Research-in-Brief

The Ties That Bind:
Women's Public Vision for Politics, Religion, and Civil Society

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This Research-in-Brief summarizes the findings of a larger report, The Ties That Bind: Women's Public Vision for Politics, Religion, and Civil Society, *based on a series of 75 in-depth, qualitative interviews with women (and a few men) working as volunteers, staff, or leaders of nonprofit religious groups working on social justice issues.*

Religious life is an important place where men and women are recruited into civic and political life. In their congregations, men and women learn and practice important civic skills, develop relationships that turn into recruitment networks, and are inspired by the values they learn and discuss. In fact, religious involvement is considered one of the stronger factors associated with increased civic and political participation. Congregations, then, have the potential to involve women in activism around issues they care about, particularly because women are more involved in congregational life than men. But in fact, the opposite is happening: within congregations, men are more likely to practice civic skills, serve in leadership, and be recruited into other civic and political activities (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). In other words, congregations are less likely to translate women's involvement than men's into political or civic activism.

Some of the problem may be connected to limitations on women's religious voice and leadership. Most religious denominations come from a history of values and traditions that have limited women's roles as leaders and activists, denying women the authority to interpret religious or moral values. Instead, they have assigned women a very specific set of roles rooted in family, children, and private life, while excluding them from the authority of claiming public leadership, and have presented these roles as based on inherent and fundamental moral values (Buchanan 1996; Chopp and Davaney 1997; Pateman 1988; Schneider and Schneider 1997). The idea of women's roles as natural and justified by "core" moral values also underlies the basic precepts of American democracy, which, too, is built on the idea of women sustaining home, family, and the private sphere,

> *"It's the struggle for the quality of life, no matter where it is…. It goes back to that Creation, trying to get some sense of that goodness back into our lives, no matter whether it's economic or global or what. And I think the social justice part creates a co-responsibility with other women to be able to do that."*

while men are public figures in politics and economics (Okin 1992; Pateman 1988). As a result, if we are to fully include women in democratic life, we may need to rethink the systems of morality that define women's roles.

To encourage the process of bringing women's experiences and values to discussions of morality and politics, this Research-in-Brief, based on a larger report by IWPR, describes how women social justice activists talk about their moral values and experiences with claiming leadership in their activist lives. Because so many "moral values" issues are linked to religious faiths and traditions, we focus in particular on the values and visions of women working as activists in religious contexts. In a series of in-depth interviews with women activists from a broad range of religious traditions across the country, we sought to determine what kinds of values and themes are central to their work and leadership (for information on methodology, see below).

In general, the women we interviewed articulate a moral vision for public life that is informed by their lives and experiences as women, experiences often excluded from traditional ideas about both morality and politics. This vision includes an emphasis on values of shared responsibility and connectedness, which are used by the women interviewed to rethink traditional ideas about economic and political rights. The work and leadership of these women also challenge ideas about women's moral agency by putting it squarely in women's hands. The women we interviewed still describe struggling to claim that agency and consistently experience resistance and hesitation in taking on leadership, but they point to ways that women can overcome those obstacles.

CLAIMING MORAL AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY

The religious women activists we interviewed are actively claiming a public voice as political and religious leaders, based on their sense of individual and collective responsibility for their communities. They often describe a very personal calling from God or a need to put their faith and values into action in public life. For example, a Latina organizer who ran for local office describes her calling from God:

> I did it because I knew. And I went to church and I could feel the energy. I could feel that I could do it. And at that point, I did know that I felt the calling from God. I did. I did. And maybe I mistook God for my calling, my own calling. Maybe God wasn't even calling me. But I think, I really, truly believe that.

An African American Christian describes her need to live out faith in a public way:

> Do we not have a responsibility to challenge those systems that are being destructive? I think as moral people, as people of faith, that we have not only the responsibility, we have the challenge to our faith. If we don't do it, our faith is filthy rags; it ain't worth diddly squat.

As activists, these women argue that their faith demands them to work in community. They see their relationship with God as giving them the moral authority to work for change in the public sphere. This, in turn, allows them to claim roles as political and religious activists, both historically frowned upon roles for women. Their activist work, then, involves asserting their own moral authority and agency.

IMAGES OF GOD AND THE VALUES OF RELIGIOUS ACTIVISTS

Women interpret their relationships with God in diverse ways, and those differences shape their approaches to issues of politics, morality, and social justice. Women who are active in conservative political work on cultural issues, for instance, often describe their involvement as an effort to defend traditional moral standards on behalf of a loving but actively intervening God who holds us accountable for living up to those standards. As a white evangelical Christian argues,

> Jonah did not want to go into Nineveh and tell the people to repent or they were going to be destroyed, and of course you know the story, he got swallowed by the whale. But he finally got there and he delivered the message, and Nineveh turned, and for a hundred years that nation obeyed God again. And I have hope for America, that if the message goes forth that, yes, we're here, just maybe it will turn around….God's people were supposed to be involved in the public arena, not just sitting on a pew.

In contrast, women who work on social justice issues tend to have a more nurturing and co-creative image of God, whom they hope to serve through efforts to improve the well-being of individuals and communities:

> 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. And so, you know, I often say to people in training, 'If you really are on a search for God, then you need to sit eyeball-to-eyeball with another person, and you will encounter God. But if you're unwilling to relate to other human beings, you're never going to find what you're hunting for in terms of a relationship with God.' And so, my faith says, and my interpretation of scripture, is that it's the communal existence that creates the presence of God.

In our interviews, women who participate in social justice activism describe four basic sets of values behind their activism: stewardship; love, peace, and compassion; interconnectedness; and basic worth and dignity. Listen to examples of these values as they are described by women discussing why they participate in social justice work.

On stewardship, a white mainline Protestant:

> The message of the gospels has to do with giving of what we have, taking care of people who don't have, distributing our abundance…I can put all my energy and some of my money into things that make the world better.

On love, peace, and compassion, an Arab American Muslim and a Hispanic Christian:

> Sufis harbor feelings of love, peace, and harmony inside, and spread it outside, without any distinctions. This is the basic concept of Islam.

> The God that I subscribe to is a God of love and compassion, and of change and working for that greater good. And it's that which is clearly—there's a correlation with my activism in social justice.

On interconnectedness, an Asian American Hindu, a white Catholic, and a white Jewish woman:

> There's a connection between all human beings, and if you are going to act aggressively and minimize somebody's rights, or just completely strip them of their rights and abuse them or what have you—what does that say for the morality that we are being taught?

I guess my worldview is that ultimately we're all connected, and that biologically and spiritually and environmentally we're all connected to each other. And even though some people are able to remove themselves from that connection based on wealth and privilege, ultimately we are all connected… It's not spiritually healthy to be one of those people that removes yourself too much from all of that… Ultimately we need to be accountable to the people that work for us and with us.

God is in the space between human beings, and all these ethical commandments and ritual commandments are all bound up together, and any relationship that you have with God, any relationship with human beings are tied together.

On worth and dignity, a white mainline Protestant and Latina Catholic:

It comes right out of my strong conviction that all of us are created in the image of God, which then means we are all created in goodness. And that image of God remains in every one of us, no matter who we are or what we've done, and all of us deserve the dignity and respect of being a person of God.

Part of what you do is that you build community. You recognize the sacredness of every person.

Together, the values articulated by the women we interviewed suggest an overall moral vision for public life. They assert that rights are both individual and shared and that recognizing our connectedness and mutual responsibility is integral to creating fully inclusive economic and political systems. That is, they suggest that if we can redefine the public sphere as a place of partnerships and relationships among citizens and communities, rather than of individuals simply protecting their rights (for example, the rights of the better off to be free of crime), we can perhaps create the kind of social networks and ties that build more integrated and consciously interdependent communities, while respecting the dignity and rights of all.

The values and visions described by women in our interviews in some ways reflect those of their religious faiths. In others, they are firmly tied to women's experiences in private and family life, with their emphasis on values of caring and connectedness. Importantly, though, they are also reinterpreted and made relevant to public life by many of the women interviewed as they apply those values, which are often seen as more appropriate to the "private" or family sphere, to politics, policy, and civil society.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RACE, ETHNICITY, AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

Women's experiences and values are impacted profoundly by factors of race, ethnicity, religion, and class. People of color, for example, have experienced—sometimes in lethal ways—their own forms of exclusion from public political roles, and the legacies of these histories are evident in our interviews. African American women, for example, note that political violence as a form of intimidation, not to mention the institution of slavery, still constrains their sense of political agency. Hispanic and Asian American women note that their histories, too, shape their experiences: the instability and vulnerability of migrant workers, the legacy of World War II internment, and discrimination based on looks or language have all served to discourage their public voices. Among Arab American women, recent history has resulted in targeted hatred and violence based on the actions of male (and female) terrorists, who often share at most an ethnic or religious background.

These kinds of differences shape the values and experiences of women in the United States as they go about their activist work. For example, women of color describe a heightened sense of discomfort with claiming a public role. At the same time, in our interviews, women of color and those from smaller U.S. religions are more likely to translate their religious values beyond a sense of caring and compassion to a concern for justice. And they are more likely to describe a sense of interconnectedness as a value inspiring their activism. These findings seem to stem from two sources: a commitment to such values in the religious traditions of many women of color, and their experiences with the exclusion and subordination of their communities.

EXPERIENCES WITH HESITATION AND RESISTANCE

Although the women we interviewed are claiming agency, they still report resistance to their efforts to do so, as well as their own hesitation to take on public roles. Almost universally, women described difficulty taking on leadership.

A white evangelical Protestant, for example, describes her concerns:

[Our director is] really intimidating. In the sense that he's really smart, I mean. How can I add something to that? That's the feeling that I came in with. And so it's taken me awhile to get to a place where I'm like oh, yeah. I can add something to that theoretically and academically and that kind of thing.

An Asian American Buddhist describes her own process of claiming authority, particularly as the daughter of immigrants:

> It goes against the nature of the way I was raised. So it's something I've had to overcome, but I think, as I've gotten older and more involved in things and been the person who's supposed to give the talk, that you gain a lot more confidence. And it becomes more enjoyable… But I think girls and then Japanese people are supposed to be more reserved.

A white mainline Protestant observes the gender dynamics in her activist work:

> I think sometimes there is a lowering of energy by the women because of the men who are there. I wouldn't say that was animosity… you see the men starting to take over and the women just start to be quiet. Or to not engage in the same way. I think there is a way in which you just say, 'Okay, well if they're going to do it, fine.'

In many cases, women have good reason to hesitate in taking on authority in religious settings. Many reported being chastised or resisted in their efforts to take leadership or even be activists. A Hispanic Catholic describes one story of being berated publicly and privately on several occasions for her work:

> 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.

Other women also report feeling restrictions on their roles as women in particular, often when working in congregations or denominational life. Some are able to channel their energy into alternative routes and satisfy themselves enough to stay in their congregations—they just fulfill their social justice work elsewhere. Many stay in their traditions and hope they will change. Others leave their religious traditions and replace them with their work in religious—and often interfaith—community groups. As a white Catholic describes her experiences with religious restrictions on women's authority,

> [As a woman], there are also times when you are very conflicted by this church that you love and you are serving. And you have to learn how to deal with that, and some people don't. And some women, volunteers and staff and leaders, have to walk away from that, because it's too big a bridge for them to cross.

Interestingly, in many interfaith settings women argue that they have opportunities to pursue leadership and activism in ways that are less restricted than those in congregational or official denominational settings. In fact, women's leadership and activism is somewhat more evident in the interfaith community organizing setting, where women are 51 percent of boards of directors and 45 percent of organizers, a far greater level of leadership than in traditional religious settings (Warren and Wood 2001). In part, this may result from fewer institutional restrictions on women, precisely because the interfaith setting is somewhat more removed from traditional religious values and institutions—interfaith groups are often their own organizations and less likely to be run by official religious authorities, and by their nature they can encourage people to think about alternative perspectives on values and traditions. Particularly in groups led by women, we also saw evidence of specific ways that women's leadership was actively encouraged in interfaith settings. These groups at times provide mentoring or training programs that increase women's skills and confidence, the most effective of which stress the specific obstacles faced by women in claiming moral and political authority.

One compelling example of successful leadership development for women in an interfaith organization comes from a Latina Catholic. She had been doing community organizing for two decades when she was approached by other women in her organization to create a training program specifically for women. She was dragged reluctantly into the idea, but she found it revolutionary for both her and the other women involved. She helped revamp the training in its entirety and had women rebuild it based on their own ideas and experiences:

> I think what happened is the acknowledgement that they had a private space, a place that was for them, I think was very, very important. And secondly, that all remnants of [our old] training were absent. It was gone.

A major component of the new training focuses on the emotional draw and consequences of the work for women. For example,

> The group had to do some reading on Rosa Parks and say, what would I want to know if Rosa Parks came in the room?... And it's very interesting the questions they were asking…How did your husband react to your activism? What happened to you when they actually arrested you? What happened to your family?... They weren't asking, Did the police beat you up? Did you have to go to court?...They weren't asking the public questions. They were asking very much the private questions.

As a result of the new approach, the proportion of organizational leaders in her group who are women has risen dramatically. This work opened the eyes of this organizer, and the eyes of other women involved, to how their interests are often ignored, both in the goals of organizations and in simply how programs such as training are defined.

This story also exemplifies how having a woman in charge can make a difference. It provides a place for other women to go for support, if only as someone perceived as having similar experiences. It also role models women's authority, as another Latina Catholic describes:

> They continually point to me…They're recognizing that they have potential, and that I recognize their potential, and they can identify with me as opposed to one of the male staff. They hold onto that because I reflect them, they reflect me. It also points to the lack of women's leadership—certainly not the lack of potential, but the lack of actual women's leadership. So you find one.

Women leaders also often mentor in ways that take into account the hesitation that women often feel. For example, two different women leaders—a white and an African American evangelical Christian—describe their work mentoring women:

> I would say 60 or 70 percent of the young women that I have mentored over a period of time who came into the organization were afraid of public speaking…. I will have young men who know absolutely nothing come to me and say, 'I could go do presentations for the organization.' And I think to myself, 'Oh, Lord help us.' In fact, the biggest problem I find with young men is often this misplaced confidence… Women don't do that. Women will be, 'Oh, I don't know anything, I couldn't possibly do that.'

> One of our top leaders, a white female Lutheran that I'm just very proud of—she's doing a fantastic job and I agitate her quite a bit. When I see her retreating to her little safe place…not to hurt a man's ego or something, I talk to her one on one, not to embarrass her because I don't do that, and I…ask her, what's it going to take for her stop giving her power away. And we have a little understanding, and she says okay, thank you, I appreciate that you brought that to my attention.

Both men and women can mentor, of course, and several women spoke of their close and powerful relationships with male mentors. One even describes a relationship with a male religious leader who not only encouraged her leadership development but also convinced her that women can and should be religious clergy. At the same time, many women suggest that having women in political, and particularly religious, leadership encourages others to take on a public voice themselves. Several note that bringing more women into leadership positions attracted more women as volunteer activists to their organizations, and others describe their ability as women to identify where women may need particular supports. In contrast, most of the male leaders we interviewed say they rarely see any issues with women claiming leadership, which could of course speak to their ability as leaders to overcome issues women might have—or, alternatively, suggest that their own experiences make it difficult to see what those issues might be.

CONCLUSION

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 and transforms concepts of rights, public life, and social policy. Women continue to experience difficulties claiming leadership, but they nonetheless are asserting their moral and political agency and authority to do so, and they are often providing supports for each other as they do.

By listening to their ideas, leaders in politics and religion, both of which are still dominated by men and male authority, can better understand how to more fully integrate and genuinely promote women's voices and leadership in their work. This in turn could motivate new strategies and policies based on the distinct perspectives contributed by women, particularly on behalf of disadvantaged communities. Recognizing women's full authority would probably also bring new energy and support to each institution.

Building relationships between women in religious social justice organizations—particularly interfaith groups led by women—and in women's movements could energize policy change on behalf of underprivileged Americans as well. Many people have criticized the women's movement for not having achieved social, political, and economic change for the most disadvantaged Americans. While the issues facing these communities have been on the agendas of many women's organizations, those that have tried to promote them have not had much success in this area and were even unable to prevent the loss of aid entitlements for poor women in recent years. New alliances with women in interfaith justice groups could contribute new perspectives on values and politics to the women's movement, broaden activist support for its work, and help achieve stronger policies designed to improve the well-being of all women.

METHODOLOGY

This Research-in-Brief summarizes the findings and conclusions of a larger report, *The Ties That Bind: Women's Public Vision for Politics, Religion, and Civil Society*, based on a series of 75 in-depth, qualitative interviews with women (and a few men) working as volunteers, staff, or leaders of nonprofit groups working on social justice issues. All but a few groups involved in the study have a religious focus, and most are interfaith—operating as independent organizations that can be affiliated with but are not solely run by a specific congregation or denomination. Interviews were conducted in Atlanta, Chicago, Southern California, and Washington, DC. Participants were 15 percent each African American and Hispanic, 9 percent Asian American, 5 percent Arab American, and 55 percent non-Hispanic white. Participants were two-thirds Christian, almost evenly divided among Catholics, mainline Protestants, white or Hispanic evangelicals, and African American evangelicals. The remaining third was almost evenly divided among Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and Unitarian Universalists, with one Sikh and one Baha'i. For more information on research methodology for this study, see *The Ties That Bind*.

The report is the first in a series on women's work as leaders and activists in religious, and particularly interfaith, social justice organizations. The series will analyze the values, motivations, experiences, and leadership development of women involved in this work. It will also explore how leaders in the women's movement think about religion and religious values.

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