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New Report Shows Critical Role Religious Women Activists Can Play in Transforming American Politics

Community and Connectedness Define “Moral Values” Behind Women’s Fight for Social Justice

The Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) releases a new report today urging political leaders to pay attention to a fresh perspective on “moral values” and public life that religious women activists bring to American politics, religious institutions, and the women’s movement.

The report, titled *The Ties That Bind: Women’s Public Vision for Politics, Religion, and Civil Society* compares and contrasts the themes that conservative and liberal religious women evoke in their activist work and analyzes the ways women are claiming moral and religious authority, despite traditional limitations on their leadership among most religions and the American political system.

“Women’s voices have frequently been excluded from recent debates among political leaders over what roles ‘moral values’ should play in politics and society, even though many of those values and debates directly involve women’s lives,” said Amy Caiazza, study director, democracy and society programs at IWPR. “‘Moral values’ arguments have traditionally been used to limit women as participants and leaders in political, religious, and economic life, and their voices should be included in ‘values’ debates for the sake of achieving a fully inclusive and responsive democracy.”

The Ties That Bind highlights ideas about shared responsibility and connectedness that many of the women interviewed use to talk about morality and politics, suggesting that their vision is very different from those that stress unyielding moral “laws” or that fail to account for the circumstances of people’s lives. “If there’s one message that came through loud and clear, it’s that we’re all in this together,” said Caiazza. “The rich woman in the suburbs is impacted by what happens to the poor woman in the inner city, and that’s why many women from different backgrounds are involved in the fight for social justice.”

According to the report, many religions address social justice issues, but most congregations do not. Several women interviewed spoke of resistance from clergy or other leadership when they attempted to pursue work in their community. In one case, a Latina Catholic was asked to leave her church because she was active in a local interfaith social justice group, instead of focusing more on her church:

I was told I would not go to heaven if I did not do more in the church. But for me, God’s work was working with the people where they’re at. The sisters told me that the

community work didn't count, that I would build a statue, not go to heaven. So I asked, Why am I living two lives? I didn't want to break off my community work. I decided that if I'm going to save myself, I'm going to save myself on 18th Street.

The women pointed to passion, experience, training or mentoring, and role modeling as helping them overcome their hesitations to lead.

“Women religious activists, particularly around social justice issues, are creating and promoting a distinct public vision for American politics and society. Their focus on stewardship, compassion, individual dignity, and interconnectedness as political values challenges basic ideas about the roles of individuals and government in American society,” according to the report.

The report suggests that building relationships between women in religious social justice organizations and those in women's movements could energize policy change on behalf of underprivileged Americans. These alliances could contribute new perspectives on values and politics, broaden activist support for the work of both movements, and help achieve stronger policies for improving the well-being of all women.

Caiazza's research raises an important new perspective on the role of religion and morality in public life. A recent AP poll shows that Americans are more accepting of religious leaders influencing politics than people in other developed countries such as Australia, France, Britain, Canada and Italy. But there is considerable controversy about what that role might be and what “moral values” really are. Caiazza contends that religious women activists provide a model for transforming how we look at many of the issues and problems facing the United States, as well as a new form of leadership for addressing them.

The release of the report coincided with the first meeting of IWPR's Working Group on Women's Public Vision at the Eighth International Women's Policy Research Conference in Washington, DC. The Working Group was designed to encourage discussion by building connections among women leaders in interfaith social justice movements and women's organizations.

The findings are based on in-depth interviews with 75 religious activists (seven were men; 68 were women) in four regions of the country: Atlanta, Chicago, the District of Columbia metropolitan region, and the area of Southern California from Los Angeles north to Santa Barbara.

The report was produced with support from the Ford Foundation. IWPR's work in this area is supported by both the Ford Foundation and the Sister Fund.

To obtain a copy of the report, to schedule an interview with Amy Caiazza, or for contact information for spokespeople in cities around the country, please contact Sharon Lewis at 914-833-7093 or Erica Williams at 831-236-3034 or 202-785-5100.

IWPR, an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit scientific research organization, also works in affiliation with the graduate programs in public policy and women's studies at The George Washington University. IWPR authors the influential “Status of Women in the States” reports, ranking all 50 states and DC on conditions for women. IWPR is online at www.iwpr.org.

**QUOTES FROM NEW INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN'S POLICY RESEARCH REPORT:
*The Ties That Bind: Women's Public Vision for Politics, Religion, and Civil Society***

The 126-page report involves interviews with women from many religions, races, and ethnicities and covers a wide range of topics:

Women and the Moral Values Debate

Women are bringing a set of values, particularly those focused on relationships and connectedness, that are often considered more appropriate to the “private” or family sphere to public life. They are calling for integrating these values with more traditionally “public” values, such as the emphasis on protecting individual rights.

Faith as a Call to Action

“Responsibility and community and vision—it’s just so compelling—of course this is what religion is about.” –a white mainline Protestant woman

Conservative Women Defend Moral Standards

“Jonah did not want to go into Nineveh and tell the people to repent or they were going to be destroyed...but he finally got there and he delivered the message...and for a hundred years that nation obeyed God...God’s people were supposed to be involved in the public arena, not just sitting on a pew.” –a white evangelical Christian woman

Religious Women Work for Social Welfare

“My faith says that you go to church because you are in communion with a group of people, with a community. And it’s only when you are in community that you experience the presence of God.” –a Latina Catholic woman

The Activism of African American, Jewish, and Muslim Women

“I view the scriptures from the perspective of the oppressed people...because my cultural tradition is of an oppressed people. So whether it’s the folks whose land was taken in the Bible, or whether it’s the kids, the children, the sick, the so-called demon possessed, I’m still looking at it from that perspective.” –an African American Christian woman

“Our mission is driven by the Jewish prophetic values of justice, and so if the public housing residents come to us and say we’re being driven out of our home, we need your help in organizing, we don’t look at it as is this issue winnable...we look at it as is this a just struggle.” –a white Jewish woman

“If you do see an injustice, you’re obligated to speak out. And that is jihad to me.” –an Arab American Muslim woman

Implications for Politics, Religion, and Feminism

[Politics can be transformed] if we can reconceive the public sphere to be a place of partnerships and relationships among citizens and communities, rather than of individuals simply protecting their rights. Most progressive leaders are not . . . challenging the tendency to treat issues of social welfare as individual problems, or even as problems affecting a specific demographic group, rather than as problems affecting us all.

The values of connectedness articulated by the women we interviewed suggest that context matters to the meaning of morality, so that “traditional moral values” make little sense to people with limited choices and opportunities—those with limited agency.

The voices and progressive moral vision of women working as grassroots social justice activists could provide vision and energy for strengthening, broadening, and transforming the women’s movement.