Zimbabwe: The Gender and Faith Working Group Meeting Report

29 June 2017

Thursday 29 June, meeting held in the Anglican Cathedral Boardroom

Introduction

This report documents deliberations conducted by faith based organisations and on the issues of gender and faith. The meeting was convened by Tearfund and Christian Aid with the aim of assessing whether there was an interest in establishing a structured working group to address issues of gender and faith. The meeting deliberated on the urgent issues within the sector, including; child marriages, high rates of GBV, low levels of participation and economic empowerment of women and the need to engage men and boys to address issues of GBV. It was agreed that the working group should be established and the majority of participants voted that it meet once per quarter. Below are the detailed discussions of the meeting.

Background to the Meeting

The idea of establishing a working group emerged in 2016 where a regional conference for faith leaders was convened by Side by Side. The conference was attended by faith leaders and institutions from 10 Southern African countries. Side by side is a global movement on gender and faith (www.sidebysidegender.org), started by seventeen international churches, ecumenical networks and mission and development agencies. The report of the meeting is annexed to this report. One of the resolutions from the meeting was that a national movement on gender and faith should be
established. The meeting was therefore an attempt to convene a joint platform for action on gender and faith.

**Opening Remarks: it’s a journey**

After welcoming the participants, Ben Nicholson, the country representative for Tearfund in Zimbabwe, shared his journey to gender awareness and the insights it has brought him. His decision to learn more about gender and subsequent paradigm shift from being a person who understands and supports Gender and Development to embarking on his own gender journey was catalysed by a conference on Gender and the Bible. From there he has gained more insights and faced new challenges in trying to adopt a gender “lens”.

Having three daughters whose world, potential and worth was already being influenced by patriarchal values also challenged him to find a narrative that does not limit their potential. He has as a result relooked at his approach towards the women in his family and his colleagues. These things have made him realise the enormity of the task.

Some of the critical issues that arise include; the depth of the problem of gender inequality and the impact it has on the lives of women and men, and secondly; the hope and potential to address gender inequality. From the faith perspective, the church often guards patriarchy fiercely. So the question of our time is; what is the role that the church will take given that it is frequently accused of reinforcing inequality? This despite the fact that in the Bible, God gives stewardship of the earth to the men and women together.

And in the New Testament, Jesus’ response to women is different from the Old Testament and St Paul is a real advocate for healthy relationships for men and women. So the church is a critical player because no other institution in Zimbabwe can influence culture like the church. The church itself is a key barrier to progress but potentially a key catalyst for change.

The tools and the structures for engaging with the church and communities of faith already exist, buts it’s a journey. Being that gender is about power, the journey will be a difficult one but not impossible. Ben ended by expressing his hope that the meeting would result in the creation of a more joined up entity and better collaborations that would increase access to resources and can INFLUENCE change. His parting note was a statement from a young Fallist:

“The Church must be destroyed because the church maintains and reinforces privileges and unfair power imbalances” Fallist

This statement is something to reflect on given that 80% of Zimbabweans claim to be Christians. It is a call for the church to find its place once more or risk becoming obsolete.

**Keynote address: Rev Erick Ruwona**

The reverend gave a comprehensive overview of gender issues covering social, political and economic factors. His presentation also spanned the pre-independence and current context to reveal a pattern of inequality, which mostly disadvantages women and that requires action. He outlined the challenges the church faces including the limited participation of women in decision making and the limited response to the realities of GBV and other issues of concern. He shared the challenges of transforming the thinking of men and women in his own church, with an example of only five women out of a total of 200 attending the church’s synod meeting, despite the fact that
women constitute the majority of congregants. His address set the tone for a discussion on the issues the working group should address and what actions should be taken to address these. Below is a narrative of the critical reflections from the discussion, grouped into thematic areas that the working group will take up.

**Critical issues from the Discussion**

**Role of the church:**

- The church must become the voice of the voiceless. The church and community are inseparable. There are opportunities for the church to act. The church must change its attitude and behaviour.

- The church should be addressing issues of child marriages.

- The church must adopt a correct interpretation of scriptures on submission. The correct bible interpretation should include the role of the men also and not emphasise women’s submission only.

- There is need to question church structures and their role in perpetuating gender inequality. There is need for total buy-in by church leaders. The WG can share ideas on how to approach church leadership to change structures /attitudes to gender.

- What is the role of the church in social justice? The church should examine its role in promoting social justice, which includes addressing GBV.

- Economic empowerment of disadvantaged groups in the church like women.

- The church must examine its role in addressing gender inequality in its clinics and schools?

**Partnerships**

- How will faith actors partner with the government initiatives addressing gender inequality?

- The working group should explore and share ways of working with men genuinely rather than “fake” male activists.

- How does the church help the voiceless “own” their voices to speak for themselves? How can it work in partnership with women and men’s organisations and groups (fellowship)?

- It is the duty of the church to address child abuse and child marriages.

**Role of the Working Group (WG):**

- An opportunity to share and learn from different understanding and perceptions of gender as a church.
• Explore questions about: what are men’s experiences of violence? Is it about women alone? Where is men’s justice?

• WG should support with Analysis of GBV causes and manifestations at each local context to guide interventions.

• Strategies for engagement with government (and other partners) should be well thought out.

• Examining bible “her stories” and using them to challenge social norms.

• How to work with male champions: recognising that male champions are on a lifelong journey to transformation.

• How to work with young people as an entry point to changing attitudes towards gender inequality.

• Generating evidence of the positive roles of the church in ending gender inequality (or specific issues like reducing GBV).

• Assist less or differently structured churches who wish to address gender inequality.

• Explore the connection between gender equality and the high rates of divorce.

• Explore the use of language: gender equality vs. creating healthy families. Positive parenting conversations vs. human rights conversations.

• How can the working group be a safe place for faith leaders and ourselves to learn more about gender and GBV?

• Sharing important interventions e.g. the development of GBV policies.

• A forum for developing and sharing resources e.g. bible studies.

• The working group can advocate for and influence the development of a gender sensitive approach in theological colleges.

• Discuss what approached have been working in economic empowerment of women in the church.

• Contribute to the campaigns on child abuse and child marriages.

**Learning and sharing**

A marketplace was created to facilitate learning and sharing of the organisations present. The different organisations showcased their interventions and literature a session which was informative and engaging.
Above: participants listen to Bekezela of Trocaire describing the SASA Faith methodology

Next Steps

It was agreed by all participants that the working group should proceed as a meeting place for partners interested in Gender and Faith. The frequency of meetings was voted as once per quarter. The next meeting will therefore be held in September. CA and Tearfund will continue to convene until then when a new structure will be agreed upon.