

Left behind

An analysis of the United Nations' response to the intersecting identities of gender and religion

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Abstract

Intersectional language is increasingly incorporated into the policy dialogue, analysis and reporting of UN entities and special rapporteurs including UN Women and Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB). This paper analyses the United Nations' responses to gendered religious persecution based on a quantitative content analysis of UN documents and a series of qualitative interviews with experts. The findings suggest that the UN is inconsistent in its recognition of the intersectional vulnerability of gender and religious persecution. Significantly, various international declarations issued by UN Women, a branch dedicated to gender equality and protection, have progressively stopped mentioning this intersection.

Keywords Religious persecution, United Nations, gender, women, intersectionality, vulnerability, human rights.

1. Introduction

More than 80 percent of the world's population has a religious affiliation (Pew Research Center 2012; Pew Research Center 2016). Religious persecution is a severe problem across the world; in fact, a recent examination of 193 UN member states has noted a marked increase in instances of religious persecution and restrictions of religious freedom (Pew Research Center 2018; Open Doors 2018). This persecution is not gender-blind. It creates a particularly high-risk environment for women who experience persecution acutely, in ways that severely violate their rights (Rees 2019; Fisher and Miller 2018).

The theory of intersectionality is a valuable tool to identify the most vulnerable people, as it considers the numerous overlapping factors of a person's identity, which exposes inequalities and subordination. Notably, this theory can be applied to the experiences of women who are strategically targeted and oppressed due to

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their religious affiliation. The United Nations claims to include an intersectional scope in its establishment of human-rights norms and policy-making (Campbell 2016; Fukuda-Parr 2019). Member states have committed to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where intersectional factors leading to discrimination are specifically included to identify the areas whereby people are left behind (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs [DESA] 2018). The pledge to “leave no one behind” refers to the call for member states to regard the needs of the most disadvantaged, marginalized and vulnerable as a priority (Cochrane 2018). However, religion is not included here as an intersectional vulnerability factor. This omission leaves these vulnerable women unaccounted for, as they are excluded from associated analyses, dialogue and policies (Randel and German 2017; UN Women 2015). This is part of a pattern of omission throughout international policies, which indicates that the international community has yet to have fully understood and “adequately addressed” religious persecution (Ochab 2018; Mountstephen 2019). Without adequate recognition of the heightened exposure to harm that results from the intersection of religious persecution and gender, these women are indeed being left behind.

Using quantitative content analyses of UN documents, this paper exposes inconsistencies between how the UN Special Rapporteurs for freedom of religion or belief, or FoRB (on behalf of the Human Rights Council), and the UN Women documents and declarations on gender protection are recognizing this increasingly apparent intersectional vulnerability. Qualitative interviews with experts in the field deepen this analysis, drawing the conclusion that women facing this intersection are not currently consistently recognized or adequately protected by the UN. It is recommended that the platforms of the 2020 SDGs and Beijing Declaration reviews should be used to address this intersectional gap. Moreover, advocacy groups should work together with government policy-makers to ensure that this intersection is recognized as a vulnerability. I hope that these findings will help to lay a foundation for future research, policy suggestions and programming so as to protect vulnerable women.

2. Background: understanding the UN’s approach to the intersectional vulnerabilities of gendered religious persecution

2.1 Why should we use an intersectional analytical lens to understand the experiences of women who face discrimination and inequality?

Intersectionality provides an analytical lens that allows for greater insight into the experiences of women who belong to persecuted religions. Intersectionality insists on considering numerous identities, to expose vulnerabilities and subordination as they intersect (Davis 2015:207). The theory moves away from viewing identi-

ties as isolated analytical categories that cause discrimination; instead, it exposes concurrent intersecting experiences of oppression, such as black women's concurrent experience of both racism and sexism (Crenshaw 1991; Sigle-Rushton 2013). An understanding of the nuanced multi-dimensional experiences of discrimination is widely considered necessary to address inequalities facing individuals (Chow 2016). Therefore, international human-rights mechanisms and policy agreements on non-discrimination laws are increasingly incorporating an intersectional analysis into policy-making. Despite the complexities of addressing the oppression of individuals in global policy, intersectionality remains a critical tool for the design and application of non-discrimination laws and equality policy, as it enables a specific understanding of discrimination (Crenshaw 1991; Quinn 2016). Therefore, intersectionality is a hugely important, complex analytical theory that highlights unseen areas of discrimination for women.

2.2 What do we already know about the intersectionality of gendered religious persecution?

Religious persecution is a severe problem across the world, and the women belonging to these groups often experience this persecution acutely and in unique ways (Ghanea 2004; Rees 2019). Religious persecution creates a particularly high-risk environment for the violation of women's rights through, for example, a lack of socio-legal protection and an elevated vulnerability to sexual violence, abduction and forced marriage (Fisher and Miller 2018). Therefore, religious persecution should be considered with an intersectional understanding, as women are deliberately and strategically targeted to pressure and break down religious communities (Fisher and Miller 2018; Jackson 2017; Tadros 2015; Barkindo et al 2013). The lens of intersectionality provides a focused analysis of the specific violence and discrimination faced by women belonging to religions experiencing persecution.

Despite this trend, religion is often left out of academic discussions of intersectionality and consequently, the international policies that list the intersecting identities of women seldom include religion (Weber 2015; Barkindo et al 2013; UN Women 2015). UN reports and literature regarding such events as Boko Haram's abduction of Christian girls in northern Nigeria or the systematic abduction and abuse of Christian and Yazidi women in Iraq by the Islamic State do not highlight the specific intersectional relationship of gender and religion (UNICEF 2018; Barkindo et al 2013; Tadros 2015). As a result, these specific vulnerabilities are largely unexplored and under-represented in policies, despite appearing to be a clear intersectional factor which heightens a woman's vulnerability (Ghanea 2017; Tadros 2015; Goss-Alexander 2018).

2.3 Why is the appreciation of this intersection in FoRB insufficient to address the vulnerability?

The FoRB section of the UN recognizes that women of religious minorities face systematic intersectional discrimination around the world (Winkler and Satterthwaite 2017). In response, the Human Rights Council has mandated the current FoRB Special Rapporteur “to continue to apply a gender perspective” in identifying “gender-specific abuses” in their reports, and two FoRB reports have specifically highlighted the intersectional vulnerability of women and religion (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR] 2019). However, the role of the FoRB Special Rapporteur is only to investigate and monitor situations and recommend solutions relating to this specific mandate. It does not possess the power to grant protection to people with religious beliefs as a human right (OHCHR 2019; Bielefeldt 2013; Ghanea 2017).

In addition, internationally recognized norms, such as Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which promotes religious freedom and tolerance, are not legally binding on states (Bielefeldt 2013). Therefore, given the limited protection of FoRB in the UN, these women must seek protection through other channels of the UN that could protect and enforce their rights. Despite the appreciation of this intersection in FoRB reports, gender and religious identities are not currently translating into other spheres of the UN.

2.4 How is this intersection addressed by the UN Women?

UN bodies are increasingly referring to intersectionality in policy-making initiatives (Davis 2015; Chow 2016). An intersectional understanding has been included in the influential 2030 SDGs’ “leave no one behind” agenda, to reveal the gaps where women are disadvantaged and face discrimination (Winkler and Satterthwaite 2017; Fukuda-Parr 2019; UN Women 2015; Davis 2015; UN DESA 2018; Randel and German 2017). However, religion is not included in this list of intersectional identities, which results in additional marginalization (Randel and German 2017; UN Women 2015). Even though the UN has a strong intersectional framework regarding equality, there has not been reciprocal interest between FoRB and UN Women in the intersection concerning religion (Ghanea 2017; Bielefeldt 2013).

Scholars have highlighted the pattern of omission of religion in international relations and policy. One reason suggested for this omission is the UN’s limited ability to accommodate the complexities regarding seemingly conflicting rights such as gender and religion (UN DESA 2018; Chow 2016; Fukuda-Parr 2019). The international human rights bodies within the UN, such as UN Women, advocate for the rights of women to be free from impositions by religious traditions and practices (Ghanea 2017; Weber 2015). Spivak (2012) suggests that the lack of mention of

religion other than in FoRB dialogues is due to the increasing secularism within the UN. Nevertheless, there appears to be inconsistency in how different elements of the UN identify women and religion. Significantly, UN Women does not include religion in its intersectional vulnerability lens, leading to a “serious protection gap” regarding the specific human-rights abuses they experience (Bielefeldt 2013:2; Ghanea 2017).

2.5 Conclusions from a review of available literature

Further investigation is needed concerning the effective use of international policies to protect women who belong to religions that face persecution. Religious persecution is not gender-blind and creates an increasingly high-risk environment for the violation of women’s rights. Perpetrators of persecution may intentionally target women to incapacitate a faith community, exploiting women’s lack of socio-legal protections and their elevated vulnerability to sexual violence. Despite such threats, this intersectionality has not consistently generated high-level dialogue and political will across the UN. This paper seeks to contribute towards understanding the apparent inconsistency between FoRB and UN Women and whether it results in women being left behind.

3. Research method

This study applied both quantitative and qualitative analysis to build an understanding of the extent to which the UN is recognizing the intersectionality of gender and religion. The quantitative content analysis quantified the degree to which UN FoRB and UN Women documents represented this intersection. The qualitative expert interviews explained the findings and widened the scope of the recommendations considered. This method of triangulation provided more comprehensive data and mitigated some of the limitations of the methodology (Bekhet and Zauszniewski 2012; Bryman 2016).

3.1 Content analysis

I conducted a content analysis of the annual reports of the Special Rapporteur for FoRB from 1995 to 2018 and of UN Women declarations. The aim of this analysis was to establish whether there is a broad pattern in how the UN sections have addressed the topic over time. The quantitative content analysis allowed a more systematic and replicable investigation into the extent to which the documents address the relevant concerns (Krippendorff 2004:10; Neuendorf and Kumar 2015).

The annual reports of the special rapporteur for FoRB are considered the “strongest mechanisms that FoRB has to generate new synergies” (Ghanea 2017:6; OHCHR n.d.). Each annual report was analysed independently, based on the four

Interviewee 1	Partnerships Developer & Academic Lecturer in Theology of Suffering & Persecution and Founding director of Gender and Religious Freedom.
Interviewee 2	Senior Global Gender Persecution Specialist and women's strategist for International NGO.
Interviewee 3	United Nations Representative for an international NGO.
Interviewee 4	Executive Editor & Director for human rights online newspaper specialising on religious persecution.
Interviewee 5	Research Coordinator at UNICEF and Managing Editor of the International Journal of Transitional Justice.
Interviewee 6	Senior Advisor for Social Justice and on the UN Faith advisory council

main terms of gender, sex, women and girls; moreover, during the initial reading of the annual reports, further categories were added to obtain a more accurate record. This approach mitigates the criticism that terms used in the reports may have changed over time (Krippendorff 2004). To account for the documents varying in length, the occurrence of the word list was divided by the total number of lines in each document to find the average frequency to create an overall trend. The percentage of lines relating to the topic of women in the whole document indicated the degree to which the FoRB documents highlighted the unique experiences of women in the context of religious persecution over time.

Second, the same method was applied to understand how religion has been covered in UN Women declarations. This method was applied to seven critical international agreements from 1995 to 2015, which act as "guiding documents" for the UN's understanding and creation of norms for women's equality and protection (UN Women 2019). Again, the word list was based on four main terms (religion, belief, spiritual and faith), and more categories were added as they appeared. The average frequency percentage created an overall trend of how often religion was included across the seven documents.

Simply calculating the frequency of terms appearing in the documents offered a shallow analysis (Krippendorff 2004). Therefore, to gain a better understanding of the contexts in which religion is addressed by the UN Women documents, I

categorized each reference to the topic and then calculated the percentage of appearances for each category. For this purpose, I compared the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (United Nations 1995) with Sustainable Development Goal 5 on Gender Equality (2015). I chose these documents because UN Women (United Nations 2015) refers to them as fundamental policy frameworks for the “empowerment of women and girls.” Additionally, 2020, which marks the 25th and 5th years of these documents’ existence, respectively, was regarded as a “pivotal year for the accelerated realization of gender equality” (UN Women n.d.).

3.2 Qualitative interviews

Qualitative interviews complemented the quantitative content analysis data by providing possible explanations for the findings from experts working in related fields of study. The aim of the interviews was to explore the interviewees’ understanding of how the UN is responding to the intersecting identities of gender and religion and to develop further areas for research (Kvale 1996).

In the selection of interviewees, I made a conscious attempt to cover a range of professional backgrounds pertinent to this topic, including NGOs, religious persecution specialists, social justice advocates and UN liaisons, to ensure a broad picture and consider different perspectives. The interviews were conducted over Skype or in person at the UN Commission of the Status of Women in March 2019, lasting about 30 minutes each. The semi-structured approach allowed each interviewee to speak in his or her area of expertise. By closely reading the transcripts, I coded the themes that emerged into the categories described in the findings below.

4. Quantitative findings

4.1 How frequently are women referred to in FoRB reports?

Each annual report discusses the themes of religious persecution observed by the Special Rapporteur for that year. Therefore, the increase in the mention of gender reflects the Special Rapporteur’s growing awareness that women face specific discrimination. Figure 1 shows a significant increase in the average frequency with which women were referenced in the documents beginning in 1998. Although the figure does not show steady growth, there was a clear increase across the time span. In other words, acts of religious intolerance specifically against women were increasingly recognized in these reports.

4.2 Religion in UN Women declarations

As Figure 2 shows, mentions of religion have tended to decrease in influential declarations on the protection and empowerment of women. There was a clear decline of 87% from 1995 to 2015.

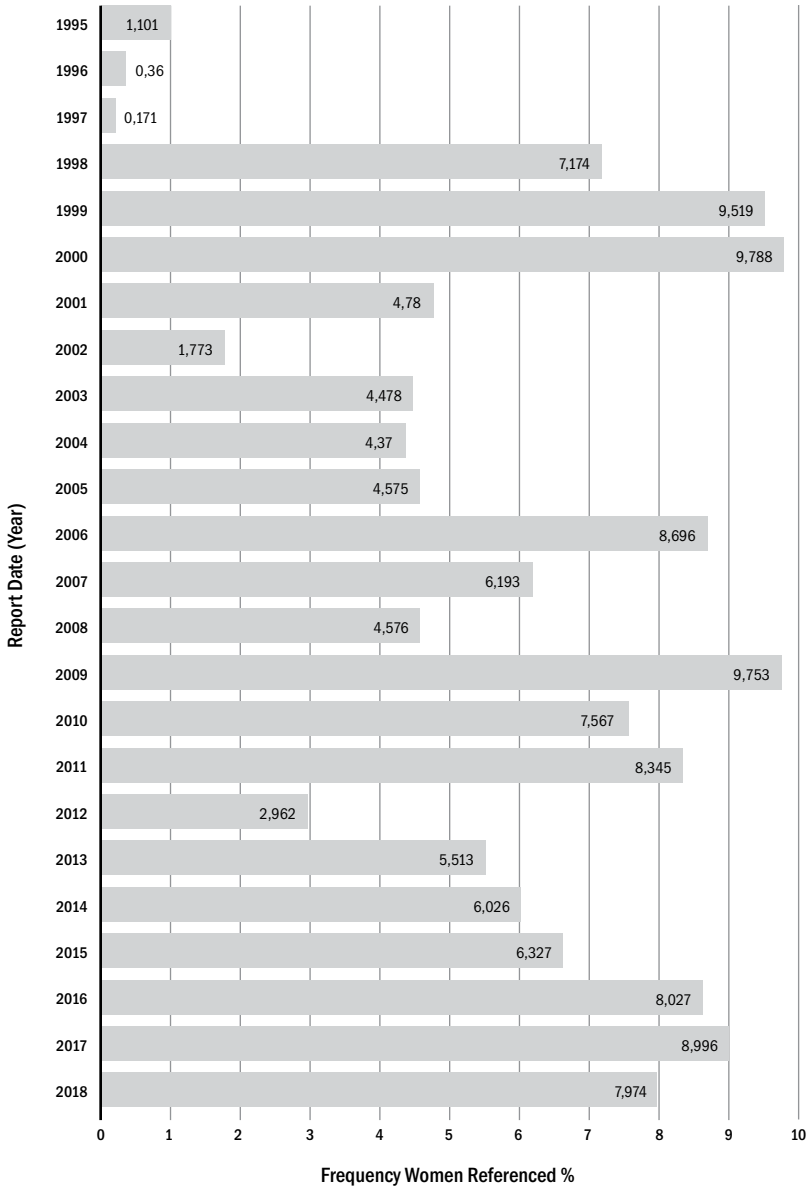


Figure 1: The frequency with which women were mentioned in UN Special Rapporteur annual reports on religious intolerance. Data was collected from 1995 to 2018. Annual reports were accessed through the archive on the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' website.

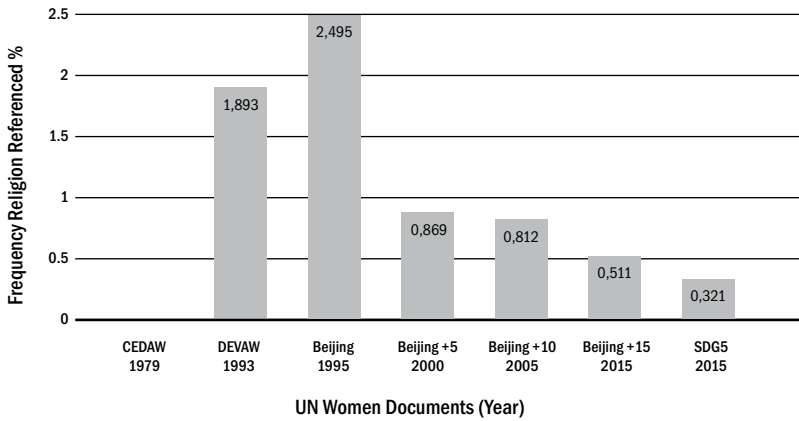


Figure 2: The frequency with which religion was mentioned in significant UN Women policy declarations. The seven documents, spanning the years from 1979 to 2015, were accessed in the UN Women archive.

4.3 Deconstruction of the mentions of religion in 1995 and 2015

Closer investigation shows that the way in which UN Women speaks about religion has shifted, from seeing it as an intersectional vulnerability towards seeing it as a source of violence against women. In the Beijing Declaration in 1995, the most common category of references to religion cited it as an intersectional factor (42%) – that is, as an aspect of identity that could result in increased discrimination and heighten a women’s inequality in society. In SDG 5 in 2015, religion was referred to as an intersectional factor less frequently (15.8%). Similarly, the mentions of a woman’s right to FoRB and women’s increased vulnerability to religious persecution decreased from 30% in 1995 to 13% in 2015. Meanwhile, the understanding of religion as a form of violence increased from 12% in 1995 to becoming the largest category, at 43%, in 2015. This category included religion as a form of fundamentalism, or religious traditions which justify harming women and girls.

4.4 Summary

These results are significant because while persecuted women have been highlighted in UN FoRB documents as an increasingly vulnerable category, the references to them in UN Women documents are declining. Women and religion are being understood less as an intersectional vulnerability factor in UN Women documents, despite being increasingly cited in UN FoRB reports. The following qualitative analysis provides interpretation of what the UN document analysis has revealed, why

the inconsistencies may arise, and the consequences for vulnerable women of a potential policy gap within the UN.

5. Qualitative findings

5.1 Recognition of religion in UN forums

Interviewee 6 (see Interviewee Table in section 3.2) remarked that the UN is attempting to become more inclusive towards religion. For example, the current UN Secretary General has established a Faith Advisory Council. However, the interviews revealed a strong theme that religion is largely absent from UN and non-governmental organization (NGO) reports on human rights. The interviewees gave three reasons for this omission. First, if UN policy-makers “do not understand religion”, then it is likely to be under-represented in policy or excluded to “avoid misrepresentation” (interviewee 4). Second, interviewee 1 argued that outside of discussions on FoRB, people are “unaware” of religion as an important topic. Third, interviewee 3 stated there was not “enough political will” to achieve change regarding these issues. Conversely, interviewee 6 said, “I don’t think it has [avoided] talking about religion” as “opportunities are given” to faith-based groups within the UN. Interviewee 3 concluded that there was a gap in policies for these women. Notably, they cited the UN’s forum on indigenous populations for minorities as an example of how these women could potentially be protected, although further research would be needed to test whether this is a viable avenue. Other interviewees insisted on the importance of interpretation of existing policies (interviewee 6) and of the UN having a “religious understanding” (interviewee 1) when interpreting and writing policies.

5.2 Reasons for the perceived policy gap

Interviewees 1, 2, 3 and 4 highlighted the gap in UN policy regarding the intersectional vulnerability of women and religion explicitly. The intersectionality of gender and religion was viewed as “pretty ignored” (interviewee 4) throughout the UN, and no interviewee could name a policy which recognized these women. Furthermore, despite the UN FoRB Special Rapporteur report of 2013 acknowledging the protection gap, no mechanisms are in place for women seeking justice after having experienced gendered religious persecution (interviewees 2 and 5). One explanation for this problem was the lack of cooperation between the perceived competing rights” (interviewee 2). Women’s rights organizations often see religious traditions and cultures as oppressive and restricting, whereas religious groups can see women’s rights as hostile to their fundamental beliefs (interviewees 2 and 3). Significantly, when the two groups regard these human rights as different, the women who face this intersectional targeting “fall through a gap” of protection (interviewee 2).

One proposed solution was to help faith leaders to understand the importance of protecting women through a clearer understanding of their role in the community. Additionally, it is important for women's organizations to recognize this area of vulnerability and include it in lobbying efforts around social protection and giving women "equal voices under the law" (interviewee 2). This is particularly important within the UN, as FoRB voices are "very weak" (interviewee 3) with regard to protecting these women. Nevertheless, while a gap remains for these women, the UN is conceivably "positioned to start" including religion, given the existing frameworks of intersectionality in the UN (interviewee 3).

5.3 Limitations of the UN

The interviewees recognized that the UN has limited power to achieve protection for women who suffer religious persecution. The assumption of the UN's "relevance" (interviewee 5) in this area was challenged. Interviewee 5 remarked on the detachment of the UN, which is prone to "create categories higher up" which "don't make sense on the ground". Furthermore, the need for the cooperation of member states highlights the UN's limited power (interviewees 3, 4, 5 and 6). This is because policies are implemented by the countries that sign the declarations, not by the UN itself.

Because of the UN's limited power to ensure the implementation and enforcement of policies, the importance of civil-society, government, and grassroots cooperation (interviewees 2, 3 and 5, respectively) was highlighted as integral for achieving change. However, the UN remains a significant mechanism in providing accountability for governments (interviewee 3), funding operations (interviewee 5) and setting international norms (interviewee 6).

In sum, the interviewees largely agreed that there was an existing gap in UN policy regarding the intersectional vulnerability of women facing religious persecution. However, they also highlighted the limitations of the UN alone to address this gap.

6. Discussions of the UN's response

6.1 The UN policy gap

The quantitative findings demonstrated that the frequency with which UN Women declarations mentioned religion declined by 87% during the period from 1995 to 2015. Significantly, a comparison of Figures 1 and 2 shows that the increase in mentions of women in UN reports on FoRB was roughly inversely proportional to the decrease in the mentions of religion in UN Women documents. Therefore, it appears that the UN is inconsistent in how it addresses this intersection, and the reports of the Special Rapporteur for FoRB are not being transferred to other UN bodies. Interviewee 5 suggested that this could be because the "UN is very siloed in how it operates, and it finds it incredibly difficult to cross over." Nevertheless, the

decline in acknowledgement of religion as a vulnerability could lead to a protection gap. Notably, the influential SDG 5 and the “leave no one behind” initiative, intended to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls,” do not include the intersection of religion (UN Women 2015; Davis 2015; Winkler and Satterthwaite 2017; UN DESA 2018; Randel and German 2017). The findings from 5.1 concerning the recognition of religion in UN forums mirrors the literature, which claimed that religion is increasingly associated with infractions against the rights of women (Ghanea 2017; Chow 2016). The perception of religion and gender as ‘competing rights’ can result in these women falling through a protection gap (interviewee 2; Chow 2016; Fukuda-Parr 2019). Indeed, these women are not protected by the norms of FoRB, nor are they accounted for in policies on women’s equality (interviewees 2 and 3; Bielefeldt 2013).

The interviewees agreed that they were aware of no existing policies that explicitly recognized these women. They suggested other avenues, however, which could account for these women facing this intersection even in the absence of policies explicitly referring to them. The interpretation of policies is important, meaning that people implementing these policies on the ground need to understand this intersectional area (interviewees 1 and 6). However, without an acknowledgement outside of FoRB, it is unclear how these interpretations might come to include these women. Notably, the interviewees cited the Universal Periodic Review process as a potential platform in which governments are held accountable for improving their record on human rights (OHCHR 2019; interviewees 3 and 4).

Despite the inclusion of religion in FoRB reports, the more influential declarations relating to women’s protection do not consider this intersection. Both the lack of consistency in addressing the issue within the UN and the difficulty of implementation without member state cooperation call into question the presumption that the UN is the strongest mechanism by which to address the synergies concerning this intersection. The interviews emphasized the importance of grassroots, civil-society, and government support and participation in effecting change.

6.2 Limitations of the analyses

Before I turn to recommendations, I should mention some limitations of this research. The qualitative expert interviews allowed further elaboration of the findings and widened the scope of the recommendations considered (Bryman 2016). However, one limitation was that although they came from different professions, all the interviewees were women of faith with a particular interest in this area and who believed that a policy gap existed. More interviews, with a greater number of experts expressing a wider range of viewpoints on this subject, would have broadened the perspective. In addition, interviewing the Special Rapporteur for FoRB would have provided clearer

insight into the effects of the annual reports. The research did not consider other sources or case studies of countries where the intersection of gender-based and religious targeting is occurring, as the research focus was specifically on the UN. Finally, direct engagement with women facing this intersection of threats would provide important insights into whether and specifically how they consider themselves to be left behind.

6.3 Recommendations

The rapidly changing narrative on these issues is influencing the implications of the research results and recommendations for policy and practice, as governments continue to react to events and societal pressures. FoRB and gender are increasingly being placed on the global agenda; for instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark launched an expert consultation on FoRB, gender equality and the SDGs in March 2019, and the current UK government undertook a review of support for persecuted Christians, which led to creation of the UK FoRB Forum in 2020 (Mountstephen 2019). However, these advances are primarily thanks to the work of civil society and grassroots activists lobbying governments to increase their awareness of this vulnerable group. The UN could put greater pressure on its member states as it creates norms and frameworks for human rights. In particular, the UN Universal Periodic Reviews could include women facing religious persecution amongst the criteria on which governments report their human rights performance. This could be an effective way for the UN to challenge countries on matters of gender equality and protection from religious persecution (interviewee 4).

In addition, the UN Commission on the Status of Women may offer significant opportunities for attention to the issue, most notably the high-level reviews of the Beijing Declaration after 25 years and of the SDGs after five years. This research suggests that the intersectional identities of religious women facing discrimination should be included in the amendment of SDG 5, via the claim that these women are being left behind. The findings also suggest that UN entities should acknowledge their own inconsistencies, address silos and inform government policy-makers so that they can address the protection gap. In the absence of adequate top-down pressure from the UN to protect these women, it is imperative for civil society to work together with member state government delegations to ensure that these women are highlighted as a vulnerable group.

7. Conclusion

Despite not being listed as a vulnerability factor, the intersection of women and religious persecution has been highlighted as a concern by the UN FoRB Special Rapporteur (Bielefeldt 2013). Furthermore, the current UN Secretary General has

stated the importance of understanding the “patterns of violations against ethnic and religious” minority women in Myanmar (UN 2018). Therefore, the problem appears to be a lack of coordination and consistency across UN bodies in how this intersection is regarded, rather than a lack of awareness.

Intersectionality is a critical theory to reveal the ‘negative space’ whereby the overlap of gender discrimination and religious persecution has heightened the vulnerability of some women (Davis 2015:209). The quantitative content analysis of UN documents in this research has exposed inconsistencies between FoRB and UN Women regarding how they are responding to the intersectional vulnerabilities of gender and religious persecution. Reasons for these inconsistencies include the “compartmentalising” (interviewee 5) of the UN and the perceived “competing rights” (interviewee 2) of gender and religion. Nevertheless, the effects of these inconsistencies for the women who fall into this intersectional gap deserve further research, as religious persecution and restrictions to freedom of belief are a rising crisis around the world.

All UN member states have adopted the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are influential in the establishment of human rights norms. By adopting the 2030 Agenda, member states have committed themselves to leaving no one behind. The omission of religion from the SDGs as an intersectional vulnerability factor, particularly for women, is a significant oversight which should be corrected so that these women can be officially recognized by UN member states. In addition, the lack of effective policy on FoRB should be ameliorated by a greater emphasis on the protection for women who fall into this intersection, through other UN bodies or state policies. The UN Universal Periodic Reviews could be further explored as an avenue to hold governments accountable for protecting women who face this intersectional violence. Finally, the importance of the participation of other actors alongside the UN on this issue is an important finding of the research. These vulnerable women must be recognized at all levels – global, state and civil – so that we are adequately advocating for their protection and ensuring that they are not left behind.

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