Over the last few decades, the importance of considering gender dynamics in specific contexts when planning development and humanitarian responses has become a topic of increased attention among both governmental and non-governmental actors. Heightened emphasis on women’s participation in humanitarian and development initiatives has resulted in the inclusion of gender-specific development goals set by the United Nations for both short-term and long-term development and in a push for “gender mainstreaming,” or the use of gender analysis at all levels of policy and program development. The gender mainstreaming approach calls on humanitarian and development agencies to take gender into consideration in the design, implementation and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of their work. Some fear, however, that, as they push to mainstream gender across their programs, development and humanitarian actors are imposing an external, neocolonial agenda that fails to appreciate the cultural dynamics within the communities in which they work. Such critiques have some validity. That said, significant work is being done by local actors at the community-based level on gender issues, work that takes cultural dynamics into account and is too often inadequately recognized.

These local voices also call for consideration of gender issues, but gender issues as they understand them. Development and humanitarian actors, we argue, must pay attention to these local voices and perspectives on gender. Organizations such as MCC must ask ourselves: How do we affirm our partners’ agency and leadership in identifying contextually-meaningful ways to work for gender equality, thus avoiding a top-down, patronizing approach of ‘empowering women’? How do we support local voices and initiatives for gender equality as they work to create lasting change in their communities?

Too often, efforts to mainstream gender across development and humanitarian programs have focused on what we would like to achieve, rather than the more challenging and important process of how we achieve these goals in a way that can be sustainable and transformative. As the following articles from MCC, partner and peer organization staff from Kenya, Lebanon, El Salvador, New York, Senegal and Cambodia highlight, locally-oriented listening processes are key to transformative change. Though these articles vary in focus, all reflect the importance of working for gender equality in culturally-sensitive ways. Authors also recognize the necessity of moving beyond the imperative but basic step of incorporating women in
Often, humanitarian and development actors work with gender mainstreaming has focused on what we would like to achieve, rather than the more challenging and more important process of how we achieve these [gender equality] goals in a way that can be sustainable and transformative.”


relief, development and peacebuilding efforts towards an emphasis on the equitable treatment of women, men, boys and girls. While the broader push toward gender mainstreaming may have wide support from powerful actors, these articles demonstrate that more deeply transformative change requires listening well to how local voices define and demand change around gender dynamics and relations at the community-based level.

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Addressing gender issues using Participatory Rural Appraisal processes among the Maasai community in Kenya

In 2015, MCC Kenya conducted a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in ten communities in Kajiado, Kenya, where its partner, Maasai Integrated Development Initiative (MIDI), works. Kajiado is predominantly inhabited by the Maasai community. It is a water-stressed county, where community members must travel up to ten kilometers in search of water. The area is also food insecure and suffers frequent droughts. MCC carried out this PRA in order to gain a better understanding of the food security situation in Kajiado through participatory engagement with community members. Results from the PRA helped to inform collaborative work between MCC and MIDI to plan new food security initiatives.

The PRA approach, widely used by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other agencies to incorporate the knowledge and opinions of rural people in the planning and management of development initiatives, can also help organizations understand how gender dynamics shape community development. MCC and MIDI used PRA gender analysis tools to identify specific needs for men and women and to gain a better understanding of their different roles and socio-economic positions.

MCC first trained MIDI staff in PRA skills and mentored them in how to facilitate the process. To ensure that the appraisal process would identify relevant gender dynamics at play within the Maasai community where MIDI planned to work, facilitators organized separate focus groups for men and women. In these focus groups, participants analyzed their daily workloads using a method called Daily Activity Clocks. Dividing men and women into separate groups gave the younger women an opportunity to interact and speak freely about issues that would otherwise be difficult for them to discuss with men present, since the Maasai community is male dominant. In the Daily Activity Clocks exercise, group members name what they usually do during the day at a specific time of the year, starting from the time they usually get up. The exercise elicits information about who works the longest hours, who concentrates on a few activities, who does several tasks in a day, who has the most leisure time and sleep and how much time is spent on different activities by men and women.

The Daily Activity Clocks exercise revealed different patterns for how women and men in the community typically spend their days. Participants found that women’s chores usually begin early, around 5:30 am. Women wake up to milk the cows and goats and to monitor and report to their
husbands about any sick or pregnant animals. After milking, women proceed to prepare breakfast for the entire family and then embark on other important chores. Fetching water and firewood may take the whole day, with women in this Maasai community having to travel long distances (up to six kilometers) in order to carry out these vital tasks. Other work carried out by women includes cleaning the home, making food for their children and engaging in beadwork for their husbands and children and for commercial purposes. In the evening, women make the fire before everyone comes home, bring calves and goat kids into their enclosures and then milk the cows again before preparing more food for the entire family, including any visitors.

Participants also noted that men usually wake up between six and eight o’clock in the morning. They monitor the village to check for any theft or loss of livestock during the night. Their work also includes protecting the village. After breakfast, they take the cattle to graze. Most grazing work, however, is done by young boys (ages nine to 14). Adult men search for better pastures and watering holes for their cattle and protect them from predators, like lions. Those who remain at home mend fences around the village while tending calves. These responsibilities last until the evening. Some men spend the evening drinking traditional beer and playing games.

After reflective sessions in which women and men considered their respective Daily Activity Clocks, men realized that women work more hours than men. On average, women work for 14 hours a day, rest for four hours and sleep for six hours. Men spend four hours working, 12 hours resting and eight hours sleeping. They also realized that women do much of the physical work, and their chores are rather repetitive, while men’s work is managerial in nature and often involves decision-making. Men’s managerial roles and women’s reproductive roles take a great deal of time, but generate little income.

Given the changing gender situations among the Maasai, the groups felt they needed to identify alternative activities that would not only ease women’s workload but also improve their communities’ household food security and incomes. Men resolved to support initiatives that could help solve gender-related challenges identified by the community, including constructing sand dams, building water tanks to harvest rain water, planting trees for firewood and fodder and installing solar lamps in their homes for energy needs. They also agreed to set up kitchen gardens in their homes and fence grazing spaces for livestock.

The PRA succeeded in creating awareness about the important role women play in the day-to-day affairs of their homes and the wider community as well in bringing forward women’s voices about their own situation. The PRA exercise also highlighted that even though women are marginalized, they make immense contributions to the wellbeing of their families and communities and to solving their communities’ food security problems. The PRA even helped the community identify development initiatives that would improve women’s lives. These types of steps towards greater gender equality, however, are limited: women in Maasai society still lack equitable access to resources and decision-making power. Men continue to dominate some sectors and the most powerful positions in society. Longer-term movement towards equality for Kenya’s rural women will require improved access for women to education and material assets and the formation of strong women’s movements.

William Kiptoo is MCC Kenya peacebuilding coordinator.
Empowering women in Palestinian gatherings in Lebanon

The Popular Aid for Relief and Development (PARD) is a grassroots, rights-based non-governmental organization (NGO) that aims to promote gender equality and the rights of marginalized groups, especially among the Palestinian gatherings in Lebanon. [Gatherings are communities of Palestinian refugees outside the twelve United Nations-administered refugee camps for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.] Palestinian refugee women living in Lebanon are deprived of many basic human rights and face multiple difficulties, including but not limited to insufficient education, limited reproductive health services, unemployment, low socioeconomic status and discrimination stemming from both their status as refugees and their position as women. PARD places a special emphasis on empowering women by identifying and redressing power imbalances and providing them with more autonomy by procuring access to healthcare and education, environmental health and sanitation services and community awareness and advocacy trainings.

Approaching gender issues using a culturally relevant and sensitive approach is essential for good relief and development work in any setting, but particularly so when working in a context where addressing gender issues is extremely delicate. Such is the case for the communities in which PARD operates. In these communities, one cannot address gender issues directly. It therefore becomes not only necessary, but deeply advantageous, to adopt a gender-mainstreaming approach, understood as “the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels” (UN Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, 2002).

For the past thirty years, PARD has worked in the Palestinian gatherings in Lebanon and has consequently garnered a significant amount of trust and respect from both the gatherings’ governing bodies and the individual inhabitants themselves. PARD believes that the acceptance and relationships it has built up are essential components of its work: without the communities’ trust, PARD would not have the access or ability to address gender issues to the degree that it does. In contrast, other NGOs have sought to carry out programs in the Palestinian gatherings around gender-related issues such as family planning, gender-based violence and early marriage, but they were not invited or welcomed by the communities, because these NGOs lacked the trusting relationships that PARD has fostered with residents of the gatherings.

Despite PARD’s success and far-reaching work related to gender issues, these efforts have encountered some resistance. PARD has had to exercise a high level of creativity in the ways that it helps educate and empower women as it implements its programs related to gender equality and justice. In one example, a local sheikh (a Muslim religious leader) approached a PARD staff member and told her that she could not hold a scheduled session on family planning. To work around this restriction, the staff person decided to host a session regarding children’s nutrition instead, making the topic more acceptable to local community leadership, while still being able to incorporate ideas about family planning, gender rights and women’s empowerment into discussions about household nutrition. As the assembled women discussed malnutrition and healthy lifestyles, the PARD community worker spoke with these women about the difficulties of providing for ten children...
without having an income and thus integrated family planning concepts in a culturally appropriate and indirect way that was better-accepted and understood.

Another integral component of PARD’s work in addressing gender inequality is working with local Women’s Committees in the gatherings. These Women’s Committees are made up of women who have undergone PARD’s comprehensive training program aimed at strengthening decision-making and problem-solving, in which participants acquire skills relevant to their individual, familial and community needs. Participants learn how to carry out community mapping, conflict mediation, needs-assessment and advocacy for their rights as women and as refugees. Women’s Committee members also serve as a community alarm system, help shape and implement relief and development projects and serve as spokespeople to the male-dominated Popular Committees that govern the Palestinian gatherings.

The Women’s Committees in these gatherings differ from the Popular Committees in several ways. Firstly, the Popular Committees are composed almost entirely of men, with few exceptions (and even when women serve on the Popular Committees, they are typically not integrated successfully, nor taken seriously). The members of the Popular Committees are appointed by political parties. The Popular Committees were not originally receptive to the idea of Women’s Committees: even today, the relationships and the levels of coordination and cooperation between the Popular Committees and the Women’s Committees vary depending on the gathering. In some gatherings, heavy competition over governing authority exists between the Popular Committees and Women’s Committees. While the Popular Committees are on paper the governing bodies in the gatherings, in practice the Women’s Committees have more influence and can even overrule the Popular Committees: so, for example, the Women’s Committee in the Jim Jim gathering forced through a plan against the will of the Popular Committee to construct a road with the help of an engineer from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

As it carries out its work in the gatherings, PARD coordinates closely with the Women’s Committees, given that their active involvement in project development and implementation is essential for the success of PARD’s relief and development programs. PARD staff meet with each Women’s Committee at least once a month and are available to meet more frequently if necessary. As the women serving on the committees are themselves members of these communities, they already have knowledge and insight into the issues facing the gatherings and can significantly influence and shape the projects that PARD undertakes. PARD supports and empowers women in these communities by providing training-of-trainers opportunities to help women become social workers and undertake fieldwork themselves (e.g., conducting needs assessments and community mapping exercises, developing action plans and advocacy campaigns, etc.) The Women’s Committees thus play a significant role in the development and design of projects as well as in the monitoring of projects.

In addition to its programmatic focus on gender mainstreaming and its work with Women’s Committees, PARD also utilizes an operational framework to address gender equality and women’s empowerment with three main dimensions: capacities and education, access to resources and opportunities and security. The first of these refers to capacities as measured by education, health and nutrition, elements fundamental to an individual’s well-being.
and the means through which women can access other forms of well-being. Access to resources and opportunities, the second dimension, addresses equality in opportunity to use or apply basic capabilities through access to economic assets and resources, as well as political opportunity, because without to access to economic and political opportunities, women’s ability to employ their capabilities for the well-being of themselves, their families and communities will be limited. Security, the third dimension of PARD’s gender equality framework, refers to reducing women’s vulnerability to violence and to conflict that results in physical and psychological harm, violence that diminishes the ability of individuals, households and communities to fulfill their potential. Moreover, violence directed specifically at women and girls often aims at keeping them subjugated through fear.

PARD recently underwent a gender audit, which in turn led to some noteworthy organizational changes, including the revision of PARD’s bylaws for women’s protection and the institution of rights regarding maternity leave and work leave for menstruation. According to Lebanese law, women are given seven days annually off work for menstruation; PARD changed its practice to go beyond the provisions of Lebanese law, allowing women to claim up to twelve days a year for menstruation leave. Additionally, Lebanese law permits women 40 days of maternity leave, but PARD extended this to 60 days and decided to give women an hour for breastfeeding at work as well.

PARD’s operational framework for gender equality not only paved the way for changes to the organization’s bylaws, but also has helped to assess PARD’s organizational culture, policies and efforts to examine organizational leadership through a gender lens. PARD has found that if women are in power, not only are their voices heard, their voices are louder. Having a critical mass of women both in leadership and in field work positions gives greater voice and attention to women’s issues within PARD’s work. PARD believes that women’s empowerment is crucial for sustainable development and human rights for all. Gender-mainstreaming is at the forefront of its holistic approach to addressing gender issues in a locally-driven manner, influenced by PARD’s partnership with the Women’s Committees. When women are empowered, whole families and communities benefit, and these benefits have ripple effects for future generations.

Paula Holtzinger is MCC’s emergency response assistant for Lebanon and Syria. Rita Hamdan is the executive director of The Popular Aid for Relief and Development (PARD).

Gender equality as presupposition: the story of ANADES in El Salvador

Founded among women of rural base communities towards the end of El Salvador’s brutal civil war of the 1980s, the Asociacion Nuevo Amanecer de El Salvador (ANADES) has a long history of accompanying colectivos (collectives) of women in urban and rural communities across the country. Staff and leadership at ANADES have spent decades refining their development approach, an approach marked by a commitment to gender equality.
and women-centered education, community development and public advocacy efforts. ANADES’ continuing self-reflection and analysis have generated a rich body of knowledge and learning around gender equality in development work. In November of this past year, I sat down with three staff members from ANADES—Ana Mirian Ayala, Nery Rivas and Gilma Escalante—to talk about what they have learned over these many years of work. What follows is a summary of our wide-ranging conversation, including lessons from ANADES about what have been critical components in its work to promote gender equality.

ANADES’ formation among colectivos of women widowed by violence during El Salvador’s bloody civil war grounds and anchors its work with women and gender. According to Ayala, ANADES’ vision is shaped by what justice “looks like” to these communities of marginalized women in El Salvador: through its work with the colectivos, ANADES supports these women’s groups in striving toward a future of justice and equality. Ayala, Rivas and Escalante view this shared history as an advantage for ANADES’ day-to-day work, because it makes gender equality something of a “presupposition” or shared assumption for all that ANADES undertakes. For Rivas, the long and continuing history of ANADES’ work and self-reflection in the area of gender equality is an essential dimension of its identity.

Rivas and Escalante both underscored the practical necessity of gender equality in ANADES’ education, development and public advocacy work. If ANADES is going to have a long-term, sustainable impact on the social, political and economic structures that generate inequality, injustice and exclusion, it must work with the most marginalized populations, in this case, women. While acknowledging the marginalization of other populations in communities across El Salvador, ANADES focuses on promoting gender equality through women’s colectivos, because these women have faced human rights violations and extreme exclusion due to their gender. Without a focus on gender equality, Rivas contends, instead of achieving “inclusive and holistic development … we merely end up replicating the same social structure, maybe with a few more resources at each level of the structure, but we still have the same discrimination and exclusion, with people better off, but still facing the same social realities.”

While ANADES’ history of rootedness in El Salvador’s colectivos is of course particular to that country’s context, ANADES’ experience could suggest a lesson for other organizations, namely, the importance of developing and maintaining a narrative framework or a story that connects an organization’s individual initiatives to a vision of a more just and equitable world. Instead of viewing gender equality solely as a pragmatic matter of improving project outcomes, the lesson of ANADES is that gender equality needs to be part of a vision and a story that guides an organization, representing a coherent philosophy that grounds its work.

MCC supports ANADES in multiple ways, including by placing young adults from MCC’s Serving and Learning Together (SALT) and Young Anabaptist Mennonite Exchange Network (YAMEN) programs at its day care centers in San Salvador and rural Perquin and through grant support for ANADES’ agroecology, youth and health programs. These programs emerge from the priorities set by the colectivos of women, but also are part of a strategy to address gender equality at all stages of life. In Ayala’s words, gender equality work requires engagement with children in their day care centers and participants in youth groups.
Working across the life course allows ANADES to better address one of the most significant challenges in gender equality work, namely, the unequal distribution of work in the domestic sphere. While ANADES works to increase women’s participation in the social, political and economic life of their communities, women routinely remain responsible for the tasks of child rearing and housekeeping. Women who seek engagement in their communities add on a “third shift” to their first and second shifts of housework and paid work outside the home. Ayala laid out how the day care exists to support women’s participation in community life outside of the domestic sphere and how day care staff work tirelessly to engage fathers in the raising of their children. When resources are available, community development projects work with men to build buy-in and support for women’s participation in project activities and to engage men in discussions of male identity and patriarchy.

All three ANADES leaders emphasized the importance of public advocacy to local and national governments to increase and improve social welfare provisions. Small, non-profit organizations like ANADES, they stressed, do not have the capacity to provide broad-based social welfare programs that can free women from some of their domestic tasks and allow for greater participation in community life.

Ayala and Rivas underscored the importance of ANADES constantly working to ensure that its own institutional practices match its vision of gender equality. Ayala proudly ticked off the gender representation ANADES has achieved from the governance level to all staff levels: the board president and treasurer are women, two of the four remaining board members are also women, while 27 of ANADES’ 39 full-time staff members are women. Provocatively, Ayala followed up this listing of ANADES’s achievements in gender representation by stating that “this means nothing to me if the women are themselves machistas” (a Spanish term referring a particular kind of misogyny based in certain patterns of shared Latin American culture): ANADES wants women leading its efforts not solely on the basis of their gender, but because of their commitment to gender equality. Ayala explained that “it is important to constantly train staff, to engage in self and collective reflection and have written and enforcement policies in the organization that lay out what are the expectations for staff in the area of gender discrimination.” Project participants also need to be aware of ANADES’ codes of conduct for its staff and of mechanisms for lodging complaints if staff do not live up to these expectations. Escalante concurred that striving for gender equality requires a constant learning process for individual staff members and for ANADES as an organization. Rivas added that the challenge of working for gender equality within ANADES mirrors the broader challenge of working for gender equality across El Salvador’s marginalized communities. When ANADES develops policies, procedures, professional development programs and codes of conduct related to gender equality, these serve as signposts and guardrails on the road to developing an organizational culture that matches ANADES’ vision of more just, more inclusive and more equal communities in El Salvador.

A key lesson from ANADES’ gender equality work that is easy to overlook is the foundational importance of trusting women. Rivas expresses it well: “our work in ANADES can’t violate an already violated population.” If the goal of gender equality work is to create spaces of freedom and liberation for
women to achieve their individually- and collectively-generated goals and personhood, the methods used to achieve those goals must allow women to experience and practice that kind of liberation and freedom.

Having men (or women) from an outside institution scolding women for lack of participation or treating them as children in need of enlightenment must end, ANADES’ leaders emphasized. Instead, ANADES insists on treating women who take part in its programs as adults in need of spaces for free expression of their needs, desires and dreams. The question is not whether women will succeed or fail in some narrowly defined sense, but rather whether through their collaborative work they will begin to exercise freedom and experience liberation from the exclusion and injustice that mark their lives.

One hour-long conversation cannot, of course, do justice to all that can be learned from the successes and challenges of ANADES’s long history of gender equality work. The discussion with ANADES leaders did, however, highlight several potential lessons from ANADES’ experience that may be relevant for other ways that MCC and its partners work for gender equality in other contexts: ground gender equality efforts in a shared story and vision of justice and equality; work with women at various stages of life; address the impact of the domestic sphere on women’s broader participation in society; embed gender equality principles within one’s own institutional policies and practices; and trust in women’s insights and capacities. Taken together, these lessons from ANADES’ experience give MCC important clues about how to work with our partners to reduce gender-based discrimination and exclusion.

Jack Lesniewski is MCC representative for Guatemala and El Salvador, together with his spouse, Sarah. He interviewed three ANADES leaders: Ana Mirian Ayala (executive director), Gila Maritza Escalante (social promoter) and Nery Misael Rivas (civic participation coordinator).

Adapting family planning initiatives to respond to the needs of faith communities in Senegal

In recent years, Senegal has made significant strides in several development areas, including gender parity and access to family planning services. Maternal and child mortality have decreased significantly since 2005 but remain high compared to global rates. Many of these deaths are from avoidable causes. Improving maternal and child health, notably through family planning, is a priority for Senegal’s government. Although the contraceptive prevalence rate has doubled since 2012, only 27.8 percent of married women are currently using any method of contraception. Another one in five married women wants to use a contraceptive method, but currently cannot do so.

Religious institutions and beliefs shape many aspects of life in Senegal, but systematic approaches to linking these dimensions to development policies and programs have been rare. Despite recognition that faith leaders can play important roles in family planning, some stakeholders have been cautious to engage them out of concern that influential leaders may take firm, anti-family planning positions. At the same time, rumors have circulated about

As faith leaders with a deep understanding of religious sensitivities, CRSD members have developed strategies that align with religious teachings and are appropriate for the local context in order to encourage broad shifts in attitudes and behaviors related to family planning.”
what faith traditions say about family planning, with little clear guidance from faith leaders. In that context, World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) facilitated discussions in 2014 with a group of Senegalese faith leaders to explore issues of maternal and child mortality and family planning. After building consensus on what religious teachings say about family planning, the group formed into the Cadre des Religieux pour la Santé et le Développement (CRSD), an interfaith association that brings together leaders from prominent Sufi orders of Senegal, other major Islamic institutions and the country’s Catholic and Lutheran churches.

As faith leaders with a deep understanding of religious sensitivities, CRSD members have developed strategies that align with religious teachings and are appropriate for the local context in order to encourage broad shifts in attitudes and behaviors related to family planning. Activities include visits to meet with the leaders of Senegal’s principal religious communities; workshops for community groups of religious women; workshops during significant religious events and holy periods, such as Ramadan; and media outreach.
Engaging women through religious networks, both Christian and Muslim, has emerged as a central and particularly successful strategy for family planning efforts. In 2015, CRSD partnered with a midwife to develop workshops that bring technical and religious perspectives into the same conversation. The workshops educate participants on family planning, addressing common myths and rumors and explaining various methods. After piloting the program, CRSD scaled up the work through a training-of-trainers model, directly reaching over 40,000 Senegalese in all 14 regions of the country.

CRSD’s workshop focuses on dispelling misinformation by providing accurate and accessible information on family planning. For example, one commonly held belief is that religion is against family planning, so messaging focuses on the holistic well-being of the family, emphasizing to participants the need to be able to provide for the children they do have. Another common misconception is that family planning is a Western effort to reduce the number of Muslims in the world, with some Sengalese making comments like, “If you look closely, you ask yourself whether Westerners are promoting birth spacing, or if they’re really aiming for birth limitation.” The workshops for Muslim communities, therefore, draw on the Qur’an and the hadith (sayings about the Prophet Muhammad) to show that traditional methods of family planning exist in Islam and that religious teachings promote healthy timing and spacing of births. Discussants draw parallels between the traditional methods found in Islam and the modern methods available today. Some people also believe that women who want to use family planning are promiscuous; by partnering with a midwife to provide accurate medical information to participants, CRSD counters such beliefs and emphasizes that family planning has health benefits for mothers and children.

Although the workshops initially targeted women, men’s engagement has emerged as a priority area. CRSD members have noted that few couples have substantive discussions about family planning. In many cases, men are or perceive themselves to be the principal authority on family planning decisions. Men’s focus groups revealed a range of perspectives on decision-making, but many participants echoed this statement from a man who was asked whether or not he had ever discussed birth spacing with his wife: “No, no, no. Regarding birth spacing, well, that’s my decision. If my wife has a kid, it’s me who can let her go five years without giving her a child.” CRSD has worked to convince men to attend workshops with their wives and has included more messaging around joint decision-making. And that effort has paid off—in 2017, 31 percent of participants in CRSD’s workshops were men.

WFDD and CRSD have made considerable progress in dispelling myths about what religious teachings have to say about family planning, but several key challenges persist. Among married women and men in Senegal, the ideal number of children is largely unchanged; society remains staunchly pro-natalist, yet there is a lack of awareness that high fertility rates are linked to maternal and infant mortality. Moving forward, we are continuing to work with CRSD to develop new and innovative approaches that respond to these challenges.

Lauren Herzog is program coordinator and Wilma Mui is program associate at the World Faiths Development Dialogue.
To know and be known: reflections from a woman leader

How has my identity affected how I work with and support churches and communities? From the inside out, in the place of formation—a woman created, knitted together in my mother’s womb. Born into a world that shouts your identity and tries to define you before you are personally self-aware, I had to take a journey in what I call “core confidence,” knowing who I am as a beloved daughter of God, “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14).

As the oldest daughter of parents of two children, both girls, I observed early the outside world’s perspective on our family. My father, a pastor, often had male mentees who would assume there was a vacant place for a son. Many of them lamented for my father, suggesting that something was incomplete in his life, in our lives, because there was no male child in our family to learn the way of the “family business.” Well, are ministry, service and calling a family business? These mentees made statements like, “I’m your son, Pastor. Teach me, I’ll be by your side.” It was as if they were on a rescue mission for my father’s ministry, calling and gifts, which might be lost because there was no male to whom to pass on his ministry. Were my sister and I not enough?

There was a great deal of gender bias that I absorbed and was a part of, as well, in my own projections of myself and of other women. Growing up, my sister and I never thought we would be leaders in the church or in church-affiliated organizations. Our service in the church would be as a Sunday school teacher, worship team leader or youth leader, and we were content with that. The thought of any leadership roles in the church never crossed my mind, nor did anyone ever ask about or name our gifts with titles that were traditionally reserved for males. In my late twenties, I started to experience a shift in the types of responsibilities and service to which I was feeling called and drawn. How could these callings be living in the skin I’m in—Camp Pastor, Program Director, Conference Speaker, Lead Pastor, Oversight Minister?

A pouring came into my life, a flood of opportunities. “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh” (Joel 2:28). My gifts, professional skills and experience were opening doors and leading to invitations for roles in my local context that had been traditionally filled by and reserved for males. Our communities and cultures are so deeply steeped in tradition, a tradition that has often been mistaken for the Gospel. But Jesus modeled the value of women in spaces despite the customs, rituals and traditions of his day. His active love moved to heal, restore, liberate and empower women. Throughout the gospels, Jesus hears the voices of women and does not silence them. They, too, were a part of his inner circle. Women provoked, inspired and even filled Jesus with expanded compassion.

As I responded to these calls, the way I had been knit together started to emerge, gradually revealing the me as I was before the seeming restriction of my body. Like a child in the womb, developing so she can later become free and evolve, I slowly discovered that my gifts were areas for growth, not restriction.
Before I could expect others to accept me for who I am in my varied roles, I had to admit my own inner worth, value and purpose, and commit to those truths daily. Difference and gender can be spaces that easily unhone confidence and cause an internal tug and pull of self-worth. If I am welcomed and joyfully received everywhere, but internally doubt my value, then I will always be emotionally tossed back and forth by every word of praise or disregard.

During this season in my life, I began to seek out mentors, other women in leadership and pastoral roles who could walk alongside me, sharing the journey together. One of the essential spaces in this area of development has been a mentoring group, Radical Anabaptist Women (RAW). This group of women supports and mentors other women as they discern call, ministry and service. This group has helped me on the journey as one of God’s leading ladies.

Even with these supportive mentors, I still faced challenges as I took on leadership roles. For about eight years, my husband and I were co-pastors of the congregation formerly led by my father. On one occasion, the church hosted an event with a Christian comedian. Due to another obligation, my husband could not attend, so I was representing both of us. When the comedian arrived, I was introduced to him as the pastor. During his show, I sat on the front row, and, every time he did something that included audience participation, he would refer to me as the “first lady.” In many African American churches, the title “first lady” is reserved for the pastor’s wife. Yes, I was the pastor’s wife, but I was also a pastor. After about the third time he used this reference, several men and women in the audience yelled back “PASTOR!” This Christian brother could not and would not acknowledge me in my pastoral role; he could only see me from one perspective. He was in a box and wanted to keep me in one, too.

Our narrow spaces can become our equipping spaces. There is a difference between social boundaries for development and imposed boundaries of oppression. Learning to live into the who and the how of my identity started with embracing a fundamental truth in my life: I’m fearfully and wonderfully made, and God pours out his spirit on all flesh. These scriptures, among many others, have become a protective covering for the truth that I have hidden in my heart and embrace with my life. I have come to a place of personal declaration. This same truth compels me to be gracious to those who attempt to box me into their definition of “me.”

There are times when my voice or contributions have been minimized and rejected because of gender. I have learned that my value and worth as a woman cannot be defined by the imposed traditions of others. Staying rooted in God’s words anchors me in spaces that historically reject and minimize me. Whether I am considered as a woman, black woman, leader, mother, wife, pastor, colleague, friend, sister or neighbor, I am fearfully and wonderfully made!

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Lessons in gendered project design: reflections from Cambodia

Both large development actors, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and small community-based organizations, like many of MCC’s partners, offer gender equality as a response to a wide range of social ills in the face of continued challenges. MCC affirms basic gender equality principles, such as women and girls having equal access to education, economic opportunities and resources. However, there remains a disconnect between funders’ theoretical perspectives on gender equality and local organizations’ capacity to design and implement projects that take gender seriously. For the most part, local partners are willing to work for gender equality; the disconnect, then, occurs because of unrealistic donor expectations that translate into ineffective project design at the local level. In this article, I examine challenges MCC’s Cambodian partners have faced when engaging funding organizations in designing and implementing development projects that seek to address gender equality.

For over three decades now, much of MCC’s work has been primarily carried out through partnerships with local actors (churches, community-based organizations and more). More recently, other development actors have also begun to affirm that localized partnerships are critical to community transformation. However, the partnership model brings its own challenges, including the challenge of how funding agencies communicate various expectations to their local partners. A particularly pertinent example is the difficulty of translating expectations regarding gender equality in project design and implementation, with continued gaps between funders’ expectations, on the one hand, and local partners’ reality, on the other.

As development efforts become increasingly professionalized, they come with an ever more complex vocabulary. Specialized vocabulary can create significant barriers to local partners. These barriers are particularly pronounced for language regarding gendered aspects of projects. For example, a recent call for proposals from an external funder to MCC asked that projects ideally be “gender transformative” as opposed to “gender sensitive.” This choice of vocabulary led to confusion and apprehension by MCC’s partner organization that their project would not be approved if was not deemed “gender transformative.” While the partner indeed values the goals behind this term, they feared that their proposal would not be selected for funding because they had not used the funder’s exact terminology.

When gender-related concepts are unclear or poorly defined, they become unapproachable for local partners involved in project design, which disempowers those best positioned to structure projects in ways that address the needs of women and girls. Much development language is English-based, which presents significant barriers to development practitioners in small local organizations due to challenges in translating concepts into different cultural and linguistic contexts. This challenge is not limited to gender-related development matters, but it clearly plays out in this space. For example, several Cambodian organizations with which MCC partners have few employees who speak English, so concepts and ideas that are not easily translatable into Khmer remain inaccessible to much of the team. This experience has been referred to as the “untranslatability of concepts” (Footitt, Crack and Tesseur, 2018). The Khmer language, for example, does not include separate terms for gender, sex or feminism. Typically, when MCC’s Cambodian partners discuss how gender is being accounted for in...
project planning and implementation, they use English terms. It becomes difficult for the entire project team to fully understand how gender analysis is shaping project design and implementation since much of the information is subject to translation and contextualisation. In order to address such challenges, Footitt, Crack and Tesseur recommend more intentional work around language and cultural awareness among program teams as well as specific resources for language support for projects. MCC could do further work clarifying expectations around how conversations about gender are conducted and providing training for partner staff on what we mean when we talk about gender.

This challenge of language is compounded by differences in cultural expectations around gender. Gender equality is an often sensitive subject, so the imposition of foreign funders’ understanding of gender equality poses particular challenges. It can become tricky to balance respect for culturally-embedded behaviours and practices related to gender while also maintaining a commitment not to unintentionally reinforce unjust systems that deny women’s freedom and agency. The significant power differential between funding agencies (like MCC) and community-based partner organizations means that partners will work hard to satisfy donor expectations. At its worst, this desire to please donors can result in projects that may check all the right boxes for the donor, but, when put into practice, fail to actually address gender inequality. Projects designed for funders versus those that truly address inequality are far too common.

The power dynamic is further felt in what local partners can experience as a double standard for funders and their local partners. Recently, an MCC partner organization in Cambodia asked why funders require local organizations to address gender equality in project staffing and design when funders themselves are not practicing gender equality in their own staffing practices. This conversation pointed to the double standards between local partners and funding institutions around accountability for certain practices. This double standard causes the local partner to distrust the funder. It also communicated that gender is not truly important to the funder, regardless of rhetoric used.

Addressing local gender dynamics in the design, implementation and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of development projects is essential to projects’ long-term success. At the same time, development projects that incorporate poorly-understood gender concepts into their design simply to meet donor requirements will not produce sustainable change. How to work with local partners in a way that addresses gender equality in a contextually-meaningful way thus represents an ongoing challenge for organizations like MCC. There are no perfect solutions to this challenge. That said, an important starting point is awareness of language used when communicating with local partners. Language must be fully accessible to local partners; otherwise, it becomes meaningless while reinforcing imbalanced power dynamics. Also, if funding agencies push local partners for gender parity within their organizations, they must seek to follow standards of gender equality in their own staffing. Sustained attention to gender equality truly has the power to transform societies. However, if funders’ expectations and behaviours are not responsive to local partners’ capacities, it will be impossible for projects to sustainably address gender inequality.

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Rand Amer, a student from the Bassa primary school in the Madaba governorate of Jordan. Here, MCC partner Madaba for Supporting Development (MSD) operates the Green Schools program which improves access to water and encourages water conservation at nine schools. MCC photo/Meghan Mast