

THE STOCKHOLM FORUM ON GENDER EQUALITY

EMBRACE COMPLEXITY – THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS ACTORS IN DEVELOPMENT WORK FOR GENDER EQUALITY

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OVERVIEW

Eighty per cent of the global population affiliate with a religion. Personal faith is a driver for change, and religious actors play an important role in shaping norms. It's important to identify strategies on how to support the progressive voices within religious movements as well as develop strategies on how to work with organisations and individuals who are different from us. This seminar strives to reach a deepened understanding of the role of religion and religious actors in development work for gender equality.

STARTING POINT IN SIDE BY SIDE TANZANIA

Faustina Nillan gave us a brief introduction to the network Side by Side Tanzania as a case of interreligious work for gender justice. Side by side is a network of religious actors, including African traditional religions, promoting gender justice. Main points:

- In faith and social background, we are diverse but united in our wish to see equality for everyone.
- Faith leaders have enormous power to influence people in local communities, as they know their people and the local culture and have authority and power.
- Religion could play a positive or negative role in the work for gender equality. Many inequalities in society have been motivated and promoted with the use of religion.
- In Tanzania, Side by Side is working on different issues within gender including GBV, domestic violence and harmful practices. In all these issues, faith communities play an important role. Another focus has been to promote 'positive masculinity' and to 'get men onboard.' The Tanzanian Dad Campaign, carried out in cooperation with the Swedish Embassy, has been one way to promote positive masculinity. At the large event linked to the campaign more than 1,000 youths were gathered to discuss positive fatherhood. In relation to this, the focus on men and boys in the newly launched Swedish strategy on gender equality was mentioned – if we are to succeed with this, the religious perspective is a must.

PANEL

Charlotta Norrby commenting on Faustina's presentation

- Sida has gender equality as one of the most important priorities since many years. Over the past ten years Sida has doubled its portfolio that is directed towards gender equality. There is a special focus on SRHR, women's rights to their own bodies, and gender is mainstreamed in 70 per cent of the interventions.
- Sida has come part of the way in embracing faith leaders. In Sida's work, it is important to always take religious leaders into account. Sida looks at poverty from four different perspectives: resources, security, power and voice – religion comes across in all these dimensions. Religious actors are very important, and we do give a lot of support to religious actors around the world through Swedish NGOs and through direct support.

Overview of recent trends of religion and gender, Josephine Sundqvist

- Traditionally, from a postcolonial perspective we tend to think that religion is imposed from the west, but religion today is really coming from the global south. This is important to bear in mind, especially linked to rooted advocacy.
- Another trend is that there are not so clear differences between religious identities; the reality is that most religious people are more fluent than we think. You might be born as a Catholic, but on Sundays you go to a Pentecostal church, and then you sacrifice to the traditional Gods when a relative has died.
- A clear trend is that religious actors are coming together in ecumenical efforts much more than before. There are many similar initiatives to Side by Side working on other issues related to gender. What we see in research is that many of these are interfaith. One reason is that faith movements want to strengthen their voices in relation to those who are radicalised, and to reach out broadly bringing about change and justice, you need to organise in ecumenical platforms.
- Another trend is that charismatic churches are rising up very fast, and the charismatic culture is also influencing other denominations.

The 'religious woman'

Maria Bard points to how the researcher Azza Karam has highlighted how the narratives of religious women are often not acknowledged or understood, and that there is quite a stereotypical image of the 'religious woman'. Fazeela comments on this:

- From my experience from Sweden and from international development and humanitarian work, I would sum it up as seeing the Muslim woman as in need of change rather than as a change-maker. I come into a refugee camp wearing a hijab and is automatically seen as the refugee – not the humanitarian officer. Often religious women are not included in the discussion.

Embrace complexity and support progressive voices within religious communities

- Fazeela pointed out how there are of course good and bad examples on both the secular and the religious side. There is a risk that religious actors mix mission with development and/or humanitarian interventions. This is primarily a risk with actors who are not in the development structures but act on their own. There is also a risk of reproducing or even

strengthen power hierarchies. Religious actors have to be included – but the question is how to do it. We need to find ways to be creative and not to get stuck in a yes/no situation.

- Charlotta said that there is complexity on different levels. There are organisational demands, but also demands on values. However, everyone cannot share 100 per cent. You have to see whether we share enough of the same values. Dialogue can be used as a tool. Religious actors are quite unique because they have an outreach that is so broad. And they can reach out also in times of shrinking space because they are not seen as the same kind of threat. So, where can we get in and support something that can give results?

Beyond an instrumental approach to religious actors

Josephine's dissertation is called 'Beyond an instrumental approach to religion and development'. Commenting on this, she said that too often in development, religious actors are seen from an instrumental perspective. We very seldom see religion in itself as a driver for attitude and behaviour change. When talking about SRHR, for instance, it is very deeply rooted in our culture/religion (which are interlinked). Many people are looking at sexuality and sexual identities in a holistic way. So, when discussing this, you need to address this from a religious perspective. For example, in Tanzania, material for sermons on SRHR from Islam and Christian perspectives has been developed.

If you are targeting young urban people ('low hanging fruit'), a secular approach might work very well, but if you want to reach beyond that and target all people, then a faith-based approach is absolutely necessary.

Comments from the audience

- Feminist theologians are often excluded. There is a need to find a language that works when talking about these issues with pastors and imams – and feminist theologians has an important role in this.
- PLAN Canada – experience of language being very challenging – plus very hierarchical structures. In gender equality work we need to change structures. We find approaching religious institutions for certain issues like FGM is quite easy, but when it comes to their own structures and systems, they are heavily patriarchal. So how can we address this fact?
- Fazeela commenting on PLAN: this is one of the hardest questions because you deal with structures that have been there for a long time. So, with time you can start to push a little and widen the conversation, and also support the more progressive voices within religious communities. Often, you support those who are the most progressive, so a challenge is to find a way to bring in and use the same language that for example male imams use, but you have a very different message than they have. And at the same time build capacity because without practice there will be no change.
- Josephine commenting: what is needed is exposure to similar settings who are more progressive. South-to-south exchange meetings between similar movements where one has come further is one way.

Final remarks/take-home message from the panel

- Charlotta: There is potential in working from within. Need of dialogue with theological basis with FBOs supported by Sida (who welcome innovative initiatives).

- Josephine: To reach beyond the low-hanging-fruit faith approach is necessary, and we need to include new forms of faith actors, as well as strengthen the faith language for example in relation to SDGs.
- Faustina: The best time to plant a tree is yesterday. The next best time is today. Swedish feminist policy is a seed. Practical implementation with beneficiaries.
- Fazeela: Look for 'the third side' that understands both sides and speaks both languages. If, for example, you want to address governments involved in sharia, you need to engage researchers who know the language. ■

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