



**Development
Studies
Network**

Development Bulletin

No. 64 March 2004

Gender and Development

◆ Features

- *Assessing the success of gender mainstreaming policy*
- *Mainstreaming in practice – bridging policy and practice*
- *Gender and economics in mainstreaming policy*
- *Role of NGOs in mainstreaming gender*
- *Mainstreaming in the field – Kenya, Fiji, Vanuatu, China, PNG*
- *Gender mainstreaming in governance projects*
- *Successful mainstreaming – practical guides and analyses for practitioners*
- *Men, gender and development*

◆ Publications

◆ Resources

◆ Editor: Pamela Thomas

Gender, faith and development: Rethinking the boundaries of intersectionality

*Robyn Kennedy and Kirsty Nowlan, World Vision Australia**

Introduction

The aim of this article is to contribute to conversations on the issue of intersectionality by investigating the contribution that the identity marker of faith makes to the practice and discourse of development. Our approach is to examine the experience of Australian non-government organisations (NGOs) working in international aid and development. However, we believe the views we express to be equally relevant to local and national NGOs whose focus is community development.

It is important to establish at the outset that we do not seek to offer any definitive descriptive or normative conclusions about the role of faith in development or its relationship to other identity markers. Rather, we have been prompted to offer this tentative contribution by what we regard as the omission of faith from contemporary conversations around intersectionality in the context of development. Other forms of identity, for example gender, race and/or ethnicity and class are acknowledged and ever present in the scholarship on intersectionality. We believe it is important to place some of the issues surrounding faith 'on the table', in order to provoke further reflection and deepen the debate and understanding around these issues.

Faith and secularism in development practice

Discussions around the place of faith in development tend to begin by noting the enormous scope of religious diversity within developing communities. In Asia alone (the focus of much of Australia's development assistance), Christians are a minority of 8 per cent with Hindus making up 24 per cent, Buddhists 21 per cent and Muslims 18 per cent of the Asian population (West 2003). Many of these religions are alien to the experience of most Australians. Even within the Asian Christian minority, the religious variation continues with Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants and Charismatic Christians all represented to varying degrees. While any discussion of faith and development must consider the religious context of developing communities and take account of the need for development practitioners to expand their knowledge of the beliefs and value structures of other faiths,

we contend that there is another vital issue that requires consideration. That is, we believe that it is also crucial to focus attention on the role of faith within contemporary Western societies, and moreover to challenge the assumption that development professionals and agencies need only consider the impact of faith as it pertains to those with whom we work in 'the field'.

The historic and contemporary articulation of Western identity as increasingly secular, and the professionalisation of the development industry creates the backdrop against which individuals, NGOs, governments and multilaterals, are able to claim spiritual and religious neutrality in the policy and practice of community development initiatives. To be secular is to be neutral and universal, whereas to claim membership of a faith community is to be marked and particular. This particularity is augmented by the notion that faith is either a default position or a choice; For example, I am Catholic because that is the way I was brought up, or, I converted to (chose) Buddhism. The subject is therefore positioned as one step removed from faith, in a way that is not the case with gender or race, where the popular assumption is that the identity is 'given'.

By refusing the choice of the particularity of faith, secularism seems to suggest a self stripped of the layers of given or chosen identity. Defined by reference to its 'other', secularism is positioned within the binary logic of Western identity as a category (similar to whiteness or masculinity) that resists examination. We can investigate the values of particular religions, but where is the canon of the secular, what values attend the 'choice' to believe in no specific religious dogma (or to relegate that belief to the weekend or the census form)? Spiritual and religious values of countries and individuals are separated from our engagement with those countries and individuals. Such engagement is ostensibly without consequence to the neutral and secularised people of the West.

On those occasions when faith is accepted as a legitimate issue for investigation, it is often in the context of the existence and spread of religious fundamentalism. While not seeking to deny the significance of this issue for the practice of development and emergency relief, the problem with this approach is that it suggests that faith is relevant only in the margins, where it can be clearly identified as the explicit and dominant organising

force within communities. Such an approach continues to ignore the relevance of the faith of development practitioners, which, even when it is exposed, is necessarily inscribed as 'reasonable' when compared to the belief systems of fundamentalism. Finally, it contributes to the easy assumption that the margins are to be found in the developing world.

Secularism and faith-based organisations

Within the international NGO community there are a limited number of agencies, such as Samaritan's Purse and Serve International, which are transparent in their desire to be seen as champions of religious fervor. In the main, however, development agencies seek to remove themselves from too close an association between their faith and their practice under the (mis)apprehension that they do not bring values of faith and spirituality to their work and can retreat to the relative high ground of spiritual and religious neutrality. This position is mandated within government legislation and further compelled by the industry's code of conduct. However, the ACFOA code (at 2.1) requires that organisations 'accord due respect to the dignity, values, history, religion, and culture of the people with whom [they] work' consistent with principles of basic human rights. The question provoked by this article is whether we can accord respect by ignoring religion/faith? Or, to put it somewhat differently, can we respect the religion/faith of others if we do not acknowledge our own?

There are some agencies, for example, the Red Cross, that have guiding principles which espouse neutrality as intrinsic to their philosophy. Others, such as the Salvation Army, Islamic Relief and World Vision Australia, belong to the group identified under the banner of faith-based organisations (FBOs). The easy application of the title FBO belies the complexity of the category. What does it mean to be or belong to an FBO? How does that impact on development practice? Unsurprisingly, FBOs are not an homogenous group. Their values and belief systems are themselves a reflection of the spectrum of faiths and traditions within the community. To describe an organisation as Christian is at once descriptive and meaningless; I may understand what the organisation is not (not Islamic, Jewish or Buddhist), but even a cursory knowledge of Christian identity reveals that there are an almost infinite number of ways to 'be Christian'. Conservative Christians may have more in common with conservative Jews than with their liberal cousins. Nor does the label suggest how development practice may be affected by a commitment to a particular faith.

Within FBOs there are differing degrees of self-awareness. It is easy to assume a common language without ensuring common understanding. Christianity may mean a commitment

to Biblical values, but how are those values to be interpreted: literally, as a social text, as a guide to life, or as a vague reference point for the sermon on Sunday? There is little doubt that within FBOs, faith becomes a more prominent identity marker than it would otherwise be in a professional context. But what does that do to the dynamics of intersectionality? How do we understand ourselves as Christian women, in the context of a church history that has privileged the identities and capabilities of men? This is further complicated by the perceptions of others within the sector. Some stakeholders regard Christians and by extension agencies that claim a Christian identity as tainted with the politics and history of the Church. As a historical vehicle of women's oppression, Christian agencies may be viewed with some suspicion by those who focus on women's empowerment. How then, do we reconcile, or at least begin to unpack, the complex bonds of identity and the contradictions of belief and practice?

Issues in development practice

It is our contention that the refusal to interrogate the role of faith within our own social context is at best misguided and at its worst almost certainly counterproductive. It has the potential to have a profound impact on the quality and integrity of development practice. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the impact of faith on development practice in any great detail, we would like to propose three sites at which the current lack of recognition is a potential hindrance: the aspiration to holistic practice, peace-building initiatives, and emergency relief and disaster mitigation.

Australian NGOs work with diverse communities in a way that purports to be holistic, with consideration of the intersecting attributes of race, ethnicity, ability, and gender. This commitment to intercultural practice often ignores the fact that development is also (almost) inevitably an interfaith encounter. Issues of faith and religion are dominant in every tradition and culture. The lack of acknowledgement of faith as a key influence on both NGOs (and their employees) and the communities with whom we work ignores the fundamental ways in which faith structures identity by providing a framework for understanding self and the relationship between self and others and by establishing systems of values and meaning. Is it possible to claim a commitment to holistic practice without acknowledging and including any consideration of religious or faith orientation of those with whom we seek to work? Often the hard realities of poverty are ascribed meaning by systems of spirituality and religion which then inform people's view of the world. Perhaps more crucially, can agencies and individuals that propose a holistic practice shirk responsibility for acknowledging their own religious, faith

and spiritual perspective and influences (be they current practices and beliefs or the remnants of religious understandings and practices of the past)?

Faith is also of critical importance to development organisations that seek to promote peace building. It may seem somewhat trite to note that violence and violations of human rights are regularly carried out in the name of faith. Without inter-faith dialogue and a careful and respectful attempt to understand different religious beliefs, the sustainability of development initiatives focused on peace building will be necessarily compromised. Successful engagement requires an understanding of both the context and values of those whom NGOs seek to support and empower, as well as the values of development exponents. Our own identity and values are critical and must be understood in order that we have a basis from which to acknowledge, understand and work with others.

Continuing focus by NGOs on issues of emergency relief and disaster preparedness and mitigation is critical in mitigating the likelihood and impact of disasters, both natural and man-made in poor and developing communities. Agencies with a specific focus on these issues of relief and emergency response must understand the contexts of religion and faith so that their response will not be solely focused on the material emergency response, but will be holistic and informed by an understanding of the broad faith, spiritual and religious dimensions of affected communities. Many communities, as is their right, see emergency situations and natural disasters as sent by a supreme deity. Unless aid professionals are aware and informed of issues such as this, they may in fact reduce the quality and impact of their own efforts.

Conclusion

Naila Kabeer (1994) refers to the 'purportedly neutral institutions within which development policies are made and implemented'. The experience and analysis of feminists has revealed that those institutions are often sites of patriarchal power. Scholarship around intersectionality and gender has significantly complicated that debate to reveal the way in which a number of different categories of identity constitute, enable and constrain women and men within both the developed and developing world. As we proceed with this discussion, we would like to suggest the imperative of acknowledging the way in which faith is and will be woven into these intersections. This is an issue of critical importance for communities with whom we work and for the quality of our practice; but it cannot be regarded as an issue for 'them'. We must begin to dismantle the myths of neutrality that have defined our understanding our selves and our work and to uncover the particularity of faith and secularism in the construction of all identity.

Note

- * This article is the view of the authors only and does not necessarily represent the views of World Vision Australia or World Vision International.

References

- Kabeer, N 1994, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*, Verso, London.
- West, J 2003, 'Unity in a multi-religious environment', unpublished presentation outline, Australia.