

# Women, Religion, and Peacebuilding

Adina Bălan<sup>1</sup>

---

**ABSTRACT** • This article highlights the vital yet often overlooked role of women in peacebuilding, especially in religious contexts. Women play a key part in faith-based conflict resolution, as emphasized by Catholic social teaching and Pope Francis, who advocates for interreligious dialogue and recognizes women as crucial peace actors. Initiatives like Talitha Kum, which combats human trafficking, showcase the transformative impact of empowering women in their communities. By addressing systemic inequalities and fostering long-term resilience, faith-based peacebuilding promotes justice and social change. Supporting women's leadership in religious peace efforts is essential for sustainable peace and gender equality.

**KEYWORDS** • women, peacebuilding, Catholic social thought, Talitha Kum, interreligious dialogue, faith-based conflict resolution, gender equality, social justice, Pope Francis, human trafficking, sustainable peace, religious women, reconciliation, Laudato Si'

---

## Introduction

Women's contributions to peacebuilding are often underestimated, particularly in religious contexts, where women's roles have traditionally been limited to the domestic or support sphere. But there is evidence that women bring important insights and skills to peace efforts, particularly in resolving religious conflict<sup>2</sup>. Catholic social teaching and recent papal encyclicals such as

---

<sup>1</sup> PhD student, University of Bucharest, Doctoral School of Theology and Religious Studies • [adina.balan@s.unibuc.ro](mailto:adina.balan@s.unibuc.ro)

<sup>2</sup> See Moosa, Zohra, Maryam Rahmani, and Lee Webster. „From the Private to the Public Sphere: New Research on Women's Participation in Peace-Building.” *Gender and Development* 21, no. 3 (2013): 453–72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24697270> accesat la 10 martie 2023, Birgitte Sorensen, „Women and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Issues and Sources”, in *WSP Occasional Paper*, no. 3, June 1998, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development Programme for Strategic and International Security Studies.

Fratelli Tutti and Laudato Si' offer a framework that calls for an integrated approach to peacemaking. Pope Francis has specifically called for interfaith dialogue, recognizing women as important agents for reconciliation and justice<sup>3</sup>. Initiatives such as Talitha Kum, an international network of religious women working to combat human trafficking, show that women can have a transformative impact on peace processes when empowered within their communities<sup>4</sup>.

This essay examines the interplay between women, faith, and peace efforts, highlighting how women's specific contributions in religious spheres help cultivate lasting peace and strengthen communities over time, while also promoting equity and justice.

### ***The intersection of women, religion, and peacebuilding***

Catholic religious communities and Church organizations, are increasingly recognizing the critical role of women in promoting peace and addressing social injustices<sup>5</sup>. The moral imperatives set out in Catholic social thought, such as the dignity of the person, the common good, and calls for solidarity, underscore the need to include women in peace processes. These principles challenge traditional gender norms that have historically marginalized women and advocate for women as equal partners in the pursuit of peace. Women play a central role not only in restoring the social fabric of communities affected by violence, but also in advocating for systemic change.

---

<sup>3</sup> Statement of H.E. Archbishop Bernardito Auza Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace, and Security, New York, 25 October 2015, <https://holyseemission.org/contents/statements/580fc2c15a40b.php> accesat la 2.2.2023.

<sup>4</sup> Talitha Kum annual report for 2021 at <https://www.talithakum.info/en/report2021/> accesat la 2.2.2023.

<sup>5</sup> See David R. Smock, *Religious Contributions to Peacemaking. When Religion Brings Peace, Not War*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, 2006, and Donna Ramsey Marshal, *Women in War and Peace Grass roots Peacebuilding*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, 2000.

Catholic social teaching calls for an inclusive approach to peacebuilding that is consistent with broader global frameworks, such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which advocates for women's involvement at every stage of peacebuilding efforts<sup>6</sup>. However, the Catholic perspective adds a spiritual dimension, as it views peacemaking as a sacred duty and the participation of women as an integral part of fulfilling that mission. By emphasizing reconciliation, compassion, and justice, Catholic social teaching provides a moral foundation that aligns with secular peace initiatives, while also highlighting the unique contributions of religious women as leaders in both grassroots and international contexts.

### ***The Role of Catholic Social Teaching in Promoting Women's Leadership***

Catholic social teaching champions the dignity of every human being, a principle that is particularly relevant to the empowerment of women in peace efforts. Encyclicals such as *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Laudato Si'*, and *Fratelli Tutti* by Pope Francis advocate for a shift towards inclusivity, with Pope Francis urging the Church to value women's perspectives in addressing social injustices. He asserts that women's unique insights, shaped by their experiences and roles in society, are indispensable for building a world founded on mutual respect and compassion by fulfilling her special role in bringing harmony to creation<sup>7</sup>.

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis discusses ecological degradation and focuses on women's roles as caretakers of creation, linking environmental stewardship to social justice and human rights<sup>8</sup>. This view positions women at the

---

<sup>6</sup> Resolution 1325 (2000) Adopted by the Security Council at its 4213th meeting, on 31 October 2000, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n00/720/18/pdf/n0072018.pdf> accessed at 10.03.2023.

<sup>7</sup> Francis, Homily, Casa Santa Marta, Vatican City, February 9, 2017, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2017/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie\\_20170209\\_woman-is-the-world-s-harmony.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2017/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20170209_woman-is-the-world-s-harmony.html) accessed at 10.03.2023.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html) accessed at 10.03.2023.

center of peacebuilding, especially in areas affected by armed conflict where competition for scarce resources is equal to and sometimes even more destructive than other forms of violence. Linking peace with ecological sustainability, the encyclical stresses the centrality of women in resolving problems like climate justice.

At the same time, the encyclical highlights the essential role of solidarity with the poor in fostering the common good (LS 158) and it calls for political and economic dialogue to prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable (LS 49) underlying the deep interconnection between all of creation, care for the marginalized, community harmony, and inner peace (LS 10). While poverty impacts both men and women, gender inequality presents unique challenges for women, often restricting their access to resources, healthcare, and education, and increasing their vulnerability to exploitation.

The text confirms Church teaching on private property (LS 93) and affirms that it is for the meeting of all. Since many women still do not have property rights, the demand is also for equal dignity. Women are also harder hit by water scarcity and pollution since they tend to be the most affected individuals in terms of collecting drinking water, which is mainly contaminated and difficult to access. Mindful of the various dimensions and experiences of the impact poverty and environmental degradation have on women, men, girls and boys; Pope Francis speaks to the need for a cultural revolution (LS 114) to overcome such discriminatory practices.

Similarly, in *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis promotes a vision of universal fraternity that encompasses gender equality as a foundation for sustainable peace. He says that societal progress relies on dismantling barriers to women's participation, recognizing their inherent dignity and their vital role in transforming communities, articulating a moral vision that aligns with contemporary peacebuilding frameworks, underscoring that lasting peace cannot be achieved without women's active involvement in social and political arenas.

### ***Case Studies of Women in Religious Peacebuilding***

Women's engagement in peacebuilding within religious contexts has yielded transformative results in communities worldwide. The Talitha Kum network of catholic religious sisters exemplifies how women-led, faith-based organizations address complex social issues by combining spiritual guidance with actionable strategies. Founded by religious sisters, Talitha Kum operates in nearly 97 countries to combat human trafficking, particularly targeting vulnerable populations like women and children. Through prevention, advocacy, and rehabilitation services for victims of human trafficking, Talitha Kum embodies the principles of Catholic social teaching by offering a compassionate response to exploitation. The network focuses on the consequences of armed conflicts for human rights, stressing the importance of enhanced cooperation between humanitarian groups and civil society to provide more effective assistance to trafficking victims. Women and children are especially at risk, frequently falling victim to forced recruitment, sexual exploitation, forced labor, and being used as child soldiers. Trafficking also affects refugees escaping war, who endure extortion, unlawful imprisonment, and exploitation. These contemporary forms of slavery are deeply linked to gender inequality and poverty, which create conditions conducive to criminal activities<sup>9</sup>.

A particular form of networking can be seen in the Middle East, where religious tensions and sectarian violence have disrupted social cohesion, Talitha Kum's interfaith collaboration with Christian, Muslim, and Druze women highlights the power of shared values in addressing community needs. Established in 2019, *Yanabia' El'amal or Wells of Hope* is the Talitha Kum network operating in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Egypt. It brings together Christian and Muslim women to combat human trafficking and exploitation, focusing on the most vulnerable groups—women and children. The initiative

---

<sup>9</sup> In 2022 Talitha Kum networks in Europe (Ukraine), Africa (Burkina Faso, Mali, DRC) and Asia (Myanmar and Sri Lanka) report how conflict zones exacerbate people's vulnerability to human trafficking, as they create fragile conditions and situations that cause people to be at risk-groups of human exploitation. [https://www.talithakum.info/files/documentdownload/2023/report2022\\_en\\_new.pdf](https://www.talithakum.info/files/documentdownload/2023/report2022_en_new.pdf) accessed at 01.05.2023.

seeks to build capacity, strengthen networks, and promote women's faith and leadership at local, regional, and international levels. By working with women across religious lines, Talitha Kum fosters mutual understanding and cooperation, underlying that faith can serve as a bridge rather than a barrier. These efforts not only provide immediate relief to trafficking survivors but also promote a culture of inclusivity that helps heal divided communities<sup>10</sup>.

Objectives of the network are:

- Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing: To unite women in sharing strategies for preventing trafficking and supporting survivors.
- Network Development: To identify partners, resource persons, and safe spaces for implementing the project and planning a unified agenda against trafficking.
- Dialogue and Action: To foster trust and create a platform for dialogue, reflection, and collaborative action among Christian and Muslim women, emphasizing human dignity and the prevention of exploitation.

In 2020 the network launched the *Wells of Hope* movie<sup>11</sup> which tells the harrowing journey of Shaima, a young Syrian girl forced to flee her homeland as war ravaged her community. Seeking refuge, she was instead trapped in the dark world of human trafficking for organs. Her story is one of immense suffering, but it also reveals the strength and resilience of those determined to reclaim their lives. Shaima's plight is emblematic of countless other victims who are exploited in the shadows of conflict, particularly women and children whose vulnerability makes them prime targets for traffickers.

---

<sup>10</sup> Such an example is Sister Alicia Vacas Moro, combonian missionary a registered nurse and 2021 International Women of Courage Award recipient, who has dedicated her life to aiding vulnerable communities. She ran a medical clinic in Egypt, serving 150 low-income patients daily, and later worked in Bethany, supporting Bedouin women and children with training programs and kindergartens. Amid the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, she has assisted refugees in the Middle East. <https://www.state.gov/2021-international-women-of-courage-award-recipients-announced/> accessed at 10.01.2023.

<sup>11</sup> <https://liabeltrami.it/2020/09/20/arab-women-against-trafficking-the-symbolism-in-wells-of-hope/?lang=en> accessed at 10.01.2023.

Often rooted in their own culture, these women cross-cultural and religious boundaries to fight against trafficking and oppression. They support survivors, providing education, leadership training and economic opportunities, empowering women to rebuild their lives and reclaim their rights.

In addition, this documentary shows the important role of women in peacebuilding. They act as mediators and advocates, building trust and dialogue in war-torn communities. By addressing systemic problems such as poverty and gender discrimination, they seek to create an environment in which discrimination is ineffective. Their work represents a powerful fusion of tradition and progress, showing how cultural values can be used to promote justice and peace. Other prominent examples include the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) in West Africa<sup>12</sup>, where women have pioneered peace initiatives by addressing root causes of violence, such as poverty and political disenfranchisement. Similarly, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition emerged as a cross-community political group advocating for peace during the Troubles, bringing together women from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds to champion social justice and reconciliation. These women-led initiatives underscore the capacity of faith-inspired movements to transcend political and sectarian divides, revealing how women's participation in peace processes can address deeply entrenched issues.

Women in faith communities bring a unique perspective to building peace through their work as mediators of communication, compassion, and social responsibility. Religious organizations often allow women to take on leadership roles in community relations and crisis intervention, enabling them to address issues affecting marginalized groups. For example, Talitha Kum's approach is a method of awareness in which members assess the unique needs of each community and develop empathy and solidarity that strengthen community ties. This inclusive leadership model is consistent with the principles of Catholic social teaching, which emphasizes the contribution of each person to the common good. Therefore, women's participation in religious peace-

---

<sup>12</sup> <https://wanep.org/wanep/about-us/> accessed at 10.01.2023.

building is not just about meeting social needs; but also about reshaping communities to be more active, inclusive and responsible. As religious leaders, women build trust within communities, facilitate open dialogue and facilitate reconciliation between groups divided by past conflicts, or politics. Their compassionate leadership challenges traditional narratives and celebrates a holistic approach to peace, emphasizing emotional healing and structural change.

### ***Catholic Social Teaching and the Roots of Peace***

The principles of Catholic social teaching, especially those related to human dignity and unity, are the basis of the Church's involvement in peace efforts. These teachings suggest that peace must be committed to justice, addressing systemic inequalities and providing support for marginalized groups. Through encyclicals such as *Pacem in Terris*<sup>13</sup> and *Gaudium et Spes*<sup>14</sup>, the Church has consistently advocated for a vision of peace that goes beyond

---

<sup>13</sup> *Pacem in Terris* underscores that true peace can only arise from an order rooted in truth, justice, charity, and freedom. However, today's geopolitical landscape is defined by two competing visions of global order. On one side is the concept of a global rules-based order, criticized by its detractors as a veiled form of dominance or "racism." These opposing blocs engage in mutual political, economic, and military antagonism, which undermines the foundation for what the Church terms Just Peace. The encyclical, authored with a pastoral and historically reflective lens, proposes a rational and humane framework for the common good. Rather than viewing global crises—such as in Ukraine, Myanmar, or among displaced refugees—as isolated incidents, *Pacem in Terris* calls for deeper discernment of their collective significance. Critics may label this vision as idealistic, but it raises a crucial question: who is more naïve? Those who work proactively to address the root causes of conflict and promote peace, or those who rely on the destructive cycle of war as a flawed path to peace?

<sup>14</sup> The Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) turns to "the person of man who is to be saved" (GS 3), referring to man as the center and summit of creation, everything that exists on earth (cf. GS 12). What is he to say to this man who is part of a "human society that needs to be rebuilt" (GS 3) and is anxiously seeking answers to his most fundamental questions? What is the meaning of pain, of evil, of death, which, despite all progress, never ceases to exist? What good are these victories so dearly paid for? What can man bring to society? What can he expect from him? What will come after this earthly life? (cf. GS 9).



merely the absence of conflict, emphasizing the importance of justice and social harmony as essential elements.

Talitha Kum's work exemplifies how Catholic social teaching translates into concrete actions that support vulnerable populations. By addressing human trafficking and advocating for victims' rights, Talitha Kum fosters a sense of solidarity and community responsibility. This network's approach reflects Pope Francis's call for a culture of encounter, where individuals and communities are encouraged to engage with and support one another across cultural and religious divides. Talitha Kum's interfaith collaborations highlight how Catholic social teaching promotes peacebuilding by recognizing the inherent dignity of every person and valuing diverse voices in the quest for social justice.

Here is the story of Leyla, one of the women helped by the Talitha Kum network.

I am Leyla. I am a busy mother of three children aged ten to fourteen. My husband is a bus driver and I am a healthcare assistant. Our lives are busy and, thank God, very happy. We have a nice three-bedroomed house and a reliable car. We are bringing up our children to know and love God and to be good neighbours and friends to everyone, no matter what their background. My husband and I met here in Ireland but we were both born in Nigeria. We met at our local church here in Ireland. We are active members of the community. We have no secrets from each other. You could say that my life is idyllic, and in many ways it is.

Your interest today is in one aspect of my life and, because you are a tried and trusted friend, I will revisit that part of my life with you:

I was duped into coming to Ireland by someone promising me a good education. I was halfway through my Degree course when a man approached me saying Universities in Ireland were much better and more reliable, no strikes and no corruption or bribery. Sadly, the reality is that I was trafficked for sexual exploitation. I was held captive for six months during which time I was raped over and over again, beaten and abused in many other ways. I was freed when the man who was guarding me got drunk and left the keys on the table. I ran and eventually got to Irish Police, the Gardaí.

There followed many months of recovery, counselling, health care, rest and medical assistance. After a long process, I was given permission to stay in Ireland. I am here ever since.

I am Leyla, a busy, efficient mother of three children, wife of a good man, who lives in a nice house, drives a nice car and works as a Health Care Assistant, attending classes which will help me to improve my qualifications. I am competent and confident.

I am also the woman whose body remembers. When a doctor examines me, when I lie back in the dentist's chair, even when I take a shower, I am back there in the brothel and I shake with fear and shame. My body is no longer my own. Loving touches from my husband and children are healing me and reassuring me.

I am talking to you today because you say you want to hear a survivor's story. I have survived but am in many ways scarred. I have lost a lot to my experience of being trafficked. I have gained one precious gift. I can easily identify a trafficked woman who comes across my path. Just a short time in her company will tell me she has been trafficked and exploited and I can help her on her journey.

I am Leyla, a woman who has been brought through the darkness of captivity and abuse to be the helper and friend of my sisters who fall into the clutches of traffickers.

Although women's roles in peacebuilding are increasingly being recognized, challenges remain. Social and cultural barriers limit women's role in churches, while patriarchal norms limit their access to leadership positions. Despite these challenges, women have made significant progress in influencing peacebuilding processes, particularly through grassroots initiatives and community organizing. Faith-based organizations like Talitha Kum show that when women are empowered to lead, they can offer transformative solutions to social issues that affect their communities, such as human trafficking, poverty, and violence. The success of peacebuilding efforts led by women requires support from religious organizations and government agencies. By investing in women's education and leadership training, faith-based institutions can amplify women's voices and increase their influence in peace initiatives. In addition, religious groups can play a role in building inclusiveness by promoting women to positions of influence, which will help break the stereotypes that have traditionally placed women in secondary roles in peacebuilding.

## ***Conclusion***

The relationship between women, faith and peacebuilding is essential to building lasting peace and addressing the causes of conflict. Catholic social teachings, with their emphasis on human rights, social justice and the common good, provide a moral foundation to support the active participation of women in peace efforts. Projects like Talitha Kum's show how religious women can drive social change by addressing urgent needs and addressing

systemic inefficiencies, and demonstrate the transformative power of peace-building, based on faith. As the global community grapples with complex issues such as human trafficking, gang violence, and climate change, it is important to recognize and support the contributions of women in religious subjects. Their leadership not only enriches peace-making efforts but also provides an example of charity based on moral and spiritual values. Ultimately, empowering women to build religious peace is not just a step towards gender equality; This is a necessary method for achieving a unified and sustainable peace as suggested by Catholic social teachings and reflected in the work of networks such as Talitha Kum.