

Women, Faith and Humanitarian Interventions

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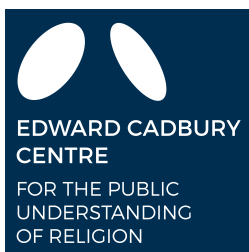
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Arts & Humanities
Research Council

WOMEN, FAITH & HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTIONS

Policy Options & Opportunities

The Women, Faith and Humanitarian Interventions network is a collaboration between practitioners and academics who are deeply concerned about the global progress required for women and girls in terms of sustainable development goals, and who value the positive potential of faith and religious literacy in working toward those goals. The project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and based at the University of Birmingham. The network teamed with international NGO Global One, to bring together further partners for conversation at a series of events in Birmingham, Glasgow, Amman (Jordan) and – in the final phase – Westminster. At these events, participants were asked to identify key priorities for women and girls from their various perspectives, and to reflect on how matters of faith and gender intersect in development terms. This working paper draws together insights gained through these events, with the aim of proposing policy recommendations to support gender- and faith-responsive humanitarian programming.

The theme of spaces was used throughout the network in order to recognise the different global arenas in which collaboration around faith and gender is required. The key spaces identified were:

Spaces of Activation and Motivation – the spaces where development actors work, connect, and collaborate; also where academics, policymakers and lay people are activated to become involved with key issues and initiatives

Spaces of Communication and Faith Discourse – the spaces where persons of faith connect and communicate with each other; also where faith leaders (whether official or otherwise) make a difference to how key issues are communicated, and dialogue occurs between secular and sacred perspectives

Spaces on the Ground/Grassroots Space – the spaces where women are living, very often in situations of transit; both material and non-material needs of women are the focus of these spaces

Spaces of Empowerment – the spaces of hope where women are enabled to fulfil their potential with equal rights and protection; these are at times ideal rather than real, but nonetheless provide a goal and port to navigate toward.

A. SPACES OF ACTIVATION AND MOTIVATION

The most urgent needs of women in situations of humanitarian crisis are being addressed by a range of humanitarian actors, though not always with sufficient consideration for the faith needs of women in these settings. Though the equal human rights of women, and the rights of all to the freedom and practice of religion are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, more needs to be done to ensure that all women are afforded their entitled freedoms and opportunities. Recently, the report on ‘Progress on Sustainable Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2019’ shows that women are still in a worse position than men in key aspects of well-being. There remains vital work to do. Secular and faith-based humanitarian efforts can work together to address global challenges, whilst recognising and accepting the different motivations of each.

Religious individuals and groups are active in humanitarianism and the international development sector, often drawing in significant resources from supporters and those who resonate with their vision, purpose and goals. These resources may be practical and financial, but they may also include distinctive religious resources like sacred texts, ritual sensitivities and developed beliefs which are drawn on in harnessing support. It is important to understand what motivates individuals and groups to take an active role in addressing global issues of inequality, and in turn what motivates others to join them in supporting vulnerable women and girls in global contexts.

The language that is used in activating support for the development of women in humanitarian settings is important. At times, the language of secular rights and religious discourse about the value of human life does not correlate in a way that is easily understandable to all (Eghdamian). This can inhibit progress and collaboration, even where positive narratives about the importance of human thriving are central to all. Suspicions by secular actors that religious narratives may be harmful or responsible for infringements of rights, and the rights of women in particular, are as potentially damaging to co-operation as are religious suspicions that secular discourses are attempting to exclude their contributions. The UDHR is potentially a unifying language amongst different groups, yet controversies still arise. All perspectives, regardless of their positioning, have a role and responsibility to communicate and demonstrate their commitment to humanitarian activity.

Participants in the network voiced the view that building trust and eliminating mistrust are essential to furthering humanitarian programming that is sensitive to matters of faith and gender, and to intersections between these aspects of rights protection. One way of thinking about religion is that it serves as an ability to engage with sacred dimensions of life. As an ability, or skill, it is one that should be valued and protected where it encourages human life to thrive. Like many skills, this ability can be activated for good or harm, and humanitarian actors agree that harm to human life, whether motivated by religious or secular discourses, must be condemned. Conversely, in places where religion is seen as a cohesive force in society, and not in conflict with human rights, development which is inclusive of religious perspectives is needed and possible.

When we consider the specific needs of women and girls, certain narratives may be divisive. Feminism is a motivating discourse for many, especially in secular Western contexts where it has great potential to engage those who wish to see a more just world along gender lines. And yet, in other contexts, feminism as a discourse is viewed negatively and is not among the motivating

factors for improving the lives of women and girls. The language of equity rather than equality may be preferred in some contexts (Tomalin). The humanitarian community needs to be responsive enough to be able to incorporate such different styles and language in order to achieve its goals. Empathy and understanding are crucial, especially where those receiving humanitarian support have a different set of values and language to those who wish to act on their behalf. Humanitarian actors who are sensitive to such differences, and to the value of faith perspectives, are better able to work effectively in these situations.

A positive vision of sensitive humanitarian programming is one where faith is valued for its potential connections to threatened communities and its potential to mobilise others for the benefit of humanity. Where the skill of engaging the sacred dimension to life is present, it can be activated for good, and enable connections that could not otherwise be made. Participants in the network voiced the view that faith and gender needs to be in the same space as humanitarian activity. For a genuinely shared space to emerge, and for a sense of belonging to the same world to be fostered, all actors need to support the rights of women, including their right to freedom of religion or belief. This includes the acceptance by all that freedom of religion cannot, and indeed must not, mean freedom to implement harm towards women. If barriers of suspicion and mistrust can be broken down on all sides, and the positive value of religion can be recognised in the arena of humanitarian action, the potential to enhance the lives of women globally is extensive, and not in conflict with the aims of secular humanitarian actors. Humanitarian efforts can make gains to ‘make visible the inequalities which underpin’, including those that most affect women and girls, and promote our ‘collective ability to mobilize interest and action’ as humans living together in one world (Tadros).

KEY MESSAGE:

Gender and faith considerations belong in the space of humanitarian activity and should not be sidelined or ignored. A multisectional and multidimensional approach is needed in order to build trust and eliminate mistrust at the intersections between gender and faith in humanitarian settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Working together at the intersections between women, faith and development, academics, NGOs, development actors and policymakers require informed understanding of the terminologies and ways of speaking which are prominent and motivating in different communities, including especially faith communities.
2. Policymakers and humanitarian actors need to be equipped to identify and avoid divisive language, whilst remaining faithful to UHDR principles.

B. SPACES OF COMMUNICATION AND FAITH DISCOURSE

In order to realise a vision of humanitarian programming that is sensitive to aspects of religion and gender, some of the work needed to achieve this is done within religious communities themselves. Religion plays a significant role, both in terms of communities who are displaced or receiving humanitarian support, and among those who are actively supporting and raising awareness globally of humanitarian needs. Focussing attention on global priorities for women and girls is work that can be done in all communities, whether characterised by religious belief or not. Where faith communities have a global dimension which crosses regional and political boundaries, aspects of identity that contribute to a sense of global commonality can be a powerful resource for communication and connection. For instance, FBOs and INGOs with a religious character may be able to effectively work with certain communities that secular activists would not be able to reach.

Although we may sometimes think of the recognition of human diversity as something that is about valuing different protected characteristics, including religion, diversity is also inherent within religious groups and traditions themselves. Whilst it may not be possible to achieve comprehensive agreement in all areas, there are nonetheless common texts, beliefs, and practices that may be drawn on to further humanitarian priorities. The network emphasised the need for religious leaders and gatekeepers to be on board with humanitarian aims. Sheikh Lethome gave the powerful example of working with leaders of communities to develop deep understandings of key religious texts and traditions, with the effect of enabling a shift in cultural practices that were harmful to women with regard to FGM. With focussed effort within faith communities, faith and belief have a tremendous potential to contribute to fostering positive environments for women, and also to eliminating harmful situations and practices. In Bangladesh, Indonesia and Nepal, ICDDR,B's quantitative research demonstrated that the involvement of faith leaders in WASH initiatives led to improvement in WASH practices, better sharing of responsibilities between men and women, reduced women's burdens, and increased knowledge of hygiene. They concluded that faith-based intervention could be effective to improve handwashing and sanitation practices and knowledge.

One further aspect the network emphasised was the importance of hearing voices of those who are not recognised leaders in faith communities and humanitarian settings. Participants observed situations where those who are not granted official power nonetheless had a tremendous impact. Ordinary women are increasingly being heard from internationally prominent platforms, but more can be done to break down dichotomies, and hear in a more equal way women often deemed to be on the less powerful side of commonly held distinctions like North-South, Western-developing, religious leaders-lay members, need provider-need bearer. The network's collaboration with Shelanu, a women's craft initiative consisting of migrant and refugee women in Birmingham made us aware of the significance of working together on practical activities, and listening to small stories along the way. Genuine co-conspiring is possible, but requires work to achieve (Phipps 2019).

KEY MESSAGE:

Faith communities and faith-based NGOs and INGOs have a wealth of resources available to them to raise awareness of key issues within and amongst their own networks. These include religious and theological as well as practical resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

3. Faith communities should share widely within their own networks (and beyond) key resources that are sensitive to specific development contexts and focussed on key sustainability challenges

C. SPACES ON THE GROUND/GRASSROOTS SPACES

All humans are placed in a shared world by nature of their birth. In situations where settled environments have broken down and people have become displaced, developing a sense of interconnectedness among those with whom the earth is shared can be crucial to humanitarian efforts (Tadros). Emphasising interconnectedness does not remove differences between groups, but may help to develop connections and a shared humanity which allows for diversity and inclusion of the margins. Interconnectedness focusses attention on the whole of life; without health in mind and body, difficult environments will not be transformed, and the rights to freedom of religion and belief cannot be recognised. Religion must be part of addressing needs where it is present and significant for those who dwell in particular environments. This encompasses much of the global development landscape, where religion is prominent.

Network participants focussed on the material and non-material needs of women in humanitarian settings. Non-material needs are more difficult to account for, due to their lack of physicality, but they are potentially as significant as material needs to the ability of women in humanitarian settings to thrive. This is not to diminish the need to prioritise material and physical needs, recognisable as those that relate to shelter, health, and finance. In contrast, non-material needs may relate to mental health and wellbeing and to the freedom to 'reveal and practise one's religion and belief without fear of discrimination' (Eghdamian). If we take the example of WASH needs, the importance of material access to clean water and the development of good hygiene practices is clearly crucial and a physical necessity globally. The ability to use water for ritual purposes in a safe environment may be related to senses of settlement, wellbeing and comfort, that is, to non-material needs. Furthermore, appeals to understanding the significance of water in a sacred capacity (non-material significance) may be vital in some cases to fostering crucial changes to practices in relation to hygiene to promote physical wellbeing. Material and non-material needs may be connected in particular ways, and the network recognises both types of needs in their complexity, focussing in particular on the impact for women and girls.

In some 'neutral' humanitarian settings where a secular narrative dominates, there may be challenges with regard to recognising where faith is relevant, and even crucial, to non-material needs and emotional wellbeing. In certain circumstances, it may be easier to recognise the physical needs of women and girls such as those for adequate shelter, food, healthcare and education, than to identify and recognise where non-physical needs are real and present, for instance where mental wellbeing is threatened, or minority identity leads to infringements of the

freedom of religion and belief. Such areas need attention and incorporation into responsive humanitarian programming. Universal and multicultural narratives, which incorporate the idea that religion ‘should not matter’, may unintentionally draw our attention away from situations where the protection and safeguarding of women precisely on religious grounds is needed in humanitarian context.

KEY MESSAGE:

In order for a sense of human interconnectedness to flourish, it is essential to recognise the equal significance of material and non-material needs for women in grassroots settings. Faith communities have a significant role to play in many global contexts where religious identities are prominent and closely connected to emotional wellbeing

RECOMMENDATIONS:

4. Humanitarian services could profitably collaborate with faith communities and faith-based organisations to provide more holistic support for women and girls, particularly in relation to non-material needs connected to wellbeing and senses of identity which are likely to be threatened in situations of displacement
5. Faith-based organisations are well positioned to identify and advise on religious requirements that are related to basic material concerns, but may be overlooked as non-essential in practical planning terms, e.g. WASH provision and ritual requirements for washing
6. Support and funding is needed for research that investigates the impact of faith-based organisations, faith communities, and faith leaders (whether official or informal) on progress toward sustainable development goals

D. SPACES OF EMPOWERMENT

In responding to experiences of displacement in humanitarian settings, it is crucial to empower women to transform their own lives and take control. Leadership and the presence of role models can be seen as instrumental in moving from potential to realised empowerment. The network conversations included examples of significant initiatives that were empowering migrant and refugee women, such as sustainable business support for women in Jordan, drama therapy initiatives in Lebanon, and a women’s community group in Scotland, pushing for government advocacy with a bottom-up approach.

For advocates located in the global North, the recognition that leadership and role models may not, and in many cases should not, come from the North is significant, as is the importance of advocating for South-South co-operation. The network encouraged reflection on what Interconnectedness means in practice, drawing on the insights of network participant Alison Phipps in her recent book:

It's vital that privilege and position are part of our ongoing reflection on where we speak from and on behalf of whom, but it's not the end or even the beginning of the story. In conspiring, we have a sense of participation in a collective, porous endeavour, not of stepping out of the world in whose suffering, loss and oppression we are so implicated, nor by believing we have the answers and expertise to clean up that very mess.

(Phipps 2019)

Through continual reflection and attempts at conspiring together, there is hope for the future of addressing sustainable goals and improving the situation of women globally. Faith, when accepted into a global development conversation, and not only in its more liberal Western forms, has much to contribute to collective endeavours in the humanitarian realm. Empowerment is more than a buzz word and is something that participants in the network were actively encouraging on a day-to-day basis through their involvement in spaces of humanitarian crises. Such spaces demand global attention to urgent needs, which are both material and non-material in nature. For women to take control of their lives, faith sensitivity is among the key skills urgently needed in the realm of humanitarian work and international development.

KEY MESSAGE:

Conspiring together for collective human flourishing through empowering women and girls is at the heart of the intersections between faith, gender and development.

RECOMMENDATION:

7. Many smaller initiatives that empower refugee and migrant women are incredibly poignant examples, far beyond their absolute size or the extent of their immediate impact. Collaborative sharing between smaller organisations and larger players, and recognition of both by governments is desirable.
8. Working collaboratively in the humanitarian sphere between ODA and non-ODA countries is desirable, but not always realised on an equal basis. Connections fostered precisely at the intersections between faith, gender and development have the potential to lead the way in demonstrating the empowering potential of shared connections, and could be expanded through training and upscaling of successful initiatives.

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