

# Faith-Based Organizations and Service Delivery

## *Some Gender Conundrums*

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## Acronyms

<b>ACLU</b>	American Civil Liberties Union
<b>ADEMCA</b>	Association of Community Women of Awakatán
<b>AFDC</b>	Aid to Families with Dependent Children
<b>AIDS</b>	acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
<b>CAFOD</b>	Catholic Agency for Overseas Development
<b>CCR</b>	Catholic Charismatic Revival
<b>CDC</b>	Community Development Corporation
<b>CEB</b>	Comunidades eclesiales de base
<b>CHASE</b>	Conflict, Humanitarian and Security Affairs Department
<b>CSO</b>	civil society organization
<b>DFID</b>	UK Department for International Development
<b>FBO</b>	faith-based organization
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organization
<b>NU</b>	Nahdatul Ulama
<b>RNGO</b>	religious non-governmental organization
<b>UIDC</b>	Union for Islamic Development and Culture
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development

## **Summary/Résumé/Resumen**

### ***Summary***

This paper deals specifically with faith-based organizations (FBOs) delivering services with the aim of contributing to the debates on religious organizations' engagement with questions of gender. The paper presents no conclusions or generic findings about this heterogeneous group of actors; instead, by flagging a series of conundrums, it questions the ways in which FBOs have been framed as positive agents for the advancement of gender equality.

The first conundrum is the difficulty in sometimes determining the nature of an FBO's gender agenda, because often a single organization takes different standpoints on various gender issues. The second conundrum is the complex way in which some FBOs provide women with a range of spiritual and social activities while at the same time delineating the ways in which they are expected to exercise their agency. The third conundrum lies in the fact that, while many FBOs may indeed be working successfully at the grassroots level, this does not necessarily mean that they all emerge from within the community or that they are necessarily "indigenous". The fourth conundrum has to do with the dilemmas women face when the extension of services and assistance is conditional on their conforming to the FBOs' interpretation of religiously appropriate gender roles and behaviour. Without generalizing for all service-providing FBOs, ethnographic studies nonetheless suggest that, in some instances, services are used overtly or more subtly as a means of seeking to inculcate religious values and ideologies. Often, controlling women's behaviour becomes a symbol of conformity to religious ideology. While women are the targets of many such processes, they are not simply repositories of doctrines and ideologies and often engage in acts of subversion as well as covert and overt forms of contestations.

The methodological approach followed is qualitative. The paper relies on an analysis of secondary sources on FBOs affiliated to both organized religion and faith movements that have contested their orthodoxies. The literature analysed encompasses FBOs operating in different countries and regions: Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and the United States. The paper also draws on the author's ethnographic fieldwork in one of Cairo's poorest urban settlements with a high density of religious organizations. The fieldwork was conducted between 2000 and 2007, supplemented with interviews conducted in Yemen in 2006 and in Cairo in 2009.

The paper argues that, due to the complexity and variation in FBOs, there is a need for caution in drawing policy recommendations applicable to all faith-based actors engaged in service delivery. How faith expresses itself vis-à-vis gender issues will vary along the personal belief system of the leadership, those of the practitioners, the context in which they work, the extent of vulnerability and dependence of their constituency on their services as well as other contextual factors (such as the state's political ideology on gender issues). In some cases FBOs' agendas are closely tied to those of organized religious establishments, while in others they are in direct contestation. In the light of this, in some contexts, it may be possible to engage with faith leaders of organizations delivering services to advance gender agendas, while in others such an assumption is naive in that it does not take into account the power politics behind how agendas are framed.

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### ***Résumé***

Ce document vise à contribuer aux débats sur les organisations religieuses et les questions de genre en étudiant spécifiquement lesdites organisations qui fournissent des services. L'auteure ne fait pas de constat général sur cette catégorie hétérogène d'acteurs, préférant relever une

série de casse-tête et ainsi remettre en question la manière de présenter les organisations religieuses comme des agents travaillant pour le progrès de l'égalité entre hommes et femmes.

Le premier casse-tête est la difficulté à déterminer parfois la nature de leurs objectifs concernant l'égalité des sexes car souvent, une même organisation prend des positions différentes sur diverses questions qui se rapportent à ce thème. Le deuxième tient au comportement complexe de certaines organisations religieuses, qui prévoient des activités spirituelles et sociales pour les femmes tout en définissant bien les modalités selon lesquelles elles sont censées agir. Le troisième casse-tête tient au fait que si bon nombre d'organisations religieuses travaillent avec succès au niveau local, elles ne sont pas toutes forcément issues de la population ou "autochtones". Le quatrième a trait aux dilemmes devant lesquels les femmes se trouvent placées lorsque les services et l'assistance qu'elles pourraient recevoir d'une organisation sont subordonnés à leur volonté d'adopter le rôle et le comportement que l'organisation juge convenable pour elles suivant les préceptes religieux. Sans généraliser pour toutes les organisations religieuses fournissant des services, les études ethnographiques portent à croire que, dans certains cas, les services sont utilisés ouvertement, ou de manière plus subtile, pour essayer d'inculquer des valeurs et une idéologie religieuses. Souvent, le contrôle exercé sur le comportement des femmes devient un symbole de conformité à l'idéologie religieuse. Si les femmes sont les cibles de nombreux phénomènes de ce genre, elles ne sont pas simplement dépositaires de doctrines et d'idéologies mais recourent souvent à la subversion active et ne reculent pas devant des formes de contestation plus ou moins déclarées.

L'auteure a opté pour une méthodologie qualitative. Le document s'appuie sur une analyse de sources secondaires traitant des organisations religieuses affiliées tant à une religion organisée qu'à des mouvements religieux contestataires. La littérature étudiée porte sur des organisations religieuses actives dans différents pays et régions: les Etats-Unis, l'Afrique, l'Asie, l'Europe, le Moyen-Orient et l'Amérique latine. Le document s'inspire aussi du travail de terrain ethnographique réalisé par l'auteure dans l'un des bidonvilles les plus pauvres du Caire où les organisations religieuses sont particulièrement nombreuses. À ce travail, effectué entre 2000 et 2007, sont venus s'ajouter des entretiens conduits au Yémen en 2006 et au Caire en 2009.

L'auteure fait valoir qu'en raison de la complexité et de la diversité des organisations religieuses, la prudence s'impose lorsqu'il s'agit de formuler des recommandations politiques applicables à tous les acteurs religieux fournisseurs de services. La manière dont les acteurs religieux s'expriment sur les questions de genre varie selon les convictions personnelles de leurs dirigeants et des croyants pratiquants, le contexte où ils opèrent, la vulnérabilité du public auquel ils s'adressent et le besoin qu'il a des services, ainsi que d'autres facteurs contextuels (tels que l'idéologie politique de l'État sur les questions de genre). Dans certains cas, les objectifs des organisations religieuses sont étroitement liés à ceux de la religion établie tandis que, dans d'autres, elles la contestent directement. En conséquence, il peut être possible, dans certains contextes, de dialoguer avec les dirigeants d'organisations religieuses fournissant des services pour faire avancer la cause des femmes tandis que, dans d'autres, l'idée même est naïve parce qu'elle ne tient pas compte de la politique de coercition qui se cache derrière la façon de présenter les objectifs.

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### ***Resumen***

Este documento se propone contribuir al debate sobre la participación de las organizaciones religiosas en las cuestiones de género, para lo cual se examinan específicamente aquellas de dichas organizaciones que proveen servicios. En este trabajo no se ofrecen conclusiones, ni se hacen observaciones genéricas sobre tan heterogéneo grupo de actores; en su lugar, al señalar la existencia de una serie de problemas, se cuestiona la caracterización de las organizaciones religiosas como agente positivos para el fomento de la igualdad de género.

El primer problema se refiere a la dificultad para determinar en algunos casos la naturaleza de la agenda de género de la organización religiosa, porque a menudo una misma organización adopta distintas posiciones sobre diversas cuestiones de género. El segundo problema surge por la forma tan compleja en que algunas organizaciones religiosas ofrecen a las mujeres una gama de actividades sociales y espirituales al mismo tiempo que determinan la forma en que esperan que estas cumpla con su misión. El tercer problema reside en que, si bien es cierto que muchas organizaciones religiosas trabajan bien a nivel popular, ello no significa necesariamente que todas ellas provienen de la comunidad o que son necesariamente "indígenas". El cuarto problema tiene que ver con el dilema que afrontan las mujeres cuando los servicios y la asistencia quedan condicionados a que su papel y conducta de género se ajusten a lo que las organizaciones religiosas interpretan o consideran religiosamente apropiado. Sin pretender generalizar para todas las organizaciones religiosas que prestan servicios, algunos estudios etnográficos revelan que, en algunas instancias, los servicios se utilizan, ya sea abiertamente o de forma más sutil, como el medio para inculcar ideologías y valores religiosos. Con frecuencia, ejercer control sobre el comportamiento de la mujer se convierte en un símbolo de conformidad a la ideología religiosa. Si bien son el objetivo de muchos de tales procesos, las mujeres no son meros entes receptores de doctrinas e ideologías, por lo que a menudo se sublevan o cometen actos abiertos o encubiertos de oposición.

El criterio metodológico aplicado en este trabajo es un criterio cualitativo. El documento se basa en un análisis de fuentes secundarias sobre organizaciones afiliadas a movimientos religiosos y de fe que han confrontado a sus ortodoxias. La documentación consultada abarca a organizaciones religiosas que trabajan en diferentes países y regiones: Estados Unidos, África, Asia, Europa y el Medio Oriente. El documento recoge además el trabajo de campo etnográfico del autor en uno de los asentamientos urbanos más pobres de El Cairo con una alta densidad de organizaciones religiosas. El trabajo de campo se condujo entre 2000 y 2007, y se complementó con entrevistas realizadas en Yemen en 2006 y El Cairo en 2009.

El documento sostiene que, debido a la complejidad y diversidad de organizaciones religiosas, es menester actuar con precaución a la hora de formular recomendaciones de política que se aplicarían a todas las organizaciones de este tipo que prestan servicios. La forma en que la fe se manifiesta en las cuestiones relacionadas con el género variará de acuerdo con el sistema de creencias personales del liderazgo y de los practicantes, el contexto en que se desempeñan, el grado de vulnerabilidad y dependencia de los feligreses respecto de los servicios que ofrece la organización, así como otros factores de contexto (como la ideología política del Estado sobre cuestiones de género). En algunos casos, las agendas de las organizaciones religiosas están estrechamente vinculadas a las agendas de establecimientos religiosos establecidos, mientras otras tienen planes diametralmente opuestos. A la luz de esta situación, podría ser posible trabajar en algunos contextos con los líderes religiosos de organizaciones que prestan servicios a fin de promover las agendas de género, mientras que con otras organizaciones tal suposición resultaría ingenua, dado que no toma en cuenta la política del poder que subyace tras la forma en que se enmarcan las agendas.

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## Introduction

Since the 1990s, faith-based organizations (FBOs) have risen to prominence on the agendas of donors, policy makers and activists, and featured more saliently in the scholarly literature on development and civil society. In some contexts, FBOs are among some of the oldest providers of services and care to their communities. Elsewhere, they have emerged as fairly new phenomena in response to the rise of identity politics and the limitations of state-based welfare provision.

This paper deals specifically with FBOs delivering services with the aim of contributing to the debates on religious organizations' engagement with questions of gender. In so doing, the paper presents no conclusions or generic findings about a highly heterogeneous group of actors. Instead, it interrogates some of the ways in which FBOs have been framed as positive agents for the advancement of gender equality. There is a growing body of literature highlighting the positive role faith and faith-based initiatives can play in eliciting social change. One of its central claims is the necessity of working through religious leaders and organizations who have the power to influence gender norms and values in communities where religion is an important dimension of culture. Proponents of recognizing the positive role of FBOs also point to the fact that, for many women and men, FBOs are repertoires of spiritual sustenance and social networks. Further, FBOs are also believed to have a comparative advantage over their secular counterparts in that they adopt a more holistic approach that addresses both the spiritual and material aspects of well-being as well as being more indigenous and grassroots.<sup>1</sup>

The paper does not contest the potential for positive FBO engagement with gender issues. However, it flags a series of conundrums. The first conundrum is the difficulty in sometimes determining the nature of an FBO's gender agenda, because often a single organization takes different standpoints on various gender issues. The second conundrum is the complex way in which some FBOs provide women with a range of spiritual and social activities while at the same time delineating the ways in which they are expected to exercise their agency. The third conundrum lies in the fact that, while many FBOs may indeed be working successfully at the grassroots level, this does not necessarily mean that they all emerge from within the community or that they are necessarily "indigenous". The fourth conundrum has to do with the dilemmas women face when the extension of services and assistance is conditional on their conforming to the FBOs' interpretation of religiously appropriate gender roles and behaviour. Without generalizing for all service-providing FBOs, ethnographic studies nonetheless suggest that, in some instances, services are used overtly or more subtly as a means of seeking to inculcate religious values and ideologies. Often, controlling women's behaviour becomes a symbol of conformity to religious ideology. While women are the targets of many such processes, they are not simply repositories of doctrines and ideologies and often engage in acts of subversion as well as covert and overt forms of contestations.

These four conundrums are dealt with in each of the four sections of the paper following the introduction. The introductory section of the paper presents the dynamics of the growing salience of FBOs as an actor in development policy and practice, and it examines both global economic and political forces and their dialectal relationship with more domestic factors in contributing to the emergence of FBOs. This is followed by a discussion of the emerging themes and debates (in the literature on civil society and development) pertaining to the positioning and role of FBOs in aid policy and development practice. The introduction also explains how the term FBO is used here, its implications and limitations, and touches on some of the debates on religion, gender and equality that are relevant to the discussion of service-providing FBOs.

In the second section of the paper, the complex and sometimes problematic ways in which different FBOs have sought to influence gender agendas, both in terms of national policies as

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<sup>1</sup> On examples from scholarly literature, see Tyndale (2006); Haynes (2007); Iqbal and Siddiqui (2008); and Bano and Nair (2007). On examples from development policy arena, see UNFPA (2004, 2008); UNAIDS (2009); and the World Faith Development Dialogue website, [www.wfdd.org.uk](http://www.wfdd.org.uk), accessed in April 2009.

well as community practices, is discussed. It is suggested that when mainstream FBOs (including service-providing congregations) are committed to maintaining patriarchal power hierarchies, it may be easier for women and men who espouse more progressive gender agendas to establish their own FBOs than to seek to reform existing ones. This is not to undermine the importance of efforts at reforming mainstream FBOs, nor to suggest that those that establish alternative ones are necessarily always espousing a progressive agenda. Rather it is to suggest that having the space to engage with questions of gender, religion and development practice in different frameworks is sometimes needed in order to be able to question existing paradigms and explore alternative ways of engaging with reality.

This is followed by a discussion in the third section of the ways in which FBOs can create the space and opportunities for women believers to exercise their agency, and what this means in practice. The fourth section highlights some of the problems of the “food-for-faith” exchange between some FBOs and their recipients, and elaborates on two ways in which the delivery of services is sometimes linked to indoctrination: through overt forms of conditionality associated with the observance of symbols of faith, and through more subtle forms of sustained engagement that allow for a more pervasive diffusion of ideology.

### ***Methodological issues***

The methodological approach followed here is qualitative. The paper relies on an analysis of secondary sources on FBOs affiliated to both organized religion, and to faith movements that have contested their orthodoxies. The literature analysed encompasses FBOs operating in different countries and regions: Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and the United States. The paper also draws on the author’s ethnographic fieldwork in one of Cairo’s poorest urban settlements with a high density of religious organizations. The fieldwork was conducted between 2000 and 2007, supplemented with interviews conducted in Yemen in 2006 and in Cairo in 2009.

One of the fundamental challenges to examining how FBOs’ delivering services engage with issues of gender is their diversity and complexity. Given that faith is ever-changing, the way in which it influences FBOs’ organizational structure, institutional policies and process of engagement is contingent upon the political and socioeconomic context in which it thrives and the particular moment in history in which its relationships and engagements are being analysed. What is particularly distinctive about service-providing FBOs in relation to other forms of religious organizations is that they are not only potentially influenced by ideological and doctrinal shifts in faith, but, in many cases, shifts in development policy and practice as well.

Given the wide array of ideological positions and practices of FBOs (and the two are not necessarily always aligned), the way in which gender features in their relationships and work are best understood as fluid, shaped, interpreted, relayed and contested by different actors at different levels. To focus strictly on the ideologies of FBOs working closely with organized religion would be to ignore the voices of dissent: organizations that challenge conventional religious doctrine on gender and power without forgoing their religious identity. Women’s involvement in FBOs also needs to be examined from the point of view of agency and power. Some of the key questions posed are: what kind of agency is exercised in what arena, and on what level? Finally, while many service-providing FBOs share strong similarities with their secular counterparts in terms of strategy, activities and mission, it is in the relationship with their constituency that issues of how the power of religion is used and mediated becomes more salient.

There is one obvious limitation to this paper: the case studies tend to emanate from the experiences of different Christian and Muslim denominations: consequently, FBOs affiliated to other faiths are underrepresented. This partly represents the bias in the literature as well as the author’s own field experience in Muslim and Christian contexts (in part due to the salience and diversity of Christian- and Muslim-affiliated organizations on the ground).

## Why Engage with Service-Delivery FBOs in Development Policy and Practice Now?

Faith-based organizations have been engaged in a wide range of services—as broad in scale as those delivered by secular counterparts. They range from education and health to financial assistance and in-kind support to the poor, as well as humanitarian relief in crises and less conventional forms of services such as legal aid. The scale of FBO service provision varies from one context to another. According to a report of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) quoted by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), FBOs account for 50 per cent of health service provision in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 40 per cent in Kenya and Lesotho, and 55 per cent in Uganda.<sup>2</sup>

In some countries, the role of FBOs has also been quite significant in education. In sub-Saharan Africa for example, the total number of Islamic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) providing education rose from 138 (out of a total of 1,854 NGOs) in 1980 to 891 (out of a total of 5,896) in the early 2000s (Salih 2000, cited in Haynes 2007:189). Similarly, some FBOs providing education in Latin America have expanded their educational outreach beyond national borders and have created networks to sustain their educational programme. In Venezuela, a Catholic education programme, founded on the principles of liberation theology and educational approaches inspired by Paolo Friere, has now grown to include 2,000 centres in Latin America, involving 1,000 schools for children, over 900 extension education centres and 800 focal points for alternative education (Haynes 2007).

With respect to poverty alleviation, FBOs' work has ranged from charity founded on religious precepts, such as care for widows and orphans, to large poverty alleviation programmes founded on comprehensive development, similar to the work of secular development organizations.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, some FBOs' service delivery has been directly tied to the specific sociohistoric and political contexts of particular communities. In the United States, it was observed that African-American churches establish Community Development Corporations (CDCs) to operate their community projects and

through investment of new resources from government, academia, denominations, and the philanthropic communities, [African-American] churches are more strongly equipped to carry out large-scale economic development projects. As a result, entrepreneurial churches are able to tackle whole neighbourhoods and a plethora of issues within them—education, business development, housing, commercial development, job training, crime and safety, and so on (Day 2001:194, cited in Kemper and Adkins 2005).<sup>4</sup>

While many FBOs have been providing services for centuries, it is only since the 1990s that they have risen to prominence in policy, practice and, increasingly, scholarship. A constellation of factors, some of which are interrelated, may help to shed light on this question. These include the increasing salience of identity-based politics, the impact of neoliberal policies on the demise of the welfare state and the emergence (or re-emergence in some cases) of civil society organizations (CSOs) as service providers, as well as the rise of the New Right<sup>5</sup> and its influence in US domestic and international policy. Moreover, a factor associated with the rise of identity politics which has also contributed to the proliferation of new FBOs is the evolving role of diasporas, often based in Western Europe and North America. Their role has been in

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2 [www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2008/Culture\\_Matter\\_II.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2008/Culture_Matter_II.pdf), p. 16 accessed on 13 September 2009.

3 For Muslim FBOs' support for widow and orphan aid, see Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan (2003). For a good account of FBOs from different religious backgrounds engagement in poverty alleviation, see Haynes (2007).

4 [http://faculty.smu.edu/rkemper/Faith-based\\_community\\_development.htm](http://faculty.smu.edu/rkemper/Faith-based_community_development.htm).

5 The New Right here refers to the alliance between religious "social conservatives" and predominantly secular "fiscal conservatives" in the Republican Party in the United States (Jakobsen and Bernstein 2009:12).

supporting the funding and implementation of services in countries of origin or countries sharing a religious affiliation.

The rise of identity politics globally has manifested itself through the creation of FBOs, in particular those affiliated with different denominations of Islam, Christianity and Hinduism. The emergence of FBOs can, in this light, be seen as a manifestation of the increased activism around identity representation and recognition. These FBOs' ideologies are conveyed through a variety of initiatives. In some cases, FBOs are affiliated to organized religious movements and institutions and serve either to affirm religious identity among the constituency through sociocultural activities and/or through service provision (in particular, education). However, their growing presence and the growth of fundamentalist religious discourses and activism has also spawned the establishment of counter-organizations that also work from within a faith-based framework, but seek to counter traditional and reactionary interpretations of religion.

The implementation of neoliberal policies in many countries of the South and the incurring hardship on the poor marked an increased role for CSOs (including FBOs) to fill the gap in unmet welfare needs (Clarke 2006:837). In Nigeria, Ruth Marshall (1991) describes how, against the backdrop of economic adjustment policies and their impact on vulnerable groups, Pentecostal churches (providing spiritual and material assistance) have gained popularity. While Marshall says that there are other reasons for people being drawn to this new religious wave, she says that often, through religious fellowship, followers have established informal faith-based initiatives to help co-religionists survive. For example, small neighbourhood groups not only provide spiritual support but also welfare support and services for followers, including financial resources, in-kind support and health services (Marshall 1991:25).

In other cases, the provision of welfare by FBOs is more overtly tied to local power struggles. For example, in the northwestern agricultural town of Tebourba in Tunisia, King observed that in the wake of the economic liberalization policies pursued by the Tunisian government, rural inequalities have widened. As a consequence, new mechanisms for channelling aid to the poor have emerged. Resources provided by the wealthy landowners are then allocated "according to an Islamic hierarchy for allocating resources" (King 2000:208). Islamic institutions and welfare-providing agencies in Tunisia have become more salient in determining when the poor get aid (for example, at religious festivals), how the *zakat* money<sup>6</sup> gets allocated, and who among the poor are prioritized to receive aid. The Islamization of the community support system has occurred in a context where the wealthy owners have purposely chosen neotraditional, religious channels for supporting the impoverished farmers. The growing power of faith-based agents is directly attributed to the economic liberalization policies which have empowered private landowners. In turn, these have chosen this particular channel for engaging in welfare assistance since it does not challenge the class structure or power hierarchy.

In contexts of very weak state provision of welfare, more attention was focused, in the 1990s, on the role of FBOs in the delivery of health services (in particular outpatient health care) and in the extension of charity and relief, as well as the provision of educational services. Former president of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, was intrigued by the critical role FBOs played in the delivery of health in some African contexts. He set up partnerships between the World Bank and FBOs and helped channel resources to them. His collaboration with the former Archbishop of Canterbury led to the initiation of the World Faiths Development Dialogue in 1998, in which FBOs could articulate their position on development policies and issues.

Moreover, the rise of the Religious Right in the United States played a critical role in the growing power of FBOs in domestic and foreign policy. Ronald Reagan, during his presidency (1981–1989), sought to mobilize FBOs affiliated to the New Right to support his domestic and foreign policy. Among the actors that he courted were many FBOs with evangelical origins.

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<sup>6</sup> Zakat is a small percentage of one's wealth given to charity, usually to the poor and needy.

During the presidency of George W. Bush, their power and impact on foreign policy and international development grew further.<sup>7</sup>

How the administration of Barack Obama will engage with FBOs and groups will be significant for domestic welfare policy and international development. Shortly after Obama's appointment as president, in January 2009, he overturned Bush's policy prohibiting federal funding of organizations which are in favour of abortion or offer advice on abortion in cases of unplanned pregnancies, commonly known as the "global gag rule".<sup>8</sup>

The global gag rule, a policy put in place by Reagan, rescinded by Bill Clinton and reinstated by President Bush, is believed to have had a detrimental impact on the work of organizations extending vital reproductive health services to women in deprived settings (Pearson and Tomalin 2008:53-55). Repealing the global gag rule was anathema to the New Right and its affiliate FBOs. However, it seems unclear whether this initiative is part of the larger Obama administration's policy to contain FBOs' engagement in politics and development. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), an activist organization acting as an advocacy and watchdog over government policies, recently criticized President Obama's initiative of forming a federal advisory committee made up of religious leaders to advise the president on federal spending, as well as a variety of other issues such as AIDS and women's reproductive health care. The ACLU is concerned that since Obama did not first change the existing rules (from the Bush administration) that allow federally funded religious organizations to apply religious hiring tests to employees, this initiative is going to increase FBOs' access to federal government without having the necessary checks and balances to ensure a non-discriminatory employment policy (ACLU 2009).

While FBOs have historically existed in many countries of the Middle East for centuries (since the nineteenth century in the case of Egypt), there has been a growth in new Muslim and Islamic<sup>9</sup> FBOs being founded in the region, especially in the Gulf region. The 1970s rise in oil prices meant a surge of finances available to oil-producing Gulf countries, some of which were channelled to the newly formed and growing number of FBOs operating on a transnational level. Saudi Arabia in particular has been a generous donor to FBOs working in the region and beyond (including in poorer parts of South Asia and more recently the Balkans). Benthall argues that the restrictions on funding from and to Islamic organizations imposed by the Bush administration in the wake of the attacks on the United States of 11 September 2001 could mean that some of the funding networks would go underground (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003).

The proliferation and expansion of diaspora communities in Western Europe and North America is another important factor that has generated the creation of many transnational FBOs. The politicization of these organizations varies. While some Hindu organizations, such as Hindu Aid, channel support from British Hindus on a non-sectarian basis, others, such as Sewa International and Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, are notoriously reputed for supporting sectarian Hindu nationalism (Clarke 2006). FBOs established in the diaspora are multipurpose: "they help the faithful to maintain their cultural identity, to help the poor overseas and to provide alternatives to the secular or Christian organizations which dominate aid flows to the developing world" (Clarke 2006:838). FBOs established in the diaspora have played multiple roles: they have acted as implementing agencies, channelled funds to partners or played an advocacy role (or all three). For example, Islamic Relief, one of the largest transnational FBOs, was established in the United Kingdom and has been operating through field offices in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East since 1984. Muslim Aid is another leading British FBO established in 1985 and now operating in 50 countries (Knowles 2003).

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7 Jakobsen and Bernstein 2009; Kaplan 2004; Clarke 2006.

8 It was referred to as the global gag rule because of its censorship implications, denying US taxpayer dollars to clinics that even mentioned abortion to women with unplanned pregnancies (Nasaw 2009).

9 The term Muslim FBOs is used in this paper to refer to FBOs that engage with Islam as a spiritual religion and the term Islamic FBOs to those that follow a more political-religious engagement.

Diasporas in the United Kingdom and United States have played a critical role in establishing and funding FBOs. There are many reasons for this. First, these happen to be some of the oldest and most established migrant communities, many with strong financial repertoires and social links to their countries of origin. Second, the strength of Christian FBOs in European and American contexts has driven diaspora communities following other faiths (Muslim, Hindu, Orthodox Christians and so on) to establish parallel organizations which can then serve their own religious constituencies, both in their countries of origin as well as in other countries where the same faith is shared. Third, government policies have also supported FBOs established domestically. For example, the UK Department of International Development (DFID) has funded UK-based service-providing FBOs such as the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD-UK), Christian Aid, Islamic Relief and World Vision UK. Special funds were established for FBOs through the Civil Society Fund and DFID's Conflict and Humanitarian and Security Affairs Department (CHASE) (Taylor 2007:8).

Moreover, FBOs have also emerged in the light of fragile states in conflict and post-conflict situations. In many cases, they stepped in to meet pressing humanitarian and welfare needs (the case of Hezbollah's welfare organizations' activism following the Israeli occupation and, more recently, following the war with Israel in 2006). In *The Charitable Crescent* (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003), humanitarian aid by FBOs in Afghanistan, Somalia and Sudan is also being extended against a backdrop of states incapable of delivering basic needs.

The increased visibility of FBOs in development scholarship is partly attributed to the reframing of development to make it more comprehensive and complex. Haynes points to Amartya Sen's conceptualization of human development in terms of quality of life which needed to be understood in political, economic, social, cultural and moral terms. Understood in those terms, it allowed for the recognition of the role of religion and FBOs because it recognized their resonance in people's moral and cultural lives (Haynes 2007:4). Tyndale also suggests that FBOs are becoming more visible as agents that challenge the way in which ethics and values have been neglected in the development literature: "A major contribution that faith-based groups can make to the development debate is to urge that the values embedded in development processes, at the macro- as well as the micro-level, should be made explicit" (Tyndale 2006:163).

The changing nature of scholarship on civil society has also brought FBOs to the fore. Critics of mainstream literature on civil society point to the way in which development NGOs have become equated with civil society and the way in which important actors, including FBOs, have been excluded from the discussion of civil society. Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan (2003), Clarke (2006) and Tvedt (2002) have pointed to the heterogeneity of the civil society sector and the way in which the literature has focused almost exclusively on secular NGOs.

The literature on FBOs has been highly polarized, however. On the one end, there is a discussion of FBOs as promoting a more holistic vision of development that recognizes the spiritual and material needs of human beings.<sup>10</sup> Such literature also points to the repertoires of social and human capital that characterizes their work. The grassroots connectedness with communities who follow the same faith is also attributed to FBOs.

For example Berger (2003:37) notes that

Through their connections to extensive networks of believers—representing a wealth of social, financial, cultural, and spiritual capital—RNGOs [Religious NGOs] embody the means through which to reach and mobilize significant portions of the world's population. Religious nongovernmental organizations represent a unique concern with the spiritual and moral capacities of those they seek to serve—capacities at the root of people's ability to transform their own condition and that of those around them.

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the literature from the World Bank-sponsored World Faiths Development Dialogue.

On a similar note, Jamoul and Wills (2008) have argued that FBOs are not only relevant in developing country contexts but also in developed countries, where inviting these organizations to take part in broad-based initiatives can enhance not only their own participation in civic life but also enrich civil society engagement by bringing in conventionally marginalized voices. Jamoul and Wills base their argument on an initiative, London Citizens, which actively sought the participation of FBOs in the area. They argued that in the context of minimal political participation, “faith organisations are often havens of association, support and solidarity in the contemporary city, particularly for ethnic minority groups” (Jamoul and Wills 2008:2049). Since many religious traditions attach the same importance to values of charity, service and public engagement, London Citizens sought to capitalize on these common beliefs in order to build bridges across different faith groups. It also involved secular organizations to seek common ways of enhancing political participation and activism among the city’s residents (Jamoul and Wills 2008).

Others have treated the implications of the growing surge of FBOs with more scepticism. There are concerns regarding the nature, scope and politics of funding for these organizations. Tvedt (2002) is especially critical of the involvement of FBOs in humanitarian aid, arguing that this is intrinsically associated with covert politics and power relations that are not always fully recognized in the development literature. Tønnessen (2007) has problematized the way in which relationships between aid organizations and partners overseas overlook the dynamics of religion in practice. There are also concerns regarding the nature and role of FBOs in their own communities, in terms of promoting exclusivist identities, contributing to sectarian practices and being implicated in violent conflict.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Defining a service delivery FBO***

The lines demarcating what constitutes an FBO are blurred in reality because of the fluidity of organizational structures and the diversity in ways in which faith expresses itself. UNFPA categorizes FBOs as:

1. faith-based and/or faith-inspired development organizations (for example, Islamic relief, Christian Aid, Catholic Relief Services, and their national, regional and international chapters);
2. interfaith- or multifaith-based organizations: organizations that come together for a common cause guided by common values derived from different religious traditions, and provide services that are beyond the scope of a single congregation;
3. local congregations: people who worship together and reach out socially (for example, by organizing food pantries, donations of clothes, in-home visits and assistance to the elderly); and
4. ministries of religious affairs (particularly, but not only, in countries where NGOs may, for whatever reason, find it difficult to register or function.

Since the above definition encompasses both service-providing and non-service providing organizations, this paper will use a narrower definition, which includes some of the above categories, but excludes others. For the purpose of this paper, *a service-providing FBO is defined as a civil society organization of a religious character or mandate engaged in various kinds of service delivery.*

With respect to the organizational nature, it was considered that a focus strictly on faith-based developmental organizations (the first category in UNFPA’s definition) would be too limiting since it is only one model of how faith-based services are channelled. It also tends to be a predominantly Western model of administering services, while in reality other models, especially those which are more tied to religious congregations, are also very active in service

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<sup>11</sup> Clarke and Jennings (2008) summarize some of these counter-arguments.

delivery. CSOs here encompass both NGOs as well as places of worship (congregations) that are engaged in service delivery. Some have suggested distinguishing between organizations that aim to recruit members (places of worship) as opposed to those with a public mission (Berger 2003:16). Such a categorization has not been followed here because some places of worship inspire and recruit adherents, as well as pursue a wider public mission of service delivery or activism. For example, the community-based organizations established by proponents of liberation theology actively sought to increase membership while undertaking a major public mission of challenging political and economic oppressions nationwide through advocacy and service provision. The Pentecostal cells that have proliferated in Latin America also do not follow a conventional NGO structure nor a conventional church hierarchical structure, they are lay organized, yet they both attract worshippers and pursue a public mission of service provision.

Jeavons (2004:144) also argues against the consideration of congregations as FBOs on the premise that such congregations do not identify themselves as such:

Some would argue, and I am one of them, that congregations should not be described as FBOs under any circumstances. First, it is an affront to common sense when one looks at the use of the language and how people who are members of congregations of every type think of them. (I have yet to talk to a single person whose first inclination in describing her or his own parish, church, synagogue, or mosque is to call it an FBO.) But even more importantly, I would argue that congregations should not be called FBOs because it blurs the very distinctions that are critical for policy purposes.

However, to restrict the use of service-delivering FBO only to those organizations that identify themselves as such would be to override a wide set of organizations that do provide services on a significant scale. Further, self-identification is fluid. It may also be that in some contexts these congregations would identify themselves as FBOs, while in others they would choose another form of identification.

The definition adopted in this paper excludes ministries as well as religious congregations that do not provide services. It also does not examine religious or political movements that provide service delivery directly. However, welfare-providing organizations established or affiliated by movements, such as the Hezbollah in Lebanon, are included here because of their organizational set-up.

The paper also excludes interfaith organizations, networks and alliances of FBOs that engage with questions of gender and development in policy and practice (including service delivery). In the past decade, a series of important networks have emerged, such as the Women, Faith and Development Alliance<sup>12</sup> which draws on FBOs from different faiths, as well as ones emerging to address gender issues in contexts of particular religions to advance progressive gender agendas as well as more reactionary ones such as the World Congress of Families.<sup>13</sup> Further there are networks and coalitions which mobilize around particular faiths, such as the Women Living Under Muslim Law network. While their work has been very significant in influencing gender agendas, their organizational structures as networks and coalitions and interfaith initiatives differs from the service-delivering CSOs examined here.

Defining faith in terms of religious character and mandate<sup>14</sup> allows for examining the many possibilities in which religion influences the agency and identity of the organization (Clarke and Jennings 2008:14), along both organizational as well as programmatic levels. Ebaugh et al. (2006:2269–2270) suggest examining the religious nature of FBOs in terms of three dimensions:

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12 [www.wfd-alliance.org/AUpartners.htm](http://www.wfd-alliance.org/AUpartners.htm).

13 [www.worldcongress.org/WCF/wcf\\_principles.htm](http://www.worldcongress.org/WCF/wcf_principles.htm).

14 This is borrowed from Clarke and Jennings (2008:14).



- Service: the manner in which they relate to clients;
- Staff: the manner in which staff are hired and relate to each other; and
- Organizational: the public face that organizations present.

Organizations are not required to have all the criteria cited above to be religious; however, these criteria present useful terrains for exploration. Due to the limitations of space, in this paper the term religious organization is generically defined and covers a very broad spectrum of organizations. These organizations vary from those that are defined as FBOs but which essentially engage in secular development work (such as the Agha Khan) to those which are highly political in their religious expression (such as the organizations established by Hezbollah). However, this is the reality of the plurality of faith-based actors providing services. There is no singular model of how religion is mediated in practice which predominates.

For the purposes of this paper, service provision in relation to FBOs encompasses organizations engaged in charity, development and humanitarian services. FBOs engaged in advocacy are only included if they are also engaged in service provision. The inclusion of charity, development and humanitarian service delivery does risk broadening the definition to include several forms of activism. However, all three are included because, first, the activities often overlap and, second, organizations may engage in all three forms of activism at different stages according to the changing political context. Organizations engaged strictly in advocacy are excluded, not because their activities do not have important implications for service delivery or for gender relations and hierarchies in religious institutions, but because their activities are very often concentrated at the level of policy arena and policy-making processes rather than the direct channelling of services to clients, beneficiaries or recipients. It goes without saying that some of the FBOs championing reformist gender agendas do not provide service delivery but focus more on advocacy. A case in point is Catholics for Free Choice whose advocacy work has an important bearing on reproductive health services and reproductive and sexual rights. However, their engagement on a different terrain—that of advocacy, rather than service-delivery per se—means that they are less relevant for the approach taken in this paper.

### ***Debating gender and religion in relation to service-delivery FBOs***

The wider debates on gender equality, religion and development have resonances for the exploration of the role of FBOs in service delivery, especially those touching on the significant role that religion plays in women's lives. A growing body of scholarship has challenged the way in which development has problematized religion and engaged with it as an obstacle to women's well-being. From this body of literature, three arguments have been identified here as particularly relevant to the discussions on gender and service-providing FBOs:

1. the influential role that religious leaders and organizations play at the grassroots level which can be capitalized upon to promote gender equality;
2. religious organizations offer social network repertoires which women draw on as part of their daily survival strategies; and
3. some forms of assistance are indigenous and in tune with grassroots realities of women, in addition to representing an alternative form of development that speaks to their spiritual as well as material needs in a holistic manner.

In contexts where religion is a salient aspect of culture, religious leaders are important actors whose influence cannot be overlooked. Engaging religious leaders and organizations may offer an important pathway of eliciting change to help address various forms of gender discrimination (in particular those relating to culturally sensitive issues, such as reproductive health and sexuality). UNFPA (2004) has advanced this line of argument. It shows how, through partnerships with FBOs across the world, processes of social change to address issues

such as AIDS and reproductive health rights have been catalysed. This has led to positive results both at the community and national levels.<sup>15</sup>

The second argument, also building on the important role of religion in many communities, suggests that FBOs play an important role in people's daily strategies of survival by being in and of themselves repertoires of social networks and connections. According to one study on FBOs in South Asia,

Faith-based community development may be characterized as social capital development to the extent that it builds on relationships within the community of interest and then expands these relationships to include external individuals, associations, and institutions. When religious institutions join with labour unions, schools, banks, and other enterprises, the chances for transforming the community increase dramatically beyond what typically occurs when 'top-down' planning approaches are imposed by external agencies....So, there is a significant multiplier effect for faith-based community development in such contexts (Kemper and Adkins 2005:95).

The repertoires inherent in FBOs are particularly pertinent for women, according to a survey involving a sample of 600 women from three different regions in Ghana. The survey revealed that 62 per cent of those who said they belonged to associations were in religious groups (Tsikata and Darkwah 2008). Dzodzi Tsikata, the co-author of the study, suggested that women's participation in religious congregations provided them with an opportunity to establish connections with other faithful believers who have something to offer in terms of services, goods or information sharing. These connections become important for acquiring knowledge of the available channels of assistance in the wider community.<sup>16</sup>

The third line of argument in favour of recognizing the positive role FBOs can play in women's lives is based on the idea that faith-based interventions do not only engage with material development but with the spiritual dimensions of well-being as well. It is argued that FBOs have a more holistic view of development since "their theories about change do not only concern outward, social but also inner and personal transformation" (Tyndale 2006:172). In many cases, arguments on combining spirituality with development have also tended to emphasize the "indigenesness" of the spiritual and development path pursued. For example, according to Otzoy (2003), in Awakatán, Guatemala, women organized and established the Association of Community Women of Awakatán (ADEMCA) in order to promote agricultural development in a context where women and men have suffered from decades of armed conflict and poverty. While the women active in the association belong to the Christian as well as Mayan faiths, they see their work as both developmental and spiritual, with no division between the two. Indigenous forms of engaging with spirituality permeate how they approach their work (Otzoy 2003).

These contentions have been important in presenting the possibilities of FBOs acting as channels for improving women's lives. While this paper in no way presents an assessment of the impact of FBOs on women's equality, some of the selected case studies explored below show a level of complexity and ambiguity that contests some of the positive assumptions about religious organizations in relation to gender questions.

### ***Service-providing FBOs engaging the gender agendas***

FBOs may be challenging gender relations on one level and reinforcing it on another.

For example, in the case of Malawi, Muslim, Catholic and Protestant FBOs delivering services were challenging the practice of widow-cleansing (the expectation that a widow have sex with

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, UNFPA (2008).

<sup>16</sup> Personal communication, Dzodzi Tsikata, 4 November 2009.

her deceased husband's brother or relative in order for her life to move on). Yet at the same time, their opposition to the government campaign promoting the use of condoms reinforced women's vulnerability to AIDS (Rankin et al. 2008).

Malawi is a country with a high prevalence rate of AIDS. As in many other countries where the epidemic is heterosexually driven, women are more vulnerable to infection than men (especially younger women who are coerced or pressured into relationships with older men who have multiple partners—also a manifestation of their economic dependency on men). In such a context, the Malawian government's campaign to address the AIDS epidemic included conveying messages on abstinence and fidelity but also on condom use. FBOs working in Malawi have played a pivotal role in the extension of badly needed infrastructure and hence were quite popular and influential. However, their outreach in the community was used to undermine the government's message on condom use. They opposed the use of a condom in a cultural context where it was accepted that men could be sexually promiscuous, but where abstinence and fidelity were expected of women. A failure to address this fundamental manifestation of gender inequality and its root cause—the exercise of patriarchal power in shaping the cultural double standards for women's and men's sexuality (“faithfulness is a female virtue”)—revealed that a policy which on the surface seems to be gender-neutral is ultimately gender-biased.<sup>17</sup>

One of the assumptions regarding the nature of FBOs has been their special connectivity to the most marginalized and excluded peoples. There is a myth that all FBOs, by virtue of their grassroots connections, represent people's agendas, values, needs and priorities.<sup>18</sup> Certainly, many FBOs have immense outreach potential because of the common religious affiliation with people. However, this is not synonymous with being grassroots or pursuing a grassroots agenda. Bayat (2000) identifies a pattern in the agency of a wide-ranging set of Islamic groups in the Middle East (including Turkey and Iran) in which they provide badly needed welfare services for the poor, but the latter, instead of being actors influencing the course of welfare policy, are its objects (Bayat 2000:18–19).

Undoubtedly some FBOs are organic and stem from the grassroots, while others are not and seek to impose their own values and ideologies rather than respond to so-called local gender agendas. Some transnational FBOs, in particular, have, through their top-down structures, sought to export their own doctrines, especially in the area of gender hierarchies and roles. Ghodsee's (2007) work highlights some key dilemmas regarding the work of proselytizing transnational FBOs whose commitment to export their own religious doctrine obliterates local variants of religious practice. In the case of Eastern Europe, Wahabi transnational FBOs exported a highly conservative strand of Islam that was at odds with the kind of Islam that was practised and followed by the locals. Wahabi Islam, practised in countries such as Saudi Arabia, is an extremely traditional strand of the religion, presenting the most rigid and reactionary religious positions on gender issues. The Islam followed by the local Muslim communities is premised on an understanding of the Hanafi School of Islamic jurisprudence. The school, by and large, allows for the most flexible interpretation of texts and is relaxed in the area of gender rights. While both schools of Islam belong to the Sunni denomination, they present radically different ideological implications on how the faith is to be lived.

The work of the Saudi FBOs has significant implications for gender politics. Ghodsee (2007:533) argued that in Albania, Bosnia, Macedonia and eventually Kosovo, “reforming the dress and behaviour of women was a strident goal of these Islamic charities”. Bulgaria had a legacy of communist rule that promoted egalitarian gender roles and “Muslim women no longer felt the need to cover themselves, had long joined the workforce and enjoyed autonomy from their fathers and husbands” (Ghodsee 2007:542). Their Islamic clothing reflected the cultural

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<sup>17</sup> This is not to undermine the important partnerships forged between some international organizations and FBOs in addressing the AIDS epidemic in other contexts (see, for example, UNFPA 2004).

<sup>18</sup> UNFPA (2004) is one example where this myth is perpetuated.

adaptation of the veil, which took the form of a colourful headscarf tied under their chin and which left some hair visible (Ghodsee 2007:540–544). The Islamic FBOs established in the Muslim part of Southern Bulgaria (the Pomaks) did not approve of this and other aspects of Bulgarian Muslims' lives. One such organization was the Union for Islamic Development and Culture (UIDC), an organization engaged in welfare service delivery as well as da'wa (prosletization). The UIDC targeted women through its separate women's section with messages about how the Islam they were living was not the authentic Islam and how they had deviated from the true teachings of Islam, which the UIDC professed to hold

The impact of the Wahabi FBOs on the community was that some men and women, especially among the younger generation, were beginning to believe that "true" Islam requires a good woman to stay home and obey her husband. More women were choosing not to study or work and stay at home in order to conform to the "true" teachings of Islam. The FBOs were insisting on the adopting of the more conservative version of the veil in order to be a good Muslim, while simultaneously adopting a rights-based discourse to defend the rights of women who chose to put on the veil. The irony of pursuing a discourse on the absolute necessity of veiling while championing women's right to choose stimulated much debate in Bulgarian society, pitting advocates of religious freedom against women's rights NGOs. Ghodsee (2007:528) argues that the rise of orthodox faith-based Islam, which was pressing women to embrace conservative gender roles in Eastern Europe, may create new challenges for Western-oriented women's NGOs by pitting "women's rights" against "religious rights".

The critical element of this debate is that it is locked in secular versus religious polarizations. Instead, the work of the FBOs should have generated public discussions about deconstructing hegemonic discourses about what constitutes the true religion vis-à-vis gender expectations, drawing on the interface between the cultural and the religious in the Bulgarian context. Yet transnational FBOs working in Bulgaria sought to impose their particular version of Islam, modelled on the Arab Gulf cultural constructs. In so doing, they denounced local expressions of Islam as "inauthentic". Thus the argument was displaced from one about how culture mediates the understanding of religion to one about what constitutes the "true" religion.

Another case of an FBO parachuting into local settings and displacing indigenous expressions of religious agency is the Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation in Somalia. The foundation, a Saudi-funded organization providing welfare, was active in the humanitarian efforts in Somalia. The foundation pressured women who were followers of the Muslim faith to abandon the local forms of veiling and comply with the Wahabi-inspired version of appropriate Muslim attire. Women were pressured into adopting the *niqab*—a veil that fully covers the face and is worn with loose clothing that does not reveal any part of the body (Le Sage 2004:25, cited in Kroessin and Mohammed 2008:204).

Yet FBOs espousing conservative gender agendas have not only been challenged by secular feminists but by religious adherents whose faith has led them to the development of alternative framings of gender issues. Some of them have established alternative FBOs which have created the space to develop more progressive religious framings of gender issues and have provided a platform to voice their visions. In contrast, if the same religious adherents were to work in pre-existing FBOs that are closely affiliated to organized religious establishments, they may not necessarily be able to create a consensus among the leadership of the organization to pursue a gender reform agenda. Without undermining the contextual factors influencing the organizational operation of Sisters in Islam in Malaysia and Nahdatul Ulama Muslimat in Indonesia, the former seems to have more space to engage in contentious gender politics for the reasons mentioned above.

Nahdatul Ulama (NU) is Indonesia's largest FBO with a membership of 40 million and is one of the largest Muslim associations in the world (Candland and Nurjanah 2004:2). It is also one of the largest organizations providing a multiplicity of services (educational and otherwise) to its constituency. The women's wing, known as the NU Muslimat, cannot enact and pursue policies

on a community level unless it has the necessary backing from the leadership of the organization. It needs to constantly negotiate positions on gender with the (male) clerical hierarchy occupying leadership positions in the organization (the Ulama). The women's wing contested the prohibition of family planning by NU until eventually the NU Ulama issued a fatwa condoning the use of family planning in 1969. Until they received the green light from the male leadership, the women members had to conform to the position of the parent organization. Negotiating positions favourable to gender equality through the women's wing is not always successful. For example, in 2004, the Indonesian Ulama's Council rejected a proposal to allow abortion in cases of rape or incest. The proposal put forward by 13 Muslim scholars was also supported by members of the women's wing of the NUI. However, some leading clerical members of the NU formed part of the Ulama council that had rejected the proposal (*Jakarta Post* 2004).

On the other hand, Sisters in Islam, which provides service delivery in the form of free legal counselling to women and men who are dealing with Shariah and civil law problems, does not have to dedicate its efforts to negotiating and bargaining with a higher power within the organization to create consensus for a progressive gender agenda. Sisters in Islam is an organization established in 1988 in Malaysia, which identifies itself as "a group of Muslim women committed to promoting the rights of women within the framework of Islam".<sup>19</sup> With a mandate of addressing gender issues within the framework of Islam, it has played an active role in contesting traditional interpretations of the Koran that have been used to justify discriminatory law and social practice. Zeinab Anwar, the director of the organization, has been active through Sisters in Islam in seeking to engage in Islamic jurisprudence with a different lens, and revealing the possibilities of alternative textual interpretations. Sisters in Islam recently hosted a conference to initiate a "global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family", which involved the participation of some 250 activists and scholars from 47 countries. Anwar explained that the meeting brought together feminists working with religion, those working within a human rights framework, scholars of Islam and the Muslim world, lawyers, journalists and activists. The one common factor that brought them together, she argued, was that they shared a mission to break the monopoly that authoritarian governments and religious leaders have over how Islam is understood and used to govern their lives, noted Anwar (2009). What is significant is that she did not have to negotiate with a central body or with religious authority in order to engage in such wide-scale deliberations on gender matters and religion. Sisters in Islam could take this decision without having to refer first to a higher religious authority for permission. The process of arriving at consensus and negotiating the terms of engagement may have been more arduous and volatile if they were working within a conservative FBO.

A counter-argument to this would be that organizations that work on the fringes may not be as successful in influencing mainstream policies and the majority of believers, compared to those who secure the support of the religious hierarchy. While there is certainly a need to open dialogue and seek inroads among the dominant religious hierarchies, there is a strong risk of co-option without a space to pursue independent agendas that allow for deconstructions and reinterpretations, rather than negotiation and bargaining within set parameters.

In short, notwithstanding the important stances which some FBOs have taken to advance certain women's rights, to talk about an FBO's gender agenda in general may be problematic because of the multiple stances taken on different gender issues. Stances and policy positions also change according to time and context, thus making it difficult to make sound generalizations. On the other hand, the case studies in this section have suggested that different power struggles often underlie the framing of standpoints on gender issues, rather than it being simply a question of the interpretation of religion. Consequently, some reformists have often found that establishing parallel FBOs may provide an alternative channel through which to contest gender positions instead of engaging in struggles with power hierarchies from within

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19 [www.sistersinislam.org.my](http://www.sistersinislam.org.my).

existing FBOs, which may be very difficult to reform. In any case, the reform option is not always politically or culturally viable, especially in very conservative or politically repressive settings. However, in contexts where reformist currents or organizations are allowed to thrive, parallel FBOs may offer women the space and forum for framing alternative agendas without their needing to abandon their faith.

### ***Women's agency in FBOs: Co-opting, constraining or enabling?***

Interpreting women's involvement in FBOs as leaders, workers, volunteers and members has been a point of contention, as is women's involvement in religion in general.<sup>20</sup> Nancy Fraser's attempt to explain the increasing numbers of women in the United States who join evangelical groups that profess patriarchal domesticated gender roles is pertinent here. She suggests that faith gives women from low-income families a means to manage the insecurity associated with economic hardship that they are enduring as a consequence of neoliberal policies. "Many working-class women in the United States are deriving something significant from this ideology, something that confers meaning on their lives. But feminists have not succeeded in understanding what it is and how it works. Nor have we figured out how to talk to them or what feminism can offer them in its place" (Fraser and Bedford 2008:303). There are several postulations here relevant to the discussion of gender, ideology and FBOs. The suggestion that women's participation in religion is about class may be revealing with respect to the surge of interest in evangelical organizations in the United States, but it does not explain the attraction of religion to women of all classes, backgrounds and orientations who are actively becoming involved in FBOs. The assumptions that religion acts as a safety net in times of economic hardship neglects the multitude of factors that makes religion appealing for women and men.

Moreover, Fraser's reference to substituting gender-conservative religious ideologies with feminism is significant because of its inferences of substituting one ideology for another. Is religion only an ideology for women who follow it or is it also a source of spirituality, and can feminism represent both an ideology and a source of spirituality? FBOs providing services are not synonymous with the multiple forms of women's engagement with and relationship to religion. However, the examples below suggest that women's agency in FBOs can be both ideological and spiritual, as well as motivated by more practical concerns (such as improved social standing and access to social networks). Feminist critiques of women's involvement in religion in its different forms tend to contest the gendered impact of "the constraints of religion, not the value of spirituality" (Baden and Goetz 1998:31-32). The example of the Feminist Majority Foundation, cited below, is a case in point.

While women are heavily involved in FBOs, this is typical of non-faith-based ones as well. Women are often the majority of paid workers in third sector organizations in general (Ishkanian and Lewis 2007:308-309). Nor is the absence of women in positions of leadership in FBOs exceptional. While women have been present in third sector organizations, in most cases they do not occupy leading positions (Ishkanian and Lewis 2007:308-309). This becomes critical if an international organization or government channels funding to FBOs without taking into account its gender implications. This is especially the case in contexts where funds are directed to FBOs affiliated with organized religious denominations where opportunities for women's exercise of leadership and agency have been particularly constrained. Notwithstanding the need to enhance women's leadership in faith- and non-faith-based organizations, it is particularly challenging in FBOs in which male leadership is sometimes legitimized on religious grounds.<sup>21</sup> In such contexts, questioning male leadership does not only imply questioning social patriarchal constructions but also questioning the sacredness of religious doctrine.

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20 This is not to suggest that women's agency in FBOs is either on a provider or receiver level. Women often relate to FBOs through multiple relationships: a woman recipient of relief aid may occasionally do some voluntary work for the organization, a woman recipient of educational religious programmes held by the organization may herself be a teacher or leader of another religious study group, and so on. As with men's agency, women's agency is framed in terms of the relationships they establish on multiple levels and in different capacities.

21 This is not to suggest that this is the case with all FBOs. In fact, in some cases, religion is used to contest the notion of male exclusive leadership. The point being made here is that in some cases, religion is used to legitimize patriarchal hierarchies.

When Bush announced the special scheme to cut taxes and provide subsidies to promote FBOs' engagement in welfare provision,<sup>22</sup> the Feminist Majority Foundation—a US non-faith-based organization dedicated to women's equality—expressed concern about the implications of such a policy on women's role and agency. Eleanor Smeal, the foundation's director, argued that such an initiative would lead to "the ascendancy of male-dominated hierarchical organizations into social programs".<sup>23</sup> She argued that since most of the poor are women and children, and ministers and priests are disproportionately male in faith-based programmes delivering services, "females are systematically reduced from participatory decision-makers to the recipients of trickled-down aid". Smeal feared that not only would opportunities for women to exercise their agency as subjects be minimized in traditional religious settings where men occupy the highest ranking positions in hierarchies, but that the overshadowing of such hierarchies in welfare will increase their power and hold over women as recipients. "Institutions that are the last to change in favour of the inclusion of women will now be enhanced as gatekeepers of aid to women and children—with monies provided by all taxpayers, male and female", she argued.

Women of different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds have played an active role as workers and volunteers in FBOs, and have given of their time, expertise and resources to support these organizations. Often they have used their access to social networks and connections in the service of these organizations. Women join FBOs for multiple reasons. Some have found the experience spiritually fulfilling; others have found working for a FBO is a way of living one's religious commitment and obligation (Mahmoud 2005).

The experience of women's activism in FBOs and movements in Latin America in the 1960s—when liberation theology was popular—was considered emancipatory in claiming space, voice and representation for women. However, the experience of women in the 1960s in liberation theology movements is very different from their experience today with the same movement—the political nature of the movement has changed in the light of the shifting dynamics between the Left, trade unions, the Catholic Church hierarchy and lay members. In the light of the increasing salience of Pentecostalism among women in many parts of Latin America, comparative perspectives on contemporary women in both these movements sheds light on some of the ways in which agency has been observed.

In the case of community-based Catholic organizations or *comunidades eclesiales de base* (CEBs) and Pentecostal cells in Colombia and Guatemala, there is no direct contestation to traditional gender roles; however, women attempt to exercise power in different arenas (Drogus 1994). Drogus suggests that while both ideological frameworks are very far removed from feminism, "nonetheless, both groups offer women unaccustomed opportunities for leadership within the religious organization that could contribute to their empowerment" (Drogus 1994:7). Yet the evidence that is put forward suggests that women's experience in both types of FBOs is of increased agency that may offer opportunities for better coping strategies, but is not necessarily about transforming gender hierarchies and power relations. Pentecostal women "may gain greater power and stature in the home and in the religious community" (Drogus 1994:11), primarily by redrawing expectations from spouses in the domestic sphere. Women seek to convert male partners to their faith and, through this, emphasize different gender practices that require men to alter their behaviour. For example, men are expected to change their consumption and spending on alcohol, as well as expenditure outside the household (for example, on extramarital relations).

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<sup>22</sup> The scheme was based on Bush's meeting with African-American churches, the Baptist Church, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Islamic Centre of America.

<sup>23</sup> The quotes from Smeal are taken from the Feminist Majority website, <http://feminist.org/welcome/esbio.html>, accessed on 17 March 2009.

While improved gender relations in the household is a notable outcome of women's involvement in Pentecostal movements, the prospects of developing an ideology of transformative power relations beyond the domestic sphere seem, for the moment, limited. In contrast to the women whose leadership remains in the realm of their religious engagement in Guatemala, many women in leadership positions in CEBs in Brazil have ventured into leadership positions in the political realm. Drogus (1994:15) notes: "Many active women CEB members both expand their public roles and begin to believe in greater equality for women within and without the home". Yet because their experience of increased agency is not accompanied by any transformation of men's gender status and roles in the domestic sphere, "CEBs offer women few means by which to bring men to share their new perspective. Indeed, many appear to remain convinced of the old gender stereotype of *machismo* which portrays men as simply errant, petulant little boys who must be humoured rather than changed" (Stevens 1973, cited in Drogus 1994:15).

Ironically, then, while some women achieve greater status and authority in both the religious and political realms through the CEBs in Brazil, they do not generally achieve this in their domestic spheres. Both the CEB and Pentecostal models involve contestations of some sort. One model is of women challenging gender relations in the domestic sphere but not in the public sphere such as in the Pentecostal model, and the other of politicized women whose expansion of public roles is in conflict with their unchanged gender relations in the household as in the CEB model. Certainly this requires differentiation across different communities and contexts. Since religious ideology is negotiated in daily lives, a constellation of factors, including personal and political ones will influence whether opportunities for leadership through participation in religious organizations will translate into assumption of leadership roles in other realms and fields or take on new forms of contestation.<sup>24</sup>

In the analysis of women's agency and power, what becomes critical is not only whether women have opportunities for assuming leadership positions or not within FBOs, but the conditions and terms of their participation in these organizations. In some cases, women take leading positions in FBOs, but within strictly defined parameters of appropriate gender roles and with minimal opportunities for negotiating the terms of their participation. The establishment of many faith-based service delivery organizations by Hezbollah in Lebanon initially prohibited women's participation. The charity organizations which Hezbollah set up in southern Beirut were subsidiaries of a mother organization based in Iran (Fawaz 2005:235; Harb 2008). These NGOs were established in southern Beirut because it is home to the Shi'a community, who were exclusive beneficiaries of their services. Fawaz observed that these FBOs established in Lebanon "reproduce the division of tasks, the classification of beneficiaries and even carry the same names as those of Iranian NGOs. They are thus duplicates of an existing elaborate model of service provision that has been generally re-adapted to fit local circumstances" (Fawaz 2005:235-236). The mother organization in Iran did not have a volunteer sisters' outreach, and it was upon the expressed request from the Lebanese offices that such a division was created. Hezbollah established the volunteer sisters, comprised entirely of women, which represents the outreach structure of the group of NGOs. They act as a two-way communication channel, relaying important information about family welfare to the NGOs, as well as disseminating information about social activities and events to the people. They report to the male social workers in the NGO offices. However, the ideological doctrines of Khomeini and the Shi'a establishment in Iran have guided the image to which they must conform. Fawaz notes that "since 'volunteer sisters' are members of the Hizballah, they have all adopted the dress code that was ruled by a jurisdiction (fatwa) of the late Imam Khomeini, which, in addition to the traditional veil, requires women to cover their chins and foreheads. Women

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24 There is a paucity of research on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR), a newer movement that is also based on lay leadership, but that, unlike the mainly grassroots CED, is composed of majority middle-class men and women (Hallum 2003). The CCR is winning far more adherents than the CEBs as a charismatic form of spirituality focused on the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit take precedence over struggles against political and economic oppression (Chestnut 2003). New research is needed exploring how differentials in class and religious orientation of this movement have influenced the way in which gender ideology is conceptualized and negotiated by its adherents.



have also adopted the traditional Islamic clothing: they wear long, formless, dark-coloured dress and entirely cover their arms and legs" (Fawaz 2005:251).

The dress, mannerisms and behaviour of the women volunteers have come to symbolize the Hezbollah presence to the people. The opportunities for acquiring positions of leadership or prominence within these hierarchies were minimal. Women's motivation for joining these FBOs included a political commitment to Hezbollah's vision but also the prestige and status associated with their distinctive identity markers in the community (people knew they represented Hezbollah by virtue of their attire). In many FBOs, women volunteers have to prove their full compliance with the organization's ideology and adherence to its gender-based ideas before they are allowed to become members.

The very organizational structure and hierarchy within some international FBOs tends to undermine the potential for gendered contestations from below. Berger observes that the majority of FBOs, across different denominations and religions, tend to be more transnational than global—that is, the central headquarters, based in one particular country, conducts the international operations and holds the decision-making power, rather than a structure where partners from around the world participate equally in the decision-making process (Berger 2003:27). While this probably also applies to secular NGOs, it becomes particularly critical for those FBOs for whom a particular gender hierarchy is a proxy for religious observance and piety. If women's participation is conditional upon conformity to the central doctrines, this may affect the nature of the choices before them. This is explored at length below.

### ***Food for faithful women***

Welfare programmes, government or non-governmental, faith-based or secular, tend to target women, especially with respect to non-contributing schemes where the criteria are poverty and vulnerability. Several feminists have pointed to the gendered notions of status, identity and role associated with welfare programmes that deal with women as passive recipients of aid. Nancy Fraser's work elaborates in detail how the welfare programme Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in the United States was structured in such a way as to perpetuate gender norms and ideals about women's roles in society (Fraser 1989). FBOs (especially those affiliated to Christian, Islam, Judaic faiths) have an added incentive to direct aid to women: the religiously prescribed commandment to care for the widows and orphans (although other forms of female-headed households, such as divorcees, may be excluded from assistance especially if they are seen not to conform to a particular moral/sexual code of conduct).

Some researchers, as well as NGOs (both FBOs and others), observed that seeking assistance is essentially seen as a "woman's job". I observed this in poor urban communities in Egypt. Some men do not even know that their wives receive assistance or at least choose to act as if they do not know. Often gender norms and values regarding a woman's femininity, her primary responsibility in caring for her children and her "sacrificing nature" have led to expectations that women also assume the responsibility of seeking welfare assistance. The image of women as sacrificing mothers is reinforced by the women themselves to justify asking for help for their children's sake. It seems that socially, it is more acceptable for a woman "to stretch out her hand" than a man—sometimes a man's self-esteem seems to be worth more than a woman's. A woman whose husband's health deteriorated so that he could no longer work long hours at a coffee shop said that she was the one to seek assistance from an FBO rather than her husband. She did not see it as embarrassing, whereas her husband did: "He would not want to feel he is stretching his hand" (Tadros 2004:314–317).

Fraser (1989) and others have pointed out the social stigma associated with being a female welfare recipient. What is argued here is that the social stigma associated with seeking assistance from a secular welfare programme is qualitatively different than the stigma associated with receiving aid from an FBO because, contextually, anonymity is guaranteed in one programme and not the other. With secular welfare programmes, women go there only to

pick up their cheques or hand-outs. This is not the case where the place of worship and the FBO providing welfare are in the same community. For women and their families who worship at churches and mosques affiliated to the FBOs where they receive assistance, the stigma can be overbearing. For example, research conducted by Kissane (2007) in the poor urban quarters of Philadelphia suggests that sometimes recipient women preferred receiving aid from welfare agencies where they remained fairly anonymous than going to FBOs where they may encounter someone they know from their church. Kissane (2007:102) uses the example of one recipient who refused to receive aid from the local church where she attended church services because she knew the staff there too well and wanted to maintain an air of self-sufficiency around her family.

These findings are corroborated by findings from my own research in the urban squatter settlements of Cairo. In some of the communities, because religious space is especially important in many ways, the social stigma of receiving aid from the FBO in the community affects not only the woman who sought assistance but all the household members. If the mosque where she and her family worship is on the same premises as the service-providing FBO, the word about her receiving welfare could spread. This has several implications: her husband could be subject to ridicule and humiliation, or her daughter's prospects of securing a "good" marriage proposal could be undermined if the suitor discovers that her mother "lives on aid from the mosque". A mother who needed assistance for her niece and nephew (who had been abandoned by both their parents) had no reservations about going to a Muslim association far away from her home, but would not go to the one only two streets away from her in case someone knew her there. She explained that her husband went to the nearby mosque to pray, and he would find it embarrassing if his peers knew that his wife received assistance (Tadros 2004:319).

While FBOs, like their secular counterparts, engage with women in many different capacities, the key question posed here is whether the "religion element" influences the objective of the services being offered, that is, whether it is geared toward indoctrination, in overt or subtle forms. The extent to which there is a food-for-faith transaction being promoted by an FBO in its dealings with its female constituency is influenced by a set of factors. It is impossible to make generalizations for FBOs as a whole. However, from the research conducted in Cairo, it seems that if the leaders of the religious congregations are the same as those engaged in service delivery, the likelihood of what I call a "faith for food" conditionality is higher. The second factor is the geographical location: if the mosque/church and the organization are sharing the same premises, this further blurs the lines between the two. A third factor is the extent to which the absence of alternative sources of assistance and the level of recipients' desperation increases the organization's ability to lay down conditions for its assistance.

There are concerns that the blurring of lines between religious worship and welfare extension may be detrimental to women's choices. When US President George W. Bush announced federal funding for FBOs through the passage of the Charitable Choice provisions of the 1996 welfare reform bill, one feminist organization raised concerns that recipients of aid might be pressured or forced into adopting certain beliefs in order to receive aid. "This program will replace social workers and public agencies with ministers and priests", Smeal warns. "It underwrites religion with tax dollars and violates the separation of church and state."<sup>25</sup> Smeal's concern was that the welfare programme will be affected by the fact that religious men are leading these initiatives.

There is evidence from experiences within different denominations which highlight ways in which welfare provision for women is associated with attempts at indoctrination. Service provision can be unsolicited but welcome, or it can be overtly or covertly tied with conditions.

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<sup>25</sup> The quotes from Smeal are taken from the Feminist Majority website, <http://feminist.org/welcome/esbio.html>, accessed on 17 March 2009.

Services can be offered to vulnerable female populations, even when they do not directly solicit them. For example, a 2002 investigation by a Bosnian journalist suggested that

at least 10,000 Bosnian war widows who had orphaned children had received letters from Saudi charities in the late 1990s. These letters offered widow's pensions on the condition that women wear headscarves and send their children to local, Saudi-funded religious schools. The charities targeted rural women with little education and few job prospects; many of them accepted these offers of help out of desperation (Prothero 2002, cited in Ghodsee 2007:534).

The food-for-faith policy pursued here does not only have an impact on redefining gender values for the widows themselves but for the children whose enrolment in Saudi-sponsored schools will expose them to Wahabi ideology about appropriate gender roles and "natural" gender hierarchies.

A similar food-for-faith policy was observed in one Islamist organization working in Cairo (see box 1). In other instances, the conditionality in acquiring aid in return for conforming to a set of ideas and beliefs is not so overt, but is ingrained in the system of disbursement itself. Hence, women "know" through informal sources that they should not apply if they do not behave in a particular way. In this particular community of Cairo, women were responding to cues about how to maximize opportunities for soliciting assistance. In some cases, while no conditions were set regarding religious behaviour, women knew that those who attended religious services were more likely to be able to take advantage of important announcements about new services available and up-to-date information crucial for tapping into resources.

However, "targeted" women, no matter how poor and desperate, do not always modify beliefs and behaviours according to FBOs' policies and cues. There were many acts both of open contestation and more subtle subversion against the food-for-faith policy. Women found ways of exercising their agency even when faced with pressures to conform and comply. In the case study mentioned above, women subverted attempts at conformity by wearing the *khimar*<sup>26</sup> on the day they were to collect their financial hand-outs but removed it afterward. This is corroborated by research undertaken by Bibars that shows similar tactics of subversion being espoused by women in another poor urban community in Cairo. An FBO had introduced a new system in which those wearing the niqab would be served first, followed by those wearing the khimar and finally those who wear the *hijab*.<sup>27</sup> Prior to that, women were served in alphabetical order. To save time, women shared a khimar between them as they waited on the stairs (Bibars 2001:119, cited in Tadros 2004:302)!

In other cases, women's agency does not manifest itself in acts of subversion but in acts of open contestation (see, for example, box 2). Where ideological orientation clashes with women's perception of their own interests and those of their families, the latter will often guide women's choices of action (Tadros 2004:307-308). This is not to suggest that women recipients of conditional FBO assistance are so empowered that they would withstand any attempts at inculcation. However, it is difficult to predict how such initiatives will be met, and eliciting genuine change in people's attitudes and behaviours (in this case through religious indoctrination tied to assistance) cannot be taken for granted.

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26 A veil that loosely covers the hair down to the knees.

27 A head covering.

### Box 1

One member of the community recounted the following story:

"One time, a 15 year old girl was going up the stairs to collect money on behalf of her mother, and the hijab slid off a little, revealing some of her hair. The sheikh got very angry. He tore up her card,<sup>a</sup> gave her no money and told her not to come back ever again. It was only after another woman intervened, and interceded on her behalf that they allowed her back on the programme." Although the person recounting this story was dressed in regular clothing for this community (a headscarf, long skirt and shirt), she confided that if she was seeking assistance from that association, she would wear even looser clothing, and a khimar. "The sheikh would call me a 'moutabarija'<sup>b</sup>. I don't think a woman who is wearing anything less than the khimar and loose clothing would stand a chance" (Tadros 2004:306).

Notes: <sup>a</sup> A sort of identity card issued by one of the Islamist organizations for all those who receive a monthly stipend. Without the card, the individual is not entitled to receive assistance. <sup>b</sup> *Moutabarija* comes from the word *tabarajj* which, according to the Al Mawred dictionary (1993:268), means women dressing up/grooming/adorning themselves. However, in this context, it bears a negative connotation of flaunting one's sexuality as well, or "tarting oneself up" in slang.

### Box 2

"Sheikh Adel came to visit us at home, and when he saw Hind, he asked whether she was married. When I told him she was not, he told me it is high time she gets married and that he has a husband for her. The suitor was a man already married to two wives. I told him 'Shame on you, you are a man of God, why are you working as a *khatba*'? You are supposed to help the *ghallaba* (the poor, the marginalized), not act like this. I really questioned his intentions. He told me I would be lucky to find a husband for the girl, nobody would take her with her burnt body". Hind suffers from severe scars as a consequence of an unfortunate accident with fire (Tadros 2004:306).

Note: <sup>a</sup> Matchmaker.

Other than relief and health services, education is one of the most popular activities provided by FBOs. Education may take the form of

1. substituting basic state-led education (especially if it is weak);
2. complementing state education (that is, by providing extra-curricular support);
3. providing special educational classes nominally provided by places of worship (such as Sunday school, Friday school or Koran classes); or
4. providing regular religious seminars, workshops and programmes, especially for adults.

Education provides a subtle opportunity for indoctrination and ideology diffusion since it offers a channel for a sustained and engaged relationship with members and recipients of services, as opposed to health services or hand-outs, which often involve brief encounters. The extent to which FBOs engage in ideological diffusion through the educational services they provide often depends on the leadership, staff, mission and context characterizing their work. Without suggesting that all FBOs engage in indoctrination through education (there is a need for a greater cross-country ethnographic study to assess the extent to which this occurs), the cases discussed here suggest FBOs' engagement in subtle religious conscientization. In Yemen, for example, the Islah Charitable Society is the largest and most renowned Islamic NGO providing one of the most extensive service delivery networks in education, health and relief nationwide. One of its activities is the organization of religious study groups which are primarily attended by better-off women. Clark (2004) notes that the religious education classes (*nadawat*) offered by the Islamic Charitable Society members represent a direct and indirect means for enlisting people and gaining participants through the informal networks that are fostered:

Networks of women who have different degrees of commitment to the Society and to Islamist ideology are linked together to provide charity and services to the poor. Society members do not have to, explicitly or directly 'use' *nadawat* by openly encouraging women to join the Society; or by making announcements on its behalf. There is no form of pressure. The process is far more natural and subtle—through regular socializing among like-minded

women and through emulation of women doing good work in the name of Islam, Society members are able to achieve their goals (Clark 2004:136).

Women attending a one-off nadwa may be invited to another in which they are introduced to members of the Islamist political party, the Islah party. As they become incorporated into new networks and circles with friends who share an Islamist collective identity, “the Islamist ideology is reinforced through both word and deed” (Clark 2004:141). The importance of their engagement is not just to secure their votes for the Islah party in national elections but to win their support for Islamist ideology, which is then reflected in how they approach the process of social change (Clark 2004:141).

This approach of conscientization through sustained educational encounters is one of the most deep-seated ways of exercising “invisible power”. In Gaventa’s (2006) discussion of the visible and invisible faces of power, the visible power is the level of definable aspects of political power, “the formal rules, structures, authorities, institutions and procedures of decision making” (Gaventa 2006:29). FBO’s ability to influence its constituency’s choices of attire and behaviour on its premises during the course of extending its services may be a good example here. On the other hand, invisible power works by “influencing how individuals think about their place in the world, this level of power shapes people’s beliefs, sense of self”. Invisible power works through processes of socialization (Gaventa 2006:29). Education provides channels for the exercise of power on the invisible level, setting in place a process of Islamicization of the conscience through a particular culture and a particular way of seeing one’s place and mission in life.

In the most recent 2005 parliamentary elections in Egypt, one leading worker activist observed that in Helwan, a low-income district with a high proportion of workers, many of the young women mobilized into standing at the ballot boxes for the Muslim Brotherhood were recruited through welfare-providing FBOs.<sup>28</sup> These FBOs were not openly known to “belong” to the Muslim Brotherhood; however, through the networks of leaders and activists with ties to the Brotherhood and FBOs, women were ideologically open to supporting a movement that reflected the kind of religious daw’a in their religious education classes. This again reinforces the idea that through conscientization, members affiliated to welfare-providing associations may be relied on to support a particular ideology, even if they were neither formal members of the Muslim Brotherhood nor affiliated to any of its organizational structures.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

From the examples cited above, it seems that the religious nature of an FBO is intensified when it shares the same leadership and premises as worship congregations, or when it is dependent upon funding from them. How this faith expresses itself vis-à-vis gender issues will vary along the personal belief system of the leadership, those of the practitioners, the context in which they work, the extent of vulnerability and dependence of their constituency on their services as well as other contextual factors (such as the political ideology of the state on gender issues). In the light of this, in some contexts, it may be possible to engage with faith leaders to advance gender agendas, while in others such an assumption is naive in that it does not take into account the power politics behind how agendas are framed. The example of transnational Wahabi organizations working in Eastern Europe suggests that their gender agenda is linked with a wider political framework of exporting a particular kind of Islamist (as opposed to Islamic or Muslim) project.

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28 In view of the volatility of the Muslim Brotherhood’s political freedom in the Egyptian context, the name of the welfare providing associations working in Helwan have been deliberately kept anonymous.

29 The examples given here are all ways of FBOs exercising invisible power over their recipients and members in ways in which religion was instrumentalized for political purposes. However, the reverse could also be true—FBOs exercising invisible power through processes of conscientization and socialization for the purpose of challenging gender oppressive hierarchies or relations. More research is needed to explore whether any studies have been done on this.

Caution is also needed in engaging with gender agendas as if they are “a package deal”. In some cases, FBOs will address harmful gender practices on the ground while simultaneously lobbying against policies (especially in reproductive health issues such as abortion) that are anathema to their interpretation of religiously sanctioned rights for men and women. A case in point is that of Christian and Muslim organizations fighting against the practice of widow cleansing, while lobbying against the extension of condoms in Malawi. This is an example of sexual double standards where women are vulnerable to infection. Another case in point is the position of the Catholic Church and some of its affiliated FBOs that pursue, on the ground, initiatives favourable to the advancement of women’s position, while advocating for agendas that undermine women’s enjoyment of full reproductive rights.

With respect to FBOs’ spiritual and social repertoire, what is emerging from the literature is that many such organizations undoubtedly play a crucial role in supporting women’s daily survival strategies, whether in terms of surviving material hardship or developing the inner spiritual strength to cope with emotionally difficult circumstances. The extent, however, with which this contributes to transforming power relations between men and women is questionable, and needs further study. Their agency within these organizations is more complex, because of the personal and contextual dimensions. Agency becomes more problematic when it requires conformity to inscribed prescriptions on appropriate modes of behaviour and conduct. The contention that FBOs offer a more holistic framing of development by tackling the spiritual and the material has certainly been an appealing dimension for many men and women. However, the danger lies when the spiritual, the material and the political are combined to restrict or limit choices, as opposed to enhancing them.

This paper has argued that in the light of the wide diversity of service delivery organizations, it would be as misleading to make generalizations about FBOs as about their secular counterparts. While faith-based and secular organizations share many similar challenges, the former pose specific questions regarding how the relationship between religion and action is conceived and mediated. In some cases FBOs’ agendas are closely tied to those of organized religious establishments, while in others, they are in direct contestation. Often, the most conservative FBOs that prescribe traditional gendered roles for men and women have been the ones to receive the most media attention. However, other FBOs that have sought to contest hierarchies and unravel power relations have been active, without necessarily abandoning their religious identity. It seems however, that women and men who form their own FBOs are able to claim this space to engage in contentious politics vis-à-vis reforming gender ideologies. However, those who join existing FBOs that have close associations with organized religious establishments find less space to challenge the positions, ideas and framings of the powers-that-be. In some cases this leads to a conflict that is never resolved within the actual organization, as is evident from the opposing positions adopted by the women’s wing and the mainstream body of Nahdatul Ulama on the Right to terminate pregnancies in cases of incest and rape.

Women’s activism in FBOs should not be in itself hailed as evidence of their empowerment, nor should it be dismissed as necessarily and consistently restrictive and inhibitive. More studies are needed which reflect the arenas, the levels, and forms of women’s agency in FBOs. The examples of the CEBs and the Pentecostal cells suggest that women’s engagement in FBOs allows them, in some areas, more negotiating power, without necessarily having a “spill-over effect” into all areas and arenas of their lives. This may help them contest power on one level, but not on others. Many factors influence this process of negotiating boundaries and trajectories. In the case of the Pentecostal cell movement, sometimes some women experienced a painful contradiction between the positively changed gender relations at home and their potential to assume leadership roles outside the home on a broad and significant level. In the case of CEBs, their transformed roles in the public arena may conflict with the limitations of transformative gender relations at home. Thus, spiritual and activist experiences within FBOs provide different women with different opportunities to exercise agency, but this does not always entail enhancing their choices in all spheres of life.

Further, it should not be assumed that ideologies, no matter how patriarchal or reactionary, can be treated as reflecting the community's beliefs and values because they emanate from FBOs. Certainly not all FBOs working on a grassroots level are grassroots organizations. In many cases, transnational FBOs play critical roles in seeking to displace local faiths and practices and impose their own. Such processes do not necessarily reflect a secular versus religious values struggle but one between local and introduced variants of the same religion. As the examples from Islamic transnational FBOs working in Bulgaria suggest, the struggle was between two very different schools of jurisprudence in Islam, being influenced by very different sociohistorical and political contexts. This has some important implications for policy.

On the one hand, there is a need for according the same level of respect to religious and non-religious women (Phillips 2009). Phillips argued that there have been attempts at demonization on both sides of the camp:

Those women who are not religious should not assume false consciousness or attribute victim status to those who choose to live their lives by religious precepts. Those women who are religious should not assume that the others lack ethical conviction or are slaves to a material culture. Unless the choices each of us makes actively harm the others, we should recognize and respect each other's agency and freedom of conscience (Phillips 2009:55).

While Phillips was referring to women's involvement with religious institutions and ideologies at a more general level, it also applies to women who are involved in FBOs versus those that work through secular counterparts. In practice, this means actively inviting women active in FBOs to participate in the debates, forums and dialogues on development policy and practice as well as on contentious gender issues, where differences in opinion do exist.

On the other hand, in practical terms, there are many concerns pertaining to gender politics in FBOs that have grave implications for limiting women's choices. Development policies and discourses should not sacrifice gender rights while supporting some FBOs on the premise that these organizations allegedly represent what people want, are "organic forces" and are best positioned to support local capacity development.

The harm incurred from implicit or overt forms of food-for-faith needs to be addressed with caution since there is often an attempt to control women's sexuality. In some cases, extension of aid is openly declared to be conditional upon compliance with a set of religious prerequisites. In other cases, women receive cues, from the FBO or members of the community, about what will enhance/facilitate/secure their chances of receiving aid, even if not overtly announced. In other cases still, women will be approached with lucrative offers of assistance, that are presented almost as a package deal entailing a set of religious measures, including adoption of symbolic submission to the religious doctrine. As conditional ties are sometimes manifest and sometimes more subtle, so are the forms of indoctrination. They can range from requests for a change in behaviour, attire, perspective on the part of individual women, or they can be more saturated, being conveyed through sustained education of the younger generation which inculcate ideological messages on gender integrated in larger curricula.

Women will not necessarily comply blindly with attempts at indoctrination. As the paper argues, individuals choose to subvert and sometimes openly contest authorities. However, all forms of food-for-faith, irrespective of whether they are overt or more subtle and irrespective of which religious denomination the FBO enacting them belongs to, are harmful because they undermine women's free exercise of agency. However, any engagement on this issue should not be based on the exclusive focus on gender politics but set within the wider sociopolitical and economic context which strengthens or undermines women's and men's agency in any given moment in history. Otherwise, it would mean reverting to the simplistic and essentialist exclusive focus on how religion undermines women's rights.

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