, and respond to, these requests.

8. A dialogue about gender and local responses to displacement

The post-2016 World Humanitarian Summit *Charter for Change*, and its commitment to increasingly support localised humanitarian responses to refugees, leaves open the question: which local actors, and with what effect?

The UNHCR's 2013 Welcoming the Stranger initiative[24] provided a clear indication of the ways that faith leaders can play a role in supporting the rights of refugees. Faith leaders can facilitate access to services, and yet can also act as opinion changers, having the potential to influence community members' views of and responses to refugees, and indeed, of gender relations and inequalities.

However, faith leaders are differently positioned around the world, at times being part of political and State systems, while at other times being part of broader civil society networks. Religious tradition dictates the extent to which different religious leaders have

[23] Beaman, L.G., Selby, J. A. and Barras, A. (2016) "No Mosque, No Refugees: Some Reflections on Syrian Refugees and the Construction of Religion in Canada," in Mavelli, L. and E.K. Wilson (Eds). *The Refugee Crisis and Religion: Secularity, Security and Hospitality in Question*. London: Rowman and Littlefield International.

[24] See: **http://www.unhcr.org/protection/hcdialogue%20/51b6de419/welcoming-stranger-affirmations-faith-leaders.html**

influence among their followers; equally, leaders' levels of education and international exposure will impact the ease with which they are able to work effectively with actors within the international humanitarian architecture.

Furthermore, the structures and hierarchies of different faiths and religions are diverse and may offer greater or lesser opportunities for pluralism in thoughts, interpretations and debates. This includes different opportunities, and openness to change, with regards to gender relations, roles and responsibilities. Importantly, just like LFCs, leaders' opinions and attitudes to gender and other key issues can change over time, and they may have different stances on a range of issues relating to gender that may not consistently align with or go against the preferences of international organisations and agencies.

Who is a leader? Whose leader?
International organisations and agencies may partner with faith leaders who are considered to be 'legitimate' representatives, and yet these leaders may have little outreach with hosting and/or refugee community members.

For instance, the highest-ranking Muslim leader in the Central African Republic (CAR) has developed a strong international presence through his role in the Interreligious Platform of Central African Republic Leaders, and yet he has a limited following among IDPs in the PK5 area of CAR.[25]

More recently, the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit Special Session on Religious Engagement included a large number of faith leaders who were government-sanctioned representatives. In contrast, leaders who have broad outreach with community members may be seen as controversial by various governments and donors, including through the application of counter-terrorism legislation (see point 10 below).

In addition to recognising the potential disconnect between internationally recognised faith leaders and local communities, more attention should be given to broadening the criteria for 'leader' itself.

Traditional definitions have tended to identify people with theological and/or ceremonial authority, and yet this has largely excluded women. However, women occupy many leadership positions within and across diverse religions, often leading social outreach programmes and mobilising volunteers and refugees themselves.

Female leaders are often harder to identify because they are less publically visible than men in many contexts. However, this should not be taken as indicative of their leadership and influence. Muslim women particularly have often been overlooked as agents of change by international organisations because they do not appear to conform to a Western notion of empowered women when they wear the *hijab* or *niqab*.

[25] El Ella, O. (2014) *Central African Republic: Mission Report (27 March – 3 April 2014)*. Muslim Charities Forum. Unpublished report on file with authors.

While institutional actors may be readily identifiable, it is essential to spend time in refugee and host communities, to observe relationships and interactions, rather than making assumptions about who the leaders are in a given community, or how these 'leaders' are viewed by different members of the community. Even if 'leaders' are easily identified, it may also be the case that grassroots community organisations are better positioned to help overcome the structural barriers and inequalities faced by refugees.

Gendered access to faith leaders and religious spaces

A study in Irbid (Jordan) conducted by Islamic Relief[26] revealed that when Muslim refugee women from Syria arrived in Jordan they often approached Muslim faith leaders for support, information and comfort, and mosques have often become a new safe space for Syrian refugee women and girls to gather, learn and discuss their situations. In contrast, the study confirmed that many refugee men from Syria avoid these since they continue to view faith leaders and mosques as being part of a political system which they do not trust.

Recommendations:

Avoid making assumptions about who 'leaders' are in communities, and what perspectives will be held by 'leaders' and 'community members' with regards to gender:

- Spend time in the community and observe relationships to develop a detailed understanding of lived dynamics in the community.
- Trace the different relationships in these communities, or work with academic researchers who have conducted research in these specific fields to avoid assumptions.

9. A dialogue to transcend the assumption that 'gender' is synonymous with 'women'

Gender is relational, and yet 'gender' is often assumed to be a synonym for 'women'. However, it is essential to balance an emphasis on women's rights and equality, with equal attention to addressing problematic and exclusionary constructions of gender identities, including problematic constructions of masculinities.

Religion and the promotion of positive masculinities

Secular approaches are often assumed to be well positioned to advance the empowerment and protection of women. However, there are growing examples of the ways that religious traditions are promoting positive non-violent masculinities.[27]

In 2010, for instance, the World Council of Churches published a manual on how to challenge patriarchy, for use with and by local church communities.[28]

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[26] Pertek, I.S. (2016) *Learning Brief: Gender Study. Conditional Cash Project for Vulnerable Syrian and Jordanian Children in Irbid, Jordan*. Islamic Relief Worldwide. Available at: **http://www.alnap.org/pool/files/irbid-case-study.pdf**

[27] Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E., Lewis, C. and Cole, G. (2016) "'Faithing' Gender and Responses to Violence in Refugee Communities: Insights from the Sahrawi Refugee Camps and the Democratic Republic of Congo," in Krause, U. and Buckley-Zistel, S. (eds) *Gender, Violence and Forced Migration*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.

[28] Peacock, P. V. and Sheerattan-Bisnauth, P. (2010) *Created in God's Image, From Hegemony to Partnership*. Available at: **http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/churches-promote-new-images-of-masculinity-in-effort-to-stop-violence-against-women**

Other initiatives to promote positive masculinities and prevent domestic violence through mobilising religious discourses have also been developed by international FBOs in active partnership with national NGOs, including Trócaire's partnership with the Ugandan NGO Raising Voices.[29]

Discussions of gender tend to be framed as a 'zero sum game', with the implication that positive gains for women occur only through a negative loss for men; such approaches often fail to secure male support. At its best, religion is able to draw out the spiritual value of respecting and honouring women, providing a greater motivation for male support for female empowerment.

In addition to identifying ways in which men can help prevent and address sexual and gender-based violence against women, there is also a need for gender-sensitive assessments of the particular needs of men and boys with different religious, ethnic and other social identity markers and forms of identification.

This is particularly important given the extent to which refugee men from the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa are depicted in the media as threatening sexual predators and terrorists by virtue of their intersecting gender, religious and ethnic identities.[30]

Importantly, refugees' religious and ethnic identities may be imposed by external observers, rather than being markers of personal identity and actual identification - indeed, refugees from the Middle East are often assumed to be Arab and Muslim, rather than recognising the ethnic and religious heterogeneity of refugees from and in the region.[31]

Recommendations:

Purposefully aim to identify the particular needs and priorities of refugee men and boys through a combination of a gender- *and* faith-sensitive lens:

- To better understand how to identify the needs, rights and priorities of both refugee women and girls, *and* of refugee men and boys.
- To identify what roles, if any, religious institutions and faith leaders can play in lifting the structural barriers that limit the safety and dignity of both women and girls and men *and* boys in displacement situations.

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[29] Trócaire and Raising Voices (2013) *Through the Voice of Faith: Learnings to inspire domestic violence prevention through faith institutions*. Kilcaire and Kampala: Trócaire and Raising Voices. Available at: **http://raisingvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/downloads/resources/ThroughtheVoiceofFaithFINALFeb2013.pdf**

[30] Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2016) "The faith-gender-asylum nexus: an intersectionalist analysis of representations of the 'Refugee Crisis'," in Mavelli, L. and Wilson, E. K. (eds) *The Refugee Crisis and Religion*. London: Rowland and Littlefield.

[31] Saunders, J., Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. and Snyder, S. (2016) "Introduction: Articulating Intersections at the Global Crossroads of Religion and Migration," in Saunders, J., Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. and Snyder, S. (eds) *Intersections of Religion and Migration: Issues at the Global Crossroads*, New York: Palgrave. Also see Eghdamian, K. (2015) 'Refugee Crisis: Syria's Religious Minorities Must Not Be Overlooked,' *The Conversation*, 30 September 2015.

10. A dialogue about the impacts of the counter-terrorism agenda on LFCs, FBOs and refugees

The increasing tendency for States to represent refugees and migrants as security threats, combined with the agenda to counter violent extremism (CVE), have been recognised as having a disproportionate effect on refugees.[32] This is compounded by a media narrative emphasising the religious aspect of violent extremism out of the context of political and economic factors.[33]

The combination of the depiction of migrants and refugees as security threats, counter-terrorism legislation and growing Islamophobia are also increasingly limiting access to funding on different levels. The banking sector in particular is 'de-risking', i.e. refusing financial services to charities working in high-risk areas and further hindering the efficiency of humanitarian work.

This process of de-risking has many implications for international and national NGOs:

- Many NGOs lose access to official funding because they work in high-risk areas, even when they restrict partnerships with local communities and only work with organisations that have been vetted by international donors;
- Muslim NGOs – on international, national and local levels alike – are especially branded as more vulnerable to extremism than secular NGOs;
- There is a complex relationship between media, government, and vetting systems such as World Check.[34] Vetting databases usually include open source information in their system, meaning that unsubstantiated web articles about a particular group or charity can lead to that group being categorised as 'high risk'. Any organisation using this database to vet partners and clients can in turn refuse service because of this categorisation;
- These issues are further compounded by the fact that within CVE and wider counter-terror legislations, there is still no clear definition of what constitutes 'extremism'. This opens the door for the media to take the lead in creating wide definitions of the term, and linking those definitions to refugees as part of a wider anti-immigrant narrative.

The World Humanitarian Summit has called for the empowerment of local groups and beneficiaries, and yet counter-terrorism discourse and practices are limiting the ability for local communities and the organisations that support them to provide meaningful assistance to refugees:

- In highly volatile and fractured societies, civil society groups are often unable to satisfy the increasingly stringent criteria imposed by international donors. They may automatically be deemed to be 'high risk' as a result of this inability to satisfy international criteria, or as a result of unverified or unsubstantiated web information.

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[32] Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. and Qasmiyeh, Y.M. (2010) 'Muslim Asylum-Seekers and Refugees from the Middle East and North Africa: Negotiating politics, religion and identity in the UK,' *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 23(3): 294-314.

[33] See Wilson, E. K. (2016) 'The Problem is Religion: But not the way we think.' *The Religion Factor*, 23 March 2016. Available at: **https://religionfactor.net/2016/03/23/the-problem-is-religion-but-not-in-the-way-we-think/**

[34] Osborne, P. (2016) 'The scandal of closed Muslim bank accounts and how MPs don't give a damn,' *Middle East Eye*, 23 June 2016. Available at: **http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/scandal-closed-muslim-bank-accounts-and-how-mps-dont-give-damn-1054013842**

- Many LFCs lose access to funding and partnership when they are providing key frontline services to displaced people who cannot be accessed by international agencies.
- Many refugees are encountering increasing barriers to receive remittances and donations. This is because banks and international money transfer organisations are increasingly unable or unwilling to transfer funds to high-risk areas where refugees reside, and organisations trying to operate in these high-risk areas do so under the threat of prosecution by counter-terrorism legislation.

Recommendations:

- Policymakers should address the incoherence of the view that international, national and local actors should support those in need, while structural barriers increasingly prevent LFCs and FBOs from doing so. This is especially the case as it pertains to the ambiguity and assumptions underlying terms such as 'extremism' and 'terrorist support'.
- Greater consultation with refugees themselves will contribute to refuting existing ideas linking refugees, and terrorism and extremism. Greater consultation with refugees will also facilitate the promotion of refugee policies that more appropriately balance the needs of refugees themselves, against the security needs of States, thereby addressing the increasing securitization of migration (see point 1).
- Humanitarian organisations and agencies should work closely with the media to challenge dehumanising representations of refugees.
- Humanitarian organisations should develop coalitions to showcase the humanity of refugees, and the shared humanity of people of faith and none. This should use language and images that humanises refugees, rather than presenting refugees as being 'less than human' or as people who lack 'our values'.

Summary

- Recognising the range of faith-based and secular organisations working on humanitarian response to displacement, assessing potential partnerships through an open dialogue that provides a space for cultural and religious dimensions to be taken into account is encouraged, while maintaining equal standards of partnership for all faith-based and secular actors.
- It must be understood 1) that religion and religious groups are not a 'one-stop fix' for problems and 2) that genuine dialogue between faith-based and secular groups is needed to develop solutions that benefit all.
- Promoting a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between gender and religion when analysing the experience and coping strategies of refugees, and recognising the intersection of gender and religion as a significant area for analysis in humanitarian response is encouraged, with a particular focus on achieving solidarity and cooperation between the various actors involved.
- Recognising that faith-based groups are often local actors, but, equally FBOs can be some of the largest international humanitarian actors, further understanding and analysing global, regional, national and local discourses as they intersect with religion and gender is encouraged. This is in order to highlight practices of discrimination against refugees across the board, rather than perpetuating assumptions of the local vs. the international.

General Recommendations

Religion should neither be viewed as the ultimate problem, nor the ultimate solution in displacement situations. There is a tendency to ascribe agency to religion, rather than seeing people as agents. Religion itself does not have agency – it is people who act on the basis of different beliefs, identities and interpretations of religious principles. With this in mind, FBOs and LFCs should be recognised, and approached, as actors who play diverse roles in these complicated situations.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES AND NGOS

- **Recognise that it is acceptable and important to create safe spaces for refugees to be able to speak about their cultural, religious, spiritual and tribal needs.**

- **Recognise that it acceptable and important for aid providers to be able to refer refugees to appropriate religious and spiritual services, while safeguarding against proselytisation through the implementation of clear guidelines.**

- **In order to maximise organisational accountability towards refugees, humanitarian agencies and NGOs should create meaningful spaces:**

    - To engage refugees' perspectives and to prioritise what *different* groups of refugees want.
    - To establish how refugees analyse and respond to their own situations.
    - To determine what types of support refugees wish to receive from different actors on local, national and international levels, including from religious leaders and local faith-based social networks.
    - To enable refugees to request specific support/services in the areas where they are hosted and/or resettled.
    - In order to achieve the above, governments, humanitarian agencies and NGOs should develop greater flexibility to listen to, and respond to, refugees' requests.

- **Carefully consider the roles of gender and religion when identifying and selecting potential partners:**

    - All potential partners must be vetted on the different issues relating to gender, with neither faith-based nor secular organisations assumed to be 'better' for gender equality or more supportive of the rights of people and communities who do not conform to norms relating to gender and sexuality.
    - At the same time, donor governments and agencies should think strategically and with a longer term vision about the partners they work with. They must determine whether a partner who is supportive of some areas of gender and LGBTI rights, but not others, may be a suitable partner for a specific project. They must also recognise that organisations are not static, and their views and attitudes on specific gender and LGBTI issues will undoubtedly change over time.

- **Combine training sessions for humanitarian actors with open discussion spaces relating to religion, secularism and gender. These sessions could productively:**

    - Provide religious literacy training to humanitarian actors, focused on techniques for understanding religions in context, not only on the content of religious doctrines. This would encourage humanitarian actors not to make and reproduce assumptions about 'religions' and their doctrines, but to develop an understanding of the position and roles of religions in local, national and international contexts.
    - Encourage humanitarian actors to recognise the diversity which exists within and across religions, including in terms of how different religious identities and traditions are represented, embodied, and practiced in different contexts.
    - Alongside religious literacy training, introduce humanitarian actors to the ideas and values connected with secularism and secular worldviews, raising awareness that secularism is not neutral and universal, that different types of secularism exist and that secularism is viewed differently around the world.
    - Encourage humanitarian actors to examine how gender and religion are framed by refugee and host communities.
    - Encourage humanitarian actors to examine how to use frameworks relating to gender and religion to help lift the barriers that limit refugees' ability to lead dignified lives.
    - Facilitate discussions among humanitarian staff across international, national, and local staff levels on issues they have observed around religion and gender.
    - These discussions may also help humanitarian actors recognise the ways in which institutional and personal biases and positions might be preventing fruitful partnerships with LFCs, FBOs and refugees.

- **Avoid making assumptions about who 'leaders' are in communities, and what perspectives will be held by 'leaders' and 'community members' with regards to gender:**

    - Spend time in the community and observe relationships to develop a detailed understanding of lived dynamics in the community.
    - Trace the different relationships in these communities, or work with academic researchers who have conducted research in these specific fields to avoid assumptions.

- **Purposefully apply a combination of a gender- *and* faith-sensitive lens:**

    - To better understand how to identify the needs, rights and priorities of both refugee women and girls, *and* of refugee men and boys.
    - To identify what roles, if any, religious institutions and faith leaders can play in lifting the structural barriers that limit the safety and dignity of both women and girls *and* men and boys in displacement situations.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO DONOR STATES

- **Policymakers should address the incoherence of the view that international, national and local actors should support those in need, while structural barriers increasingly prevent LFCs and FBOs from doing so. This is especially the case as it pertains to the ambiguit and assumptions underlying terms such as 'extremism' and 'terrorist support'.**

- **Greater consultation with refugees themselves will contribute to refuting existing ideas linking refugees, and terrorism and extremism. Greater consultation with refugees will also facilitate the promotion of refugee policies that more appropriately balance the needs of refugees themselves, against the security needs of States, thereby addressing the increasing securitization of migration.**

RECOMMENDATIONS TO HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES, NGOS AND THE MEDIA

- **Work closely with the media to challenge dehumanising representations of refugees.**

- **Develop coalitions between humanitarian organisations to showcase the humanity of refugees, and the shared humanity of people of faith and none. This should use language and images that humanises refugees, rather than presenting refugees as being 'less than human' or as people who lack 'our values'.**

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ACADEMICS, POLICY-MAKERS AND DONORS

- **Future research into the following areas could help provide a critically needed evidence base for subsequent policy development and implementation:**

    - Document the lived experiences of refugees so that agencies and organisations can be better informed of daily realities in issues that concern gender and religion for refugees.
    - Identify how refugee women and men draw on, negotiate and mobilise gender roles and religious identities to cope and try to live in dignity in displacement situations.
    - Explore questions about religion and faith in the humanitarian workplace, and examine how to manage religious diversity both within and across humanitarian practitioner communities, and displaced communities alike.
    - Examine the role of the media in shaping discourse on refugees – including gendered discourses and stereotypes – and how media representations influence and are influenced by policy-makers, legal systems, and political frameworks.
    - Understand and address the effects of counter-terrorism legislation and related processes on refugees. Consulting with refugees themselves and then drawing on their knowledge and experiences to counter discourses conflating refugees and terrorism is one option for approaching this.

UCL Migration Research Unit

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The views expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of UCL's Migration Research Unit.

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