

Conference at the World Bank, Panel discussion July 9, 2015. Ruth Messinger, AJWS:

I hope to add to the provocativeness of what you've heard from my fellow panelists.

Let me say a word about my organization, and what is in its mission description. We are an organization motivated by Jewish values that works to realize human rights and end poverty for marginalized people in the developing world. I want the words "human rights", which have been mentioned by only one or two people, to be more central in the rest of this discussion and in our ongoing work together, than has been the case.

We heard yesterday about the central theme and the push from Dr. Kim: the preferential option for the poor. Folks, that means somebody else gets less preferred and thus there is an issue of conflict built into our work.

When we talk about religious freedom, we need to be sure that it's not just an afterthought, but that it is central to our operations. But we also need to be aware that it is religious freedom not only for ourselves, and our religious groups, operating on our values and our principles, but religious freedom for everybody with whom we work. And this will create some conflicts.

You heard about the faith conflict in Burma/Myanmar affecting the Rohingya, but there are a thousand other examples of conflict, some of them connected to religion. I very much appreciated what Sid [Chatterjee] said about how religions have seen and treated women and how that affects gender-based violence and the huge issue of early child and forced marriage. As Susan [Hayward] observed, many of us are discovering in places where we work that the role of women as peacekeepers is very effective in moving beyond intense conflict. I think particularly right now on that issue of the women in Casamance in southern Senegal, who are making peace after a 30 year civil war. But that has happened only because someone finally decided to invest in them and their role as peacekeepers.

So faith issues come together with issues of nationalism. I hope some of us will focus on the issues for the Dominican Republic and Haiti, looking for ways to move forward on the question of citizenship.

As far as I can remember, one group that has not been mentioned from the podium here in the last day or two, and that is the LGBT community. We in the United States just won an extraordinary victory for people's rights to be themselves, for the notion that each person is actually made in the image of God, and it should be broadly celebrated, including by religious leaders. I want to highlight those who have done so even where their own religion does not support homosexuality or homosexual behavior, but who recognize this as a decision for people's freedom.

We are an international group, and same-sex relationships are punishable by imprisonment in 78 countries in the world and by death in eight. So the world is not a free place for a whole lot of people whose future and whose preferential options we claim to care about.

As actors in the world, we need to create preferential options for the poor, trying to enhance people's human rights, trying to treat each person with whom we engage regardless of her or his nationality, or faith, or gender, or sexual orientation, as another, as one of us, as another person with whom we must find common cause. If we are really about doing that, then we are going to find ourselves having to confront daily these issues of difference. We are going to find ourselves being constantly tested to really listen to the other, to really look at who we do or don't partner with when we go in to give aid. To really find people who are living and operating at the

grassroots who are making extraordinary advances toward their own visions of justice and towards their own claims to human rights. Some of those encounters are going to be unsettling to us because of our religious training, or because of our national framework, or because of our personal orientation. If we are serious about making a difference in the world and advancing the multiple causes of freedom, then we need to be guided by the fact that if no one where we work appears to disagree with us in any regard, then we are probably not doing enough to make a difference.