Religious and secular approaches to issues of gender and women’s empowerment often seem to clash. While secular development actors sometimes propose gender and sexual rights as the litmus test for religious actors to prove their relevance in realizing development outcomes, religious development actors stay away from the more politicized discussions around gender and sexuality and focus on less (politically) sensitive issues such as health, education and humanitarian aid. This chapter explores how the polarization around religion and gender that plays out in contemporary international politics affects international development. It situates the contemporary polarization around gender and religion in the context of historical discourses around the development of modern societies. It then discusses the influences of the political polarization on international development, in particular in relation to gender (in)equality. The main argument of the chapter is that game changers in the context of polarization cannot be found by focusing on the loudest voices. Rather, the chapter explores the work of actors that are situated in the middle: religious feminists and religious development NGOs, in terms of how these actors navigate the polarization around religion and gender. It will conclude that rather than allowing the polarization in international politics to influence what happens at the grassroots, international development actors are uniquely equipped to depolarize by building networks and alliances in the middle that offer more inclusive language and approaches to promote gender equality and challenge gender-based violence.

Introduction

In 2004, I interviewed female leaders in governmental and non-governmental women’s organizations in Yemen as part of a graduate study on religion, gender and development. One of my interlocutors was the chair of the national women’s organization. She explained how she often felt caught between two dominant international discourses on gender and religion. In secular feminist circles, she had to demonstrate her feminism and reduce her Muslim faith identity. In Islamic contexts, she had to be careful not to come across as a feminist, but instead to affirm her faithfulness and piety as a Muslim. How this catch-22 situation can play out for religious
gender activists in the context of international development became even more obvious in an interview with the gender and development advisor of the Dutch embassy. Being aware of the modest dressing practices for women in Yemen and out of a desire to build rapport with the people whom I interviewed, I had consciously chosen to cover my hair and wear long dresses while in Yemen. The gender advisor questioned this choice, as she expressed her admiration for the courage of an intern from the Netherlands. Whilst in Yemen the intern continued wearing t-shirts that exposed her belly as she was used to doing back home. In our conversation, the gender advisor suggested that working on women's empowerment meant setting the right example. In her view, this was modelling what freedom for women really meant, the freedom to wear what you want to wear, regardless of the context and circumstances.

These examples speak to how international development is a field on which the contextual differences in how gender and religion intersect and are perceived become visible. Gender inequality and violence are terms that describe the very real and sometimes wicked forms of oppression and harm that women and girls experience. How these are problematized and proposed to be solved—and how religion is implied in these problematizations and solutions—may vary between particular actors. The differences in understanding and approach of gender inequality and gender-based violence do however confront the international development sector with challenges. The gender advisor admired the embodied opposition of the intern against the embodied gender normativity of women in Yemen. However, such oppositions—as can be observed in the case of the Yemeni women's leader—do not necessarily acknowledge religious women's own strategies to navigate gender norms and realize gender equality in their own cultural and religious contexts. While we may expect the gender advisor (being a diplomat and an experienced development professional) to be sensitive towards the local context, her approach indicates that the theme of gender calls out for more principled responses. Therefore, if we want to understand how women's lives and in particular their bodies continue to be the symbolic sites on which conflicts around gender are played out, we need to consider the religious/secular dynamics on the field.

This chapter engages with the dynamics between religion and secularism around gender in two ways. It aims to understand the dynamics of polarization in international politics as an empirical reality that is highly influential in international development. Rather than assuming religion to be central to the polarization, the chapter explores how polarization is fuelled by actors that assume religion and the secular to be fundamentally different and opposing. On a conceptual level, however, the chapter understands the secular and the religious not necessarily as different or conflicting, but as historically and conceptually entangled and mutually constituting categories. The very real conflicts and polarizations around religion and gender and its social life on the field of development cannot be explained by zooming in on religion, or on the secular for that matter. Instead, this chapter draws on polarization as an analytical lens that allows for exploring the dynamics in which the religious and the secular are perceived as opposed and conflicting.

**On polarization**

The analytical lens in this chapter is inspired by the work of philosopher Bart Brandsma on polarization (2017), which builds on the work of Rene Girard and two decades of work in conflict mediation in the Netherlands, Northern Ireland and Lebanon (amongst other contexts). Brandsma has developed a ‘framework for thinking on polarization’ that has traction with governmental and non-governmental actors. This framework is not an academic theory or model, and the intention of this chapter is not to put it to the test of academic critique. Rather,
it is drawn in as a framework to analyse the dynamic of polarization without using language that actually reconstructs or reinforces the polarized categories. This is important because of the role that language plays in the polarization. The negotiations over gender and the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women in the United Nations have also been referred to as a ‘battle over words’ (e.g. Pass Blue 2019). Looking at the contestations around abortion and the right of women to terminate a pregnancy, for example, two poles can be observed that accuse the other pole of promoting death, while claiming their own position as promoting life and well-being (Berro Pizzarossa 2018).

Polarization is a fact of life and often a useful political strategy. Different from an actual conflict between two or more parties, polarization exists in the words, perceptions and ideas that construct two identities as oppositional while suggesting these differences are based on facts (Brandsma 2017). Language as ‘pro-life’ and ‘pro-choice’ does not only capture the moral and political positions of that actor, but simultaneously contains a strong moral message about ‘us’ and ‘them’. Such language often works to fuel the polarization and evokes strong emotions and responses. While polarization itself is located in thinking, the effects of polarization are very real and visible. The polarization around abortion has created a deadlock for women’s rights in international politics, which in turn is highly influential in the field of development. The US administration, for example, decided to cut funds for sexual and reproductive health programming following President Trump’s signing of a bill (e.g. the Mexico City Policy) that prohibits funding for any services related to abortion. This in turn has invited new initiatives and arrangements that shape the field. The ‘She Decides’ fund that was initiated by the then minister of Foreign Trade and International Development in the Netherlands in 2017 is a case in point as it aims to repair the loss of funding for sexual and reproductive health and rights following the signing of the bill (e.g. She Decides 2020; New York Times 2017). These empirical changes shift and alter the polarization. It brings new actors, voices and ideas that influence the dynamics of polarization, by pushing the polarization and inviting people to choose sides or trying to solve it by building bridges between the poles. In addition, this dynamic also contributes to fuelling the polarization, and Brandsma (2017) therefore argues that depolarizing strategies should be focused on enlarging cohesion in the middle.

This chapter focuses on exploring how development actors resist polarization, are caught up by the dynamic and (willingly or unwillingly) contribute to fuelling it at times. It considers the international field of development as entangled with international politics and the two fields often mutually reinforcing each other, as illustrated in the example on abortion. However, I will also argue that they do not entirely concur, as the international development sector has a large silent majority consisting of a wide range of civil society actors that are not easily described as either religious or secular. This chapter will focus on two types of actors that are situated in the middle: religious feminists and religious NGOs. These actors are not necessarily distinctive from each other, as they may be connected and mutually influence each other. As these actors interweave religion and gender justice, they cannot be located on one of the poles and hence occupy a middle position. Religious feminists focus on feminist theological, scriptural or other (less text-based) forms of religious work, which is often combined with feminist social activism (Yanay-Ventura 2016; Woodheid 2001). This chapter refers to religious NGOs as NGOs that are in some ways religiously affiliated amongst other (secular) affiliations and ties, and focuses in particularly on larger and influential religious NGOs that have over the past decade developed and implemented gender programming (Fountain & Petersen 2018). Exploring their approach will offer some insight into what can be considered ‘game changers’ (Brandsma 2017) in polarization, and as such may suggest ways out of the deadlock in international politics. This chapter will therefore analyse how religious feminist and religious NGOs (propose to) navigate the
polarization around religion and gender, and in particular try to understand how they utilize depolarizing strategies.

The chapter builds on a review of academic literature, including theoretical, historical and empirical studies on religion, gender and international development, and is inspired by past and ongoing research projects by the author that focus on gender, Christianity, religious feminism, religious NGOs and international development. The chapter will start with situating the polarization around gender and religion in the context of the history of secular modernity. It will then explore how the polarization around religion and gender that plays out in contemporary international politics affects international development. The subsequent sections focus on two groups of actors that from a middle position work across religious–secular divides: religious feminists and religious development NGOs. Offering some concrete examples, the chapter reflects on challenges and potential pitfalls of religious feminist and religious NGO approaches in their efforts to realize gender equality as part of their religious missions. It will be argued that shifting our gaze from the poles to include what happens in the middle is important, because there we find practices that succeed in carefully navigating the dynamics of polarization while challenging gender inequality and gender-based violence.

Religion, gender and secular modernity

The polarization between religious and secular positions around gender and women’s rights can be understood by tracing its historical construction to modern Western Europe and its introduction across the globe through colonial regimes. Secularism is strongly associated with the project of liberating society from the rule of religious authority, while simultaneously relegating religion to the private sphere (Mahmood 2015). However, as eminent scholars of secularism such as Joan Scott have demonstrated, the gendered female body served as a symbol for this project of liberation from religion while women themselves were confined to the private sphere and subjected to rigid moral rules at the onset of modernity (Scott 2011, 2017). Scott argues, ‘gender difference was inscribed in a schematic description of the world as divided into separate spheres, the public and the private, the male and the female’ (Scott 2017: 31). The privatization of religion and the privatization of women are thus intimately intertwined. When the private sphere became the sphere of religion in modern society, it also became the sphere of the family and of domestic matters. Consequently, family and domestic matters became primarily associated with women and subject to religious discipline and morality. While women were more inclined to actively participate in religious institutions, church institutions often actively invested in masculinizing Christianity that led to complex constructions of gender and often sharp distinctions between women and men (Brusco 1995; Martin 2001). The point here is that the association of women with religion not only is a result of how religion has historically governed women’s lives, but also has to be understood in the broader context of how secularism has constructed religion and gender in particular ways in the emerging nation states in Western Europe.

In Western Europe, Christianity continued to develop in entanglement with secular modernity. This resulted in a Christian–secular civilization narrative that often served to legitimize conversion to Christianity as a conversion to modernity in the colonies (van der Veer 1996). The construction of secularism in relation to religion and gender was often done through the mirror images of ‘foreign’ religions. Islam and Hinduism in particular were portrayed as ‘barbaric’ traditions because these religions were associated with oppression of women and violent gender practices (Scott 2017). This served as a legitimization of colonial rule. In Egypt, the secular public–private divide introduced under colonial rule allowed the traditional family law that
reified a rigid interpretation of sharia laws to govern the private sphere (Mahmood 2015). In many Asian countries, resistance against colonial rule simultaneously produced religious reform movements and feminist movements. However, many of these feminists did not resist religion but rather the imperial domination and hierarchical power in their societies (Jayawardena 1994). With the introduction of a secular European model for nation state, traditional legal systems continued to govern ‘private matters’ which included the rights related to women, the family and sexuality. This is how colonial regimes prevented religious reform movements and feminist movements to unite against them (Jayawardena 1994).

The mirror images of secular modernity and religion as traditional, submissive and oppressive were inscribed in the organization of colonial states and in the dominant European discourses on these societies. It formed the historical background against which contemporary discourses on development and progress must be understood (Escobar 2012; Arce & Long 2000). International development has been challenged by scholars and practitioners across the globe for its secular bias, which assumes religion to be either irrelevant or dangerous (Deneulin & Bano 2009; Olivier 2016). When it comes to gender and women’s rights, religion tends to be seen as dangerous rather than irrelevant (e.g. Bartelink & Groeneweg 2019). Understanding gender in terms of its entanglements with religion and secularity allows for a critical engagement with secularism and its claims of equality and liberation, opening up a perspective on how it historically laid the foundations for women’s exclusion from the public sphere (Scott 2017). Discourses problematizing local religious traditions as harmful for women often did not align with the way feminists in these societies understood the nature of the problems that women faced, while such discourses are still influential in the understandings and approaches of gender inequality and gender-based violence in the context of international development today (Bartelink & Le Roux 2018; Longman & Bradley 2015).

Polarizing powers in international development

This section explores how and why international development actors are caught up in the polarization around religion and gender, starting with the 1970s feminist movement when feminists started to question the role of women in the context of international development. The so-called Women in Development discourse questions the invisibility of women’s labour in the economic development of societies in the Global South, focusing strongly on the real and potential contributions of women to the development of these societies. Inspired by feminist critique of the singular and hegemonic construction of women as passive victims (Mohanty 1988), the discourse on Gender and Development focused on empowerment and agency (Crewe & Harisson 1998). This discourse reflected an increased awareness of the social construction of the differences between women and men and how these power structures are constructed and perpetuated by institutions and procedures, including those of international development itself. Women were increasingly seen as active agents, who should have the primary voice in analysing their own problems and providing solutions and ways forward to gender equality.

The UN Conference of Women in Beijing in 1995 was an important conference in this process, because it succeeded in claiming women’s rights as human rights and stimulated wide international exchange around the issue of women’s rights (Abu-Lughod 2013). While the Beijing Conference is generally seen as the first in its kind to actively include the voices of women themselves—allowing feminist social and civil society movements to play a key, influential role—it also revealed the broader politics around gender in the context of international development. Beijing was criticized for privileging Western feminist voices and positions from two different positions. First of all, non-Western feminists and women’s movements did not
experience their voices being heard or represented by the feminists from Western Europe and North America who were advocating women’s rights at the UN (Spivak 1996; Olcott 2013). Their critique exposed feminism’s implicit assumption that gender is more determining for women’s positions and experiences than race, class or geographical location (Crewe & Harrison 1998; Abu-Lughod 2013). Feminists from the Global South criticized the assumption that Western feminists are able to speak on behalf of all women, pointing out the problematic lack of awareness of the contexts and positions in which these women are embedded. These sharp debates within feminism called for a more intersectional approach to women’s rights (Mahmood 2011). However, as will be argued in the following sections, an intersectional approach turns out to be difficult to implement in the international development sector, precisely because the dynamics and language of polarization is so influential in development discourse.

Another critique of the particularity of Western feminism came from a loose network of religio-political actors with the Vatican at its forefront which emerged in the 1990s. I refer to these actors as religio-political actors because they do not necessarily represent the diversity of understandings and approaches of the people within their particular religious communities and institutions. Furthermore, in international politics they operate as political actors, while being seen as religious because their strong gender ideologies are legitimized based on religious grounds. Historically, for example, the Roman Catholic Church is an important social welfare service provider. Local Catholic actors play crucial roles in offering maternal and child health care in the most resource-poor regions of the world (Clague 2014; Grotenhuis 2014). Influenced by the loss of influence on people’s moral choices following secularization in Western Europe and North America, the Catholic Church started to position itself more strongly and vocally in the politics around women’s rights and in particular on the issue of sexual and reproductive health and rights (Vaggione 2015). As a religious entity as well as a nation state, it has occupied a unique and influential position within the United Nations. While the Vatican did not reject the focus on women as part of the development agenda, it framed much of the feminist agenda as ‘radical feminism’ and a threat against the family (Bus & Herman 2003).

Another, yet different religio-political actor is the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), an organization that consists of 57 member states in the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Latin America, has developed its own human rights discourse based on Islamic principles (Cisma 2018). In its intervention during the Beijing conference, the OIC—like the Vatican—emphasized the role of women in the family (Houston 2012). The organization has objected to gender equality, women’s rights and sexual rights as part of the universal human rights agenda (Cisma 2018; Rehman & Polymenopoulou 2013). This is also reflected in how the OIC member states have approached gender, for example by putting restrictions on ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the UN in 1978 (Rehman & Polymenopoulou 2013).

Since the UN conferences on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 and Women in Beijing 1995, a discourse on women emphasizing their role in the family became stabilized and gained much broader support from a wide range of conservative faith-based actors (Bus & Herman 2003). In Latin America, for example, so-called pro-life or pro-family NGOs emerged, and along with Catholic and evangelical representative bodies, actively mobilized citizens against feminist, as well as sexual diversity, movements (Vaggione 2015). While similar NGOs can be found across the globe, in particular in contexts where the women’s rights agenda is primarily seen as a Western agenda, the influence of these NGOs in the international arena is limited (Tomalin 2015). A non-academic study of the religious lobby on sexual and reproductive health and rights at the UN, published by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Vik, Stensvold & Moe 2013), argues that US-based NGOs are most influential in navigating in the
UN system and lobby family values and against gender and sexual rights (Vik, Stensvold & Moe 2013). These NGOs use health and medical arguments in their political and legal strategies to advocate for family values (Vik, Stensvold & Moe 2013), which invites critique from human rights activists who see religious politics being disguised in secular language (Datta 2018).

Seen from a scholarly perspective, this example shows how the historical entanglements between Christianity and secularism play out in contemporary politics. It furthermore can be argued that these religious actors strive to de-privatize religion, while drawing on the language and approach that is accepted in a secular dominant public domain. In doing so, these actors actively critique and attempt to turn around the particular Western organization of society in which religion is confined to the private. This is exactly why their activism often focuses on de-privatizing those issues on which women have claimed their agency. In turn, the advocates of women’s human rights often strongly focus on pushing back religion into the private domain, allowing little space for acknowledging the agency of religious women (Mahmood 2011; Tomalin 2009). For both the feminist actors and the religio-political actors around gender and sexual rights, the personal is also political. The negotiations on women’s human rights in the field of international politics as described in this section have extensive influence on the field of international development and its engagement with gender and religion. However, different from what the dynamic of polarization suggests, there are also more nuanced positions and approaches that are relevant to consider. In the subsequent sections, two examples will be discussed: religious feminism and gender programming by religious NGOs.

Voices in the middle

The political contestations and polarization in the fields of international politics sketched earlier have limited the space for engagement with gender and religion in international development. As Karam et al. (2015) note, the real and assumed differences in understanding an approach between religious and human rights actors have given rise to often fierce debates. Polarization is successful if the middle is disappearing because people are compelled or forced to take sides. Strategies towards depolarizing, therefore, need to shift attention from the poles to constructively engage the middle (Brandsma 2017, 83). In this section I will analyse actors situated in the middle—religious feminists and religious NGOs—as their efforts as religious actors to challenge gender-based violence might offer insights into (de-)polarizing strategies and dynamics. As already outlined, I consider these actors as voices in the middle for how they work across religious/secular binaries, hence demonstrating the entanglements between religious and secular approaches of gender.

Feminist religious activism

Religious feminist actors have been increasingly acknowledged and influential in international development since the beginning of the millennium. When the devastating impact of HIV and AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa on women, in particular, became visible, Christian feminist theologians from the area found new platforms to address gender injustice and gender-based violence in their societies (van Klinken 2013; Njoroge 2013). While Christian churches played important roles in halting HIV and AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa (Patterson 2011; Trinitapoli & Weinreb 2012), they also reproduced the historical (colonial) patriarchal structures that deny women their agency (Uzodike 2008; Le Roux & Toit 2017). There often was ‘little recognition of the political, cultural, legal, and economic considerations that exacerbate gender inequalities’ that prevented women from accessing services (Karam et al. 2015, 23). Christian feminist
theologians challenge gender injustice through a biblical and theological lens, by offering inclusive readings and interpretations of scripture. These theologies inspired faith-based international campaigns such as the Tamar Campaign (West 2004) and the Thursdays in Black campaign (Tveit 2018; Gnanadason 2016) that are primarily focusing on church networks. From this, close collaborations between various religious and secular development actors emerged (Dube & Kanyoro 2004; Njoroge 2013).

In the Middle East and Asia, feminist religious activism has also emerged, yet mainly around women’s rights in Muslim-majority societies. Pioneering organizations such as Sisters in Islam in Malaysia, who promote women’s rights from an Islamic perspective, have been a major actor in the Muslim feminist movement since the 1990s (Basarudin 2016). These efforts to empower women in religious contexts necessarily include engagement with theological and legal discourses in Islam. The Muslim feminist movement has been supported by and engaging with scholars and religious reformist leaders, and as such there is a clear overlap between broader reformist movements and women’s movements in Islam (cf. Derichs 2010). This is particularly visible in the joint efforts to realize transformation on Muslim Family Law. In postcolonial nation states in the Middle East in particular, colonial interpretations of Muslim Family Law have become fossilized in the national legal framework, making it impossible for women to have any influence on marriage, polygamy and divorce, child custody, and inheritance (Derichs 2010; Scott 2017; Mahmood 2015).

Similar to the Christian feminist scholars already discussed, the resistance against suppression of women’s rights is explicitly inspired by positive understanding of Islamic and Quranic principles inspired by the feminist scholarship of scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas (Buïtelaar & Bernards 2013). The work of these feminist theologians has inspired the organizations and networks that challenge gender-based violence and inequality. The organization Musawah founded in 2009 in Kuala Lumpur is a case in point. Musawah focuses explicitly on equality in the Muslim family, uncovering Islam as a ‘source of justice, equality, fairness and dignity for all human beings’ (Musawah Frame for Action). Part of their work is focused on giving Muslim feminist access to these reformist theological and legal resources, supporting advocacy efforts in a wide range of countries and providing a platform for women and women’s movements to share their stories and experiences (www.musawah.org).

As the example on the Yemeni women’s union leader in the earlier vignette suggests, religious feminists are affected by and drawn into the dynamics of polarization around religion and gender. International development organizations from Europe and the US have supported Christian and Muslim feminist organizations. While it has shifted the focus from the poles to the centre, it has not always allowed for a more inclusive and diverse approach to gender. Religious feminists advocate for women’s rights in ways that resonate with the secular feminist movements of the Global North. While secular feminists may consider the work of religious feminists significant, it is often the case that this acknowledgment goes as far as religious feminisms fit with a secular feminist agenda (Deneulin & Bano 2009; Tomalin 2015). Moreover, religious feminists have been accused of aligning their agendas too much with secular, feminist agendas. Religious and political actors blame the religious feminists’ movements for buying into Western imperialist agendas and their hidden strategies to influence postcolonial societies and religions in the Global South (Derichs 2010). The dynamic of polarization is still fully at work in framing these forms of activism as secular. Locking religious feminist movements in an ‘us-versus-them’ narrative delegitimizes them either as progressive development actors or religious actors (Chatterjee 2018).

Furthermore, because of the focus on religious feminisms insofar as these align with secular feminisms, agentic practices of religious women remain invisible and largely ignored. For the
case of Buddhist nuns who fight for recognition as a monastic community, Tomalin argues, for example, that the religious motivations of women who are part of these movements cannot be understood within these secular frames even when their activism aligns with a secular feminist cause (2009). The anthropologist Saba Mahmood has argued that the pious ethics and practices of Islamist women in Cairo can be considered as agentic (2011). Mahmood’s critique is relevant for international development, as it throws up the question of whether and how women’s agency can be understood and acknowledged when it is not expressed in the ‘Western’ forms of agency and resistance. The Rajasthani women who cope with violence in their daily lives through their participation in women-only ritual spaces where they can escape patriarchal structures of their homes, written about by Bradley (2009), are a case in point. Another example of female religious agency can be found in the Pentecostal women in Southern Africa studied by Bochow (2012) and Kamp (2011). Becoming Pentecostal Christians, for these women, allows them to make autonomous decisions regarding whom to marry, even when this means that they subject themselves to a strict sexual morality.

These forms of agency are complex and appear paradoxical as they are not always visible in the type of choices and actions that fit a Euro-American understanding of feminism and women’s empowerment. Assumptions about the (lack of) agency of religious women in the Global South often remain influential, and the idea that women’s empowerment will include a moving away from religion remains dominant in both religious and secular understandings (Mahmood 2011; Abu-Lughod 2013; Tomalin 2015; Chaterjee 2018). However, considering how women may use their religions tactically might offer valuable and important insights into depolarizing strategies that women themselves use to become more empowered in patriarchal religious and secular contexts.

Voices in the middle: religious NGOs

Religious NGOs have become the most prominent representations of religion in the field of development, while being hugely diverse (Fountain & Petersen 2018). Although highly experienced in engaging with local religious communities, religious leaders and institutions around a broad range of development concerns, religious NGOs have often struggled to address gender and sexuality. NGOs working in communities with stronger gender ideologies have only recently started to work on gender, often because their work around HIV and AIDS called out their engagement on the topic. The religious networks and methodologies addressing stigma and discrimination in relation to HIV and AIDS that were initiated in Sub-Saharan Africa were expanded to include religious actors from different religious backgrounds in Asia, Latin America and Central Europe (Tomalin 2015; Bartelink 2016, 2020; Le Roux 2017). The Interfaith Network of Religious Leaders Infected or Affected by HIV and AIDS (INERELA+) is a case in point (Njoroge 2012), as is Channels of Hope, a programme adopted by World Vision International (Greyling 2016; Le Roux 2017). Building on their work to engage religious leaders in the response to HIV and AIDS, these religious NGOs started focusing on other so-called sensitive issues such as gender-based violence and maternal health (Le Roux & Bartelink 2017).

Despite these efforts, gender and sexuality often are experienced as challenging subjects to address, in particular for organizations that engage with more conservative religious groups (Le Roux 2017). Critique or resistance may emerge from the target communities, the staff and local partners or from the religious networks, funding bodies and institutions to which they are affiliated. The differences between more liberal and conservative members in religious networks ask for careful navigation by religious development actors who do address gender and sexuality. In
both local and international contexts, (religious) NGOs addressing gender have avoided being caught up in the dynamic of polarization.

Strategies employed may vary between different NGOs. They might choose to address gender issues in more sensitive and acceptable terms in local communities (Le Roux 2017). The Catholic NGO Cordaid is a case in point. Cordaid is a member of the Catholic Caritas and CIDSE networks that work closely together with the Vatican (Vik, Stensvold & Moe 2013), which is remarkable given its overt policy to improve sexual and reproductive health and rights. In order to avoid using language that fuels the polarization, Cordaid has focused on informed decision-making rather than on advocating women’s rights (Grotenhuis 2014). Working with Catholic health providers in the Global South on an individual’s right to have full information, referral systems were put in place to improve the access of women and men to reproductive health information and services even if these services could not be offered in the Catholic health facility (Kaybryn 2010). A focus on health has, more often, created a space for conversation, even between actors who have stronger gender ideologies.

Another example is Islamic Relief Worldwide, which developed its gender justice policy in consultation with Islamic scholars. The policy focuses on realizing ‘balanced relations between the genders’ and echoes a similar understanding of harmony in the family, allowing people to address problems with inequality and violence in a language and discourse that is authoritative for them (Islamic Relief Worldwide 2015, 11). A last example is World Vision’s Channels of Hope, which has focused on addressing gender inequality with local religious leaders from mainline Protestant, Pentecostal and Catholic backgrounds by addressing it through the lens of harmonious relations (Bartelink & Wilson 2020). A male and female religious leader in Kenya, interviewed by the author, explained that gender was seen as a Western, elitist term that would divide their families and communities when it was introduced in Kenya after the Beijing Conference in 1995. Initially sceptic, these religious leaders became motivated to challenge gender inequality and gender-based violence in their families and communities, because of the possibility of realizing a Biblical vision of harmonious relations that was much more convincing than a top-down introduced feminist discourse (e.g. Bartelink & Wilson 2020).

These examples indicate that addressing gender inequality and gender-based violence in a religiously and culturally sensitive matter may be a constructive depolarizing strategy deployed by religious NGOs. A focus on the middle instead of the poles means prioritizing building relationships and contributing to social cohesion (Brandsma 2017, 88). This does throw up some challenging questions. What does it mean for promoting gender equality when the most sensitive aspects of a programme are dropped (e.g. Le Roux & Toit 2017)? Adjusting and compromising in gender programming may also come with the cost of leaving the underlying structures of patriarchy and heteronormativity unaddressed (Bartelink & Le Roux 2018). Since religious NGOs (as well as secular NGOs for that matter) are also embedded in the dominant structures of patriarchy and heteronormativity, this might jeopardize their ability to contribute to structural transformation (Bartelink & Wilson 2020). Related to that is the observation that religious NGOs and religious feminists do not always go well together. As De Cordier has argued in a study on Pakistan, feminist interpretations of sacred scriptures have little legitimacy in local contexts, and NGOs may consciously avoid being associated with them (2010). While this may be a depolarizing strategy for religious NGOs, taking their distance from religious gender activism, it also means a possibility is lost for acknowledging those forms of leadership that interweave gender justice and religion.

This section has reflected on religious NGOs that as part of their development work address gender in their work with religious actors and communities with strong gender ideologies. These religious NGOs often do not engage with feminist theologies and religious activism and
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carefully navigate the dynamics of polarization around religion, gender and secularism. They sometimes choose to adjust their language and approach, seeking compromises to maintain relations with local religious actors. While understandable, it also jeopardizes constructive, respectful and inclusive relations between the various actors in the middle.

Concluding reflections

The dynamic of polarization around religion and gender is entangled with the historical, colonial constructions of secularism, modernity and progress. Against this background can be understood how and why religion and gender are seen as contested issues in global society, and on the international field of development in particular, without assuming that religion is to blame. While this historical awareness often leads to the desire to build bridges between religious conservative and secular liberal actors as a means of overcoming polarization, this is incredibly challenging. Bridge builders are easily caught up in one of the poles (Brandsma 2017), and in the context of a secular dominant discourse religious actors are often forced to align with either the religious or secular pole. However, as argued in this chapter, there is a middle ground that is likely to be overlooked. This middle allows more space for diverse views and approaches to challenge inequality and violence in religious and secular contexts, and has the most potential for changing the dynamic of polarization.

It is in the middle that interesting and relevant questions emerge that require further research and conversation. As demonstrated in this chapter, actors in the middle do have to carefully navigate their work around gender in local, national and international settings, to avoid being caught up in the dynamic of polarization. The various efforts of religious (feminist) actors to address gender inequality and violence in local communities are particularly inspiring. Religious feminists move beyond the multiple binaries that continue to be affirmed in the polarizing discourses, demonstrating through their praxis that realities are much more complex, hybrid and multifaceted. Rather than evaluating the work of these religious actors according to technocratic standards of the international development sector, it is important to consider how these actors (propose to) transform power relations (Chattarjee 2018). It is not only by means of their positioning, but also for the content of their work, that these actors are important. Their use of language and tone of voice may inspire other actors in their attempt to depolarize and focus on the middle.

International development actors—religious and secular—are strategically positioned, mediating between local grassroots actors and communities and international politics. In the context of a polarized international political domain, these organizations should acknowledge their potential and responsibility to create more hybrid and inclusive conversations on an international level. Rather than allowing the politics of polarization to determine what happens in the grassroots, these organizations should be supported to build alliances in the middle, facilitating and supporting those religious actors that work on gender transformation in their own religious and cultural communities.

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