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# Oxfam GB

## Discussion document

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### **Avoiding some deadly sins**

*Oxfam learnings and analysis about religion, culture, diversity, and development*

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*Religion is a significant force that shapes attitudes, practices, policies, and laws across the world in ways that can advance or obstruct rights-based development. Development organisations need to strengthen their analysis of the interconnections between religion, culture, diversity, and development. This discussion document describes 18 common challenges facing development actors when they consider these issues. Based on Oxfam GB's experience in the field and illustrated with case studies, it shares several learning points about effective development practice related to religion, culture, diversity, and development. It includes initial efforts by the We Can Campaign to end violence against women to develop gender criteria for mapping religious groups.*

#### ***Oxfam discussion documents***

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# Executive summary

## *Why think about religion?*

Religion is a significant force that shapes attitudes, practices, policies, and laws across the world, North or South, developed or developing, whether the state is secular or theocratic. For many people (including some development actors), religion is an essential part of their personal well-being and identity; and, as an institution, it can provide networks and services that ensure practical survival in times of economic stress and national crisis. Many religious organizations have significant resources available for service-delivery and for influencing policy advocacy. However, religion is also used to justify discrimination and conflict. To summarize, religion and religious organizations evidently need to be taken seriously in rights-based development analysis and practice.

On the ground, religion is shaped by a variety of factors such as ethnicity, local custom, urban-rural location, state structures, economic development level, etc. Therefore, at times the analysis in this paper talks more broadly of 'culture', which means the set of beliefs and practices that structure individuals' lives and place them as members of one or more 'communities'.

Despite the significance of religion, analysis of the interconnections between religion, culture, diversity, and development, and of how to account for diversity in practice, is scarce and scattered. Many development actors lack the degree of 'religious literacy' that would help them to develop effective responses to challenges related to religion as well as to the question of partnering with religious organizations.

Since 2004, Oxfam GB (OGB) has taken concrete steps towards building its capacity in this area, and to this end has held a number of related workshops involving staff from around the world. The analysis they shared forms a basis for this paper, along with illustrative case studies on: the Early Marriage Campaign, Yemen; responding to the tsunami, Aceh, Indonesia; anti-mosquito spraying, Am Nabak Camp, Chad; responses to HIV and AIDS, Mombassa, Kenya; the 'We Can' Campaign to end violence against women, South Asia; and dealing with diversity, Oxfam field office X.

OGB has built up a solid body of knowledge and expertise on the issues of religion, culture, diversity, and development. It now seeks to share this more widely within the organization, as well as with development allies and partners.

## Religion and development – some common challenges

The paper provides 18 examples of common challenges (raised by workshop participants – see Part 2) facing development actors when they consider religion, culture, diversity, and development. These questions are organized into broad categories. In addition to challenges arising from the current global context, they relate to:

- (i) Development analysis: for instance, are rights and religion necessarily opposites that need balancing?
- (ii) Development policy: for instance, what should be the criteria for partnership with a religious organization, especially when the language of rights has become so ubiquitous as to be almost meaningless?
- (iii) Development practice: for instance, how to be 'culturally sensitive' and what decisions to make regarding staffing and diversity?

## Learnings from case studies around the world

Illustrated through case studies, the report details over two dozen learning points (see Part 3) about effective development practice related to religion, culture, diversity, and development.

The diversity *within* cultures across time and geography illustrates how culture is a human construct as well as a matter of power and politics rather than something divinely ordained and unchanging. All cultures have scope for a rights-based approach to development, and changes in cultural attitudes can happen surprisingly quickly. Active rights supporters do include some local religious authorities.

The recognition of plurality within cultures has implications. First, it means a universal rights-based approach can be combined with a tactical recognition of local complexities without compromising on the former. This involves finding ways to reveal how local cultures can and do express the concept of universal rights. Second, communities, including 'the poor', do not speak with one voice, so it is important to value the voices of internally marginalized groups, such as women, religious or cultural dissidents, and minorities.

Since all religions have the potential to support rights-based development, it can be effective to offer religious responses to religiously framed objections to development. Local staff have been able to turn religious arguments around to support rights-based development, and sharing positive development practice from other countries that practise the same religion can be an effective strategy.

However, religious responses require expertise in theology, knowledge of religious practice, and the legitimacy to speak on the religion or local culture, and this is not always a viable strategy for development actors. Yet there are effective alternatives. First, in some contexts, even if religion appears to outsiders to be a dominant factor, in practice it may not be the most significant driver of local attitudes. Second, religiously framed objections to development may be a cover for protecting existing power dynamics (especially regarding gender) and also a way of framing a simple desire to avoid change or responsibility. Thus while an understanding of local culture is vital, local complexities can often be understood through a general power analysis that is relevant to broader development situations. This also helps avoid tactical short-term compromises (such as agreeing to conditions imposed on women's participation in a project) that may have longer term structural impacts on rights. Third, empirical data (both quantitative and qualitative) about people's development needs can be a powerful alternative to tackling religion head-on, and can subtly challenge religious authorities to provide practical solutions that address structural disadvantage. The report provides examples from beyond OGB's experience where strategies that do not necessarily refer to religion have been used successfully to advance rights in contexts where either the state is theocratic or religion plays a major role in shaping public policy.

The learnings point to a need for fresh approaches to development. This includes understanding that 'tolerance' is the lowest level of acceptance, while 'valuing' diversity entails active steps to ensure that diversity is promoted and protected. The fundamental task of changing attitudes may be most effectively achieved by appealing to people's positive aspirations (e.g. wanting respect, a violence-free life, etc.) rather than by entering into irresolvable debates about whether or not religion supports rights-based development. Identity categories – 'Muslim', 'Hindu', 'African', 'Western', 'indigenous', 'settler', etc. – can be part of absolutist agendas that obstruct development. But development actors often use labels too. An alternative approach to labelling is to focus on the *impact* of a person's behaviour or of a group or organization's agenda on the rights of others. The binaries that accompany analysis about religion and culture – for instance, that women have to choose between gender equality and religious identity – need to be challenged. There exists scope within international human rights standards, which form



# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Why think about religion and development?

In Am Nabak Camp for the displaced in Chad, beneficiaries were asked to select an equal number of men and women to be trained to spray camp tents against mosquitoes. The men opposed women's participation in the programme, stating that according to local religious practice women are not allowed to enter into a man's house.

OGB's Humanitarian Response (Cash For Work Programme) in East India was faced with a dilemma when the local religious leader issued a dictum that cash for work was not suitable for Muslim women and thus no woman should take up this work (even though women were those hardest hit by the crisis).

In its office in a country with a history of ethnic and religious conflict, OGB has been careful to ensure that its local staff represent a diversity of religious and ethnic backgrounds. The Country Director is now wondering how in practice this recognition of cultural diversity will affect team-building within the office.

**The need to fill a gap in analysis:** These three examples, taken from the experiences of Oxfam GB (OGB) staff reported in various workshops, illustrate the real-life challenges of development practice in situations where religion and cultural identities play a significant role in people's lives. At the same time, the importance of religious organizations in development work is increasingly recognized, and it is ever more fashionable to talk about faith-based groups as 'partners in development', especially in terms of service-delivery (and even more so following the current global economic crisis that has accelerated the withdrawal of state services).

Yet a quick sweep of development literature reveals that analysis about the interconnections between religion, culture, diversity, and development, and how to account for diversity in practice is scarce and scattered.<sup>1</sup>

The reasons for this gap are understandable. For some, open discussion of such matters raises concerns about 'cultural insensitivity'; others fear they lack the kind of knowledge necessary to deal with cultures or cultural institutions beyond their own experience; yet others feel that it is not the place of secular development organizations to address matters relating to religion, or indeed that religion has nothing to offer development discourse and practice.

Nevertheless, in some secular development organizations – and specifically within OGB – there is growing acknowledgement that, there is a need for better religious literacy amongst secular NGOs. Without deepened fluency in the language of religious discourse we may miss critical parts of our engagement in the cultures and societies where we work.<sup>2</sup>

There are clear arguments for taking account of religion:

- The social, political, and economic attitudes and practices that shape development are greatly influenced by culture and belief – in all societies, North or South, developed or developing, or whether the state is secular or theocratic.<sup>3</sup>
- Many religious institutions have significant resources available for investment in service-delivery and policy advocacy<sup>4</sup> and are therefore major players or potential players in development policy and practice.
- 'Development also has an important moral component (the domain of religious movements). Justice, sustainability and dignity are at least equally important motivators for development as "hard" components such as economics and

education.<sup>5</sup> In other words, rationalist evidence is not the sole effective driver of policy change. Also, addressing poverty and injustice cannot be solved through purely technical interventions.<sup>6</sup>

- If development organizations believe in people's agency – and many see religion as an essential constituent of their own well-being – then logically religion has to be taken seriously.
- In times of social, economic, and political upheaval, religion can offer social cohesion and important networks that ensure practical survival.
- Many rights violations and conflicts are justified with reference to religious tenets.<sup>7</sup>

The HIV and AIDS crisis in Africa illustrates all of these aspects, where religious organizations<sup>8</sup> play a crucial role in palliative care, and in both challenging or, alternatively, reinforcing the attitudes and practices that contribute to the increasing prevalence of – and prejudice against – those living with HIV and AIDS.

In addition, there are more current reasons for taking account of religion:

- Especially in the post-September 11 context, OGB and other development and human rights organizations have been under increasing pressure to formulate clear positions regarding issues that, to varying degrees, are related to religion.<sup>9</sup>
- Conflict, the global economic downturn, the absence of stable governments, and alienation have all meant people feel a growing need to find security in group belonging and identity.<sup>10</sup> Since religion is a powerful mobilising force, an appeal to 'identity' has been a convenient tool for those who seek political and social control. This rise in identity politics, especially religious fundamentalisms, fosters intolerance and violence that undermine rights-based development.<sup>11</sup>

OGB research into the impact of the financial crisis has found that in practical terms, membership of a religious community deepens a person's resilience to shock.

Identity politics based on religion (as well as, for example, debates about 'Africanness') are increasingly challenging the human rights framework and deeming it to be 'irrelevant' or 'inappropriate' for local cultures.<sup>12</sup> Since development policy and practice base themselves on the human rights framework, challenges to this work, based on religion, need to be examined.

## 1.2 The scope of this paper

Starting from the presumption that, good or bad, religion as a social institution cannot be ignored, this paper hopes to support learning about and analysis of the role of religion in development among programme staff both in Oxfam House and in country. It has five parts:

- **Part 1** introduces the issues.
- **Part 2** discusses some of the common challenges and dilemmas presented by religion and cultural diversity to development practitioners, using examples from OGB and other development organizations.
- **Part 3** examines examples of effective development analysis and practice regarding religion, culture, and diversity through real-life case studies shared at OGB workshops and workshops of the spin-off We Can Campaign in South Asia. It also draws on the experiences of other international non-government organizations (INGOs) and rights organizations.
- **Part 4** completes the paper's shift from theory to practice. It shares the beginnings of a tool for mapping religious groups, developed at OGB and We Can workshops, as well as some guidelines for engaging with religious groups in development work.

- **Part 5** provides some concluding comments and recommendations for future steps, also drawn primarily from OGB workshops.

The paper also includes a number of boxed case study examples of best practice in addressing religion, culture, diversity and development.

**The relationship between religion and culture:** At times, rather than just speaking of religion, this paper talks more broadly of 'culture' – meaning the set of beliefs and practices that structure individuals' lives and place them as members of one or more 'communities'.<sup>13</sup> This broader frame is necessary because, on the ground, religion is shaped by a variety of factors such as ethnicity, local custom, urban-rural location, state structures, and economic development level, etc.

## 2. Challenges for development work presented by culture, religion, and diversity

In practice undertaking ‘culturally sensitive development’ can seem to be a complicated affair. Below are some of the most common challenges for development work presented by culture, religion, and diversity, roughly organized into broad (but not watertight) categories: challenges related to (1) analysis of culture and religion; (2) development policy; (3) development practice and organizational development; and (4) challenges arising from the current global context.

Some of the questions relate back to our starting case studies; no doubt readers can add other challenges to this list.<sup>14</sup> Proposed responses to these challenges, based on the experience of OGB and other development organizations, is shared in Part 3.

### 2.1 Challenges related to analysis of culture and religion

**Are rights and religion (or rights and culture) necessarily opposites that need balancing?** In development literature – notably from INGOs, multilateral and bilateral agencies, and donors – religion or culture and development are often analysed as binaries. It is presumed that protecting a person’s rights necessarily involves a loss of their cultural or religious identity. This is sometimes expressed as the individual (rights) vs. the collective (culture). This approach is particularly found in relation to women’s rights and the rights of sexual minorities. It usually calls for a ‘balancing’ of rights and culture. The challenge is: how to ensure that a person retains both their rights and their cultural or religious identity?

**What does ‘cultural plurality’ include?** Does it mean taking account of the diversity that exists *within* communities in terms of power and ideology? Or is pluralism and multiculturalism just about ensuring diversity *across* religions, ethnicities or other ‘cultural communities’? UNESCO’s 1995 report, *Our Creative Diversity*, on the cultural and socio-cultural factors that affect development, and on the impact of social and economic development on culture is an example of this lack of clarity. It is surprising how often plurality is reduced to diversity between, rather than also within, cultures.<sup>15</sup> When ‘cultural plurality’ is narrowly understood to be about diversity *between* rather than *within* communities, everything tends to be reduced to opposite pairs: Christian vs. Muslim, majority vs. minority, the modern West vs. the traditional South, etc. Is this a sufficient description of local contexts?

**Is religion a ‘pillar of patriarchy’?** Women’s rights are frequently a topic of concern in development policy and planning. Yet the three ‘pillars of patriarchy’ – private property, family, and religion – are what one ActionAid critique calls the ‘holy cows’ of the development sector, on which there is a ‘deafening silence’.<sup>16</sup> That critique poses the following questions: ‘Why no angry, passionate champions against FGM [female genital mutilation] in spite of the fact that this must be or must have been happening to girls within the families of some of the staff?’<sup>17</sup>

Indeed development organizations tend not to confront these three structural aspects of women’s inequality head-on – but is characterising religion as a ‘pillar of patriarchy’ the full story? Does it account for feminist interpretations of religion and men who resist patriarchy, or explain those women who uphold ‘patriarchal’ values (who are often just dismissed as suffering from ‘false consciousness’)?<sup>18</sup> How should development practice view the relationship between religion and women’s rights?

**How to deal with apparently different approaches to development between the religions?** Development literature often takes pains not to distinguish between different

religions – or not to compare them. This can be the result of a desire to avoid appearing discriminatory or an assumption that all religions are ‘just as bad as each other’. Neither approach is helpful in allowing development actors to plan for the nuances of their work context, which may be dominated by a particular religion. Research among nearly 1,700 women’s rights activists found that there are commonalities across regions and religions among those who use religion to violate rights, but that there are also significant tactical and operational diversities between religious fundamentalists in different regions and religions.<sup>19</sup> How to account for diversity without appearing discriminatory? As the Resource Kit (available to Oxfam staff only), which accompanies this paper illustrates, in comparison to the number of Christian INGOs that take clear rights-based positions on development, there are few comparable Muslim or Jewish development INGOs. Is it more important for an INGO campaigning coalition to include representation from Muslim and Jewish organizations, or to ensure that coalition members (no matter what their religious affiliation) are all on the same page about the issue?

## 2.2 Challenges related to development policy

**How should development policy and practice regard religion?** Broadly, development policy and practice tend to take four possible approaches towards religion – each of which may be found within the same organization. The first is to simply ignore religion and hope it will somehow ‘go away’. But increasingly this approach is understood to be not viable, for the reasons outlined in 2.1 above, which leaves the following as the common approaches:

- Religion as the ‘development problem’:  
Religion is understood as the main obstacle to development; once the ‘underdeveloped’ cast off their backward religion, development will flood in automatically. This obscures other factors contributing to underdevelopment (such as trade inequalities and the arms race), stigmatizes and stereotypes the poor, and ignores the positive role played by religion in people’s lives.
- Religion as the ‘main development issue’:  
Religion is seen as the only significant development issue, overlooking issues such as class, ethnicity, age, gender, etc. This ignores the fact that discrimination and underdevelopment is experienced as a whole complex of interconnected issues, not just those related to religion.
- Religion as the ‘development solution’:  
This approach assumes that if all development policy focuses on accommodating religion, development will proceed smoothly. This overlooks power dynamics within religious communities. It silences and delegitimizes secular approaches, and renders invisible the alliances between religious progressives and secularists that exist among local activists.

The question is whether there are more effective alternatives to these approaches.

**To mainstream culture and religion, or not?** Should concerns about protecting and promoting culture, or taking account of the impact of culture on how we undertake development, be a separate area of development work in order to ensure it gets proper attention? Or is it better to bring these concerns into the mainstream of all aspects of development work, or somehow do both? Is it sufficient to include culture as a development planning variable or are specific projects, for instance focusing on women and religion, needed? This dilemma – to mainstream or not to mainstream – is familiar to those working to promote women’s rights.

**How to recognize cultural diversity without silencing dissidents and the marginalized?** Promoting inter-cultural dialogue is often seen as an effective way of recognising cultural diversity. Yet this raises the question of who speaks for or leads

Community A in its dialogue with Community B or with state policy makers. How far are the voices of marginalized groups – religious dissidents or atheists, for example – included in this dialogue process?<sup>20</sup> How can the promotion of inter-cultural dialogue avoid giving voice and legitimacy to dominant, anti-rights views?<sup>21</sup>

**What should be the criteria for partnership with a religious organization?** Some argue in favour of development partnerships with religious organizations because they have extensive networks, low operational costs due to voluntarism, and/or substantial budgets.<sup>22</sup> Are these reasons enough? Is coming to power through democratic elections a useful criterion for partnership? Potential partners would then include Hamas in the Palestinian Territories and the Gujarat Chief Minister (who was allegedly complicit in India's 2002 communal violence).

How to identify potential partners if every religious development organization, progressive or conservative, talks about 'rights and justice'? At one level the language of rights has become so ubiquitous as to be meaningless, while at the same time the Millennium Development Goals, whose implementation now often takes place through religious organizations, have been critiqued as failing to take a human rights approach to development.<sup>23</sup>

Do disaster situations merit different criteria, and what are the potential long-term impacts of partnership in an immediate crisis context?<sup>24</sup>

**What does being politically neutral mean?** No matter what Oxfam's institutional approach, the NGOs it partners with and individual staff are bound to have their own political preferences. In many contexts, political preferences are closely tied up with approaches to religion (e.g. supporting a party that promotes secularism, or conservative interpretations of religion), while partner NGOs may be the public wings or undisclosed fronts of political forces.<sup>25</sup>

**Is more knowledge about culture and religion the solution?** Improving 'religious literacy' requires building knowledge. However, development research sometimes gets lost in endless quantitative detail and descriptive mapping. This can overlook qualitative aspects such as local political and power dynamics.<sup>26</sup> For instance, a statement that certain religious organizations are 'important players in development processes' in Country X can lead to the assumption that such organizations must necessarily be partners in development work – while overlooking or simply being unaware of their opposition to particular rights. What kinds of knowledge about culture and religion are needed, and what is sufficient knowledge?

**How to make rights-based religious perspectives on development more visible?** Some ecumenical and rights-based religious development organizations are now wondering whether they should be more assertive about their perspectives, but remain concerned about imposing their convictions on others.<sup>27</sup> This is part of the broader challenge of how to ensure that strong convictions about rights are both visible and reflected in policy, without inadvertently becoming absolutist and intolerant. This is particularly challenging given that local and global media prefer development stories that are black and white.

## 2.3 Challenges related to development practice and organizational development

**How to discuss culture?** There is a general wariness among development actors about publicly questioning harmful cultural practices and rights violations justified in the name of religion. This is understandable since these are sensitive matters and, in extreme instances, such questioning can have serious consequences.<sup>28</sup> How, then, to begin discussion of sensitive issues? While open discussion may have its own challenges, development organizations' failure to do so is sometimes interpreted by other social

actors such as women's rights organizations as a lack of commitment to rights or ignorance about the role of religion in obstructing development.<sup>29</sup>

**What to do when religion is used to justify discrimination and how to be 'culturally sensitive' in development practice?** This question is usually raised by development workers who are not from the local context because it is about understanding the permissible local boundaries to development action. But is only local knowledge applicable or can learnings from other contexts also be applied?

This question is also about understanding the most effective local drivers of change. Are religious arguments always the most effective responses to discrimination justified by using religion?

**What does a 'culturally aware' organization look like and how does it work in practice?** Is hiring an ethnically or religiously diverse staff sufficient to ensure 'cultural awareness' in the organization, and should steps be taken to match staffing with national religious representation? Or does this bring its own challenges, as raised in the third of this paper's opening examples (see Part 1.1 above)? Do – and should – managers know what their staff's beliefs are?

**How representative are secular development organization staff?** In contexts where conservative understandings of religion and culture are widespread and where they are used to justify limits to development and rights, secular development organizations can provide a safe space for local people who do not hold these dominant views. How to square this with the need to be 'culturally sensitive' and perhaps deflect criticism that the development organization and its staff are 'westernized' and therefore their initiatives are not legitimate or appropriate? How to recognize the agency of both the communities who are religious and the staff who come from those communities but are not religious?

**How to ensure appropriate analysis is put into practice in staff attitudes and behaviour?** Many development organizations have developed sound policy on rights-based approaches, but find that this is not always reflected in the daily practices and attitudes of development workers, irrespective of the liberal use of the language of rights.<sup>30</sup> Even when development language and analysis are appropriately rights-based, how to ensure that these match the actual work that takes place in complex environments?

**How to ensure local knowledge and expert analysis feed into policy?** If it is accepted that knowledge about the local cultural and religious context is important, how to ensure the knowledge of local staff and partners is adequately reflected in an organization's global policy?

Meanwhile, for a variety of reasons, analysis developed in background papers by consultants on the basis of their expertise does not always find its way into global policy.<sup>31</sup> How to ensure greater consistency between effective analysis on religion and development, and development practice?

## 2.4 Challenges related to the current global context

**The 'war on terror' and the global economic crisis** When OGB held its 2004 Oxford and 2006 Dhaka workshops on Gender Equality in Muslim Contexts, the 'war on terror' and its dictum that 'you are either with us, or against us' was raised as a factor that complicates development policy and practice. It has forced local groups into polarized political positions, or positions that potentially compromise their principles, and has impacted on religious schools and the mobility of adult men.<sup>32</sup> It has also required OGB to develop messages that distinguish it from the governments involved in the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the context of the 'war on terror', 'The mainstream media has perpetuated this homogenisation of violent "Muslim fundamentalism" by failing to distinguish between various religious and political groups.'<sup>33</sup> The global media overlooks progressive interpretations of Islam because nuanced approaches do not produce good 'sound bites' or the kinds of dynamic headlines that match stereotyped visions of Islam.<sup>34</sup> This makes it difficult to popularize progressive, gender-friendly interpretations globally and helps keep them invisible locally.

Moreover, the 'increased militarization of international diplomacy has also promoted violence as means of resolving problems, which seems to have a knock-on effect in the domestic setting'.<sup>35</sup>

In 2008, the polarizations caused by the 'war on terror' were compounded by the global economic crisis and the insecurities it produced.

### 3. Some successful development approaches to religion, culture and diversity

This Part draws upon the rich analysis shared and developed through case studies that were discussed at two OGB workshops on Gender Equality in Muslim Contexts held in Oxford in May 2004 and in Dhaka in March 2006 with Oxfam participants from the following country programmes: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Pakistan, Palestinian Territories, Philippines, Tajikistan, Tanzania, the UK, and Yemen. It also draws on the analysis and practice that has developed within the spin-off We Can Campaign in South Asia, in particular workshops held in Jaipur in September 2006 and in Bangkok in February 2009, and on discussions held during workshops on culture, diversity and gender at the 2010 Country Directors' Meeting.<sup>36</sup>

Three out of the six case studies come from Muslim contexts, one is broadly from South Asia (which has involved work with Hindu, Sikh, Christian, Catholic, and Muslim communities), one is from a Christian context, and one from a post-conflict context where ethnic-religious identity had been a focus of the conflict.

#### *Gender Equality in Muslim contexts – the broader linkages*

OGB's 2004 Oxford and 2006 Dhaka workshops, which have provided much of the analysis about religion and development contained in this paper, were specifically focused on gender equality in Muslim contexts. This focus arose out of the post-September 11 context and was based on demand expressed by staff.

However, while both workshops did focus quite narrowly on Muslim contexts, many of the participants' observations explicitly linked what was happening in these contexts with other religious and cultural communities.

These include noting that:

- The definition of 'Muslim' was unresolved but an appreciation of the spectrum of interpretations was recognised.
- Muslim contexts must be seen as interconnected with other religions and countries.
- All religious contexts exert pressure on the development agenda, and gender inequality is not unique to Muslim contexts. When addressing fundamentalism in one group, its presence in other groups has also to be addressed. We need to invite more perspectives on this debate, not just focus on Islam.
- Where Muslims are a minority community (e.g. in India and the Philippines), addressing discrimination can present particular or additional challenges. This can include the need to understand the implications of parallel laws for different communities and can require taking account of 'fundamentalisms' in other religions.
- An over-cautious approach to Islam, not matched by approaches to other religions, can appear patronizing.

#### 3.1 Case studies illustrating best practice and effective analysis regarding religion, culture, diversity, and development

For each of the case studies below, the analytical learnings are drawn out of a discussion of practice. Several of the learnings may be drawn from more than one case study, but for the sake of clarity each point has been discussed largely in the context of just one study.

### ***Case Study 1: Early Marriage Campaign, Yemen***

The 'safe marriage' campaign in Yemen deals with early marriage, a practice rooted in local tradition and often supported by citing religion. As a strategy, partnership with Yemeni institutions and consultation with the community through research was emphasized from the outset. The campaign faced numerous challenges. In Yemen, the word 'campaign' has certain connotations. For instance, because people are familiar with the Malaria Campaign, Oxfam had to be careful not to imply that early marriage was being treated as 'a disease'. Moreover, gender equality is not a widely accepted local concept and thus, at least at the initial stages, the approach was to frame the campaign more broadly as a women's development issue.

Community-based research through a credible Yemeni university department was undertaken to produce evidence that early marriage results in several health problems for the girl and curtails the education and economic opportunities of both boys and girls. The research looked at the relationship between early marriage and poverty, with the aim of encouraging men to recognize that women's development is beneficial to the whole family. Religious leaders were a key target audience of the research. Some religious leaders were convinced about the consequences of early marriage for women's health, although they wanted more evidence from the medical fraternity. Such research helped open up avenues for engagement with key stakeholders, especially religious leaders and parliamentarians who are critical in influencing public opinion as well as government policies and national law.

A 2009 draft law making 17 the minimum age of marriage is currently on hold following opposition from conservatives, but at least the taboo on speaking about the subject has finally been broken.<sup>37</sup>

**Cultures are changing, contested and therefore related to power and politics:** The Yemen Early Marriage Campaign illustrates how practices, including practices justified by referring to religion, are not fixed but dynamic and changing. There are activists, academics, health professionals, religious authorities, and parliamentarians in Yemen who support this change, and there are others who oppose it. Thus, not only are cultures changing but the changes are contested, which is a matter of power and politics.

Struggles for women's rights and against harmful cultural practices is neither 'modern' nor 'Western'.<sup>38</sup> Numerous examples have been documented from the eighth century to the present day of women from Muslim contexts acting to protect and promote individual and collective rights in the private and public spheres - in other words, contesting dominant culture.<sup>39</sup>

The diversity within cultures *across time and space* also illustrates how culture is a human and contested creation, rather than divinely ordained. For example, polygamy was banned in Muslim-majority Tunisia in 1956 under an interpretation of the Koran, but remains largely unregulated in the Muslim states of the Gulf, while controls regulating its practice have been introduced in Muslim family laws in Bangladesh and Pakistan (1961), Senegal (1972), and Malaysia (1984). While polygamy is illegal in Europe where laws remain heavily influenced by Christian concepts of marriage, certain Christian communities in Africa and North America may practise polygamy. This diversity undermines racist claims, as well as absolutist interpretations of Islam, that there is one homogenous Muslim world and a 'correct' way of being Muslim.

**Cultural plurality includes diversity within communities:** The Yemen case study addresses some of the developmental challenges raised in Part 2. It shows that 'cultural plurality' must be understood as including plurality within cultures as this provides scope for a rights-based approach to development. While local staff in a development

organization may not always represent the dominant local view, their perspectives are just as much part of the local context and are thus to be valued as part of plurality.

The case study indicates that religion may well operate as a 'pillar of patriarchy' and can be a useful framework for justifying rights violations such as early marriage, but the support gained from some local religious authorities also reveals how religion need not necessarily operate in this manner – in other words, every religion is internally diverse.

Advocating for legal reform such as a minimum age for marriage is sometimes dismissed as irrelevant because there is a gap between formal law and people's understanding of what is culturally appropriate. However, cultural plurality is not just about the differences between national laws and people's practices. Experience in the field shows that there is also a gap between people's *stated* cultural practices and their *actual* practice; often, the latter is closer to a rights perspective.<sup>40</sup>

**A universal rights-based approach can be combined with recognising local complexities:** In shaping the Yemen Early Marriage Campaign, OGB was clear about its long-term goal of advancing women's equality. It followed the established principle that international human rights standards, which form a backdrop to development work, do not permit any cultural defences to discrimination.<sup>41</sup>

At the same time, the campaign demonstrates an understanding of local complexities and the fact that a one-size-fits-all approach is not effective. It provides an example of how local knowledge can feed into policy, addressing one of the developmental challenges identified in Part 2. The term 'campaign' was recognized as one that came with its own local baggage and early marriage was therefore tactically framed as a women's development rather than a gender equality issue. Moreover, choosing to campaign on early marriage shows a response to contextual demands. As the 2006 Dhaka workshop report noted: 'We need to look at specific issues that affect gender relations on the ground in each country [...] The next step is to respond using local knowledge to adapt the broad and shared human rights framework to address specific local development needs.'<sup>42</sup>

In other Muslim contexts people may have completely different experiences. For instance, in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, Soviet attitudes are layered on top of traditional values. Thus, a shared religion is not sufficient to determine what is culturally-appropriate development.

**Changes in cultural attitudes (for and against rights) can happen quickly:** Development workers often face a response from communities (and indeed sometimes themselves agree) that cultural practices are part of long-standing traditions that can only change very slowly.

However, the Yemen case study illustrates how, within the space of a few years, the scope for public debate on an issue can expand dramatically – even when religious belief is involved. The 2004 Oxford workshop report also noted how, 'Yemen and Azerbaijan, for example, have seen huge changes in values following the conflict and political changes that took place since the early 1990s and the collapse of socialism.' These changes have included the rise in religious fundamentalisms, previously not as widespread locally.<sup>43</sup>

**Non-religious strategies can overcome religious objections to rights:** The Yemen campaign recognized that religion is an important factor in shaping attitudes and that religious groups can be powerful supporters or opponents of change. For this reason religious leaders were made a key target audience for the campaign.

At the same time, it showed that non-religious arguments – in this case empirical data on the impacts of early marriage on health and employment – can be effective even where religious authorities are significant actors. In this instance, power derived from religious and patriarchal authority was countered by power derived from academic authority.

The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) has published a number of case studies<sup>44</sup> which show how strategies that do not necessarily refer to religion have

been used successfully to advance rights in contexts where the state is either theological or religion plays a major role in shaping public policy. The Musawah global initiative for equality and justice in the Muslim family<sup>45</sup> uses a holistic framework which combines arguments drawn from Islamic principles, international human rights standards, national constitutional guarantees of equality, and socio-economic realities.

**Commonsense strategies for social change:** When discussing the role of culture and religion in development, it is important not to lose sight of some commonsense strategies essential to any process of social change. The Yemen case study illustrates several of these strategies, including identifying and engaging with a range of significant audiences and opinion makers; and developing strong and broad alliances with local women's groups and the local media.

Participants in OGB's 2006 Dhaka workshop noted the strategic importance of using government programmes to support Oxfam's work on gender equality in Muslim contexts. For instance, the Bangladeshi government has various programmes to promote girls' education, while in the Philippines, the political climate is generally favourable towards women's rights work. In Yemen, the Women's National Committee has been a major force in the Early Marriage Campaign. Participants also noted the need to vary approaches according to the issue, time, and context, and the importance of the community, local staff, and partners conducting an analysis of appropriate context-specific responses.

### ***Case Study 2: Responding to the tsunami, Aceh, Indonesia***

During the humanitarian disaster that followed the 2004 tsunami in Aceh, Oxfam's Public Health Work Programme directly asked affected women what they needed, instead of making assumptions about what was appropriate. When it was found that in this Muslim-majority region, many women wanted scarves and prayer mats, the question arose as to whether meeting this need would compromise Oxfam's secular position. But Achenese and gender-trained staff were consulted and it was found this was a real need and Oxfam's response was appreciated.<sup>46</sup>

**The difference between tolerating, respecting and valuing diversity:** Despite the pressures of a humanitarian disaster, Oxfam actively sought to respect the needs of local women, even though these could have been seen as being contrary to the organization's secular identity. As discussed in the 2004 Oxford workshop, there is a crucial distinction between tolerating, respecting, and valuing diversity; 'tolerating' various practices is the lowest level of acceptance, while 'valuing' diversity entails taking active steps to ensure that diversity is promoted and protected. As the workshop report noted, 'Full development and realisation of human rights requires us to value others which implies our taking active steps to understand them, their views, culture and also ensure their rights.'<sup>47</sup>

**Valuing the voices of marginalized groups:** The Aceh case study shows the high value placed on women's own assessment of their needs. In contexts where culture can be used to exclude women from expressing their views, it can be vital to approach them directly rather than privilege the views of 'community leaders'. This ensures that efforts to promote cultural diversity do not inadvertently strengthen dominant, conservative voices – one of the challenges raised in Part 2.

**Valuing local knowledge and applying knowledge from one context to another:** One of the challenges raised in Part 2 was how far is more knowledge about culture and religion the solution to 'religious illiteracy' in development work? While an understanding of local culture is vital, at times this can transform into a paralysing sense, especially among non-local staff, that the local nuances are too complex to ever fully understand. Some local groups (for example some indigenous people's organizations or religious

fundamentalists) even use this notion to deflect criticism: any challenges from people who are not 'experts' in the local culture are dismissed as the result of ignorance of realities on the ground.

The Aceh case study highlights these knowledge-related power dynamics. The quality of local knowledge was clearly valued but rather than endlessly gathering more contextual information, the approach taken was to examine the women's demand in the light of general gender theory, which applies across contexts. In other words, general analysis of power dynamics that is relevant to any development situation is also an essential ingredient of 'religious literacy'.<sup>48</sup>

### ***Case Study 3: Anti-mosquito spraying, Am Nabak Camp, Chad***

In Am Nabak Camp for the displaced in Chad, beneficiaries were asked to select an equal number of men and women to be trained to spray camp tents against mosquitoes. The men opposed women's participation in the programme, stating that according to local religious practice women are not allowed to enter a man's house.

OGB staff accepted the men's point but suggested that the women should undergo the training as well so that they could spray their own tents. It was agreed that the women would also assist the men in mixing the chemicals and addressing safety issues. This suggestion was accepted and both men and women were trained.

On the first day, only the men did the spraying while the women mixed the chemicals and took care of safety issues. On the second day, however, roles were reversed by the participants and stayed this way for most of the remaining period. Indeed, the same men who had opposed women's participation on religious grounds allowed the women to spray while they mixed the chemicals. The reality was that spraying took more effort. It also added to the women's existing heavy workload.

**A claim regarding religion or culture may mask other development dynamics:** The Am Nabak case study highlights the significance of gender discrimination in development dynamics. Religion as an issue can be central to development, yet rights-based development is not advanced by focusing on religion to the exclusion of other factors and identities (such as gender), as these also shape development. This case study relates back to the challenge of how development policy and practice should regard religion, raised in Part 2.

Just as the men in Am Nabak camp took refuge in religion in order to ensure women's mobility remained controlled, religion is often mobilized to obstruct development that challenges existing power dynamics. During the 2006 Dhaka workshop, participants listed words and phrases commonly used at the field level within Muslim contexts to criticize development initiatives; almost all of the criticisms were framed with reference to religion: programmes were 'un-Islamic', likely to lead to people losing their religious identity or to moral chaos; confident female staff were 'turned Christian'. Yet when the examples and contexts were examined in depth, asking who was using these arguments and for what purpose, it became clear that religious justifications were being used to mask other, often-complex interests.<sup>49</sup>

Participants in the workshop reported that men rather than women more commonly use such arguments, and call upon the power of religion to gain or preserve male status and power, to rationalize or justify their own bad behaviour, or simply to resist new things and change that appear threatening in some way.<sup>50</sup>

A similar argument about the need to preserve cultural identity is sometimes used to justify rejection of development. For example, African evangelical preachers who claim

they represent local cultural authenticity may resist human rights because they are ‘un-African’, but have no qualms about receiving funding from US-based evangelical organizations and using globalized communications technologies.<sup>51</sup>

Other factors that obstruct development identified by Oxfam participants in the workshops included: ethnic and racist stereotyping; cultural biases; political instability or a general lack of political will; weak development and involvement of civil society; and the limited capacity of partner organizations.

This list indicates that religiously framed objections to development may be the cover not just for certain power dynamics but also be a way of framing practical reasons for avoiding change or responsibility. The workshops shared an example from South Darfur, where the turbidity of water is high and the Oxfam programme sought to introduce a chlorination process. The reason given for initial opposition from local male leaders was that chlorination would interfere with the purification process of ablutions carried out before offering prayers. Realizing that the men’s real aim was to avoid adding to their workload, Oxfam staff reminded them that using perfumes and incense dissolved in water (a common local practice) also theoretically affected the ablutions process. Eventually the men took the responsibility for chlorination.

**Unpack statements about religion and rights:** All these examples respond to the development challenge raised in Part 2 of what to do when religion and culture are used to justify discrimination or resistance to development. Whereas the Yemen case study illustrates the strategy of promoting the plurality and dynamic nature of culture, the Am Nabak and South Darfur examples reflect a strategy of not accepting the arguments at face value. The Oxfam staff’s response was to examine other potential underlying issues. Once it was clear that religion itself was not the core issue, other general Oxfam strategies were easily brought into play.

The We Can 2006 Jaipur workshop noted the commonsense need to tease apart statements made by religious groups, including asking: What political goals are served by any given statement that criticizes a development initiative? What facts are stated? What does the group not state? What stereotypes are used? Who do they label as right and wrong? It is a common feature of absolutist forms of religion to claim that the religion ‘has all the answers’. This might work at a metaphysical level, but does not address day-to-day development policy, for instance about running a country’s education system. In Iran, three decades on from the 1979 Revolution, even sections of the clergy are now refusing to involve religion in what they see as ‘dirty politics’.

Even apparently progressive positions need to be examined closely. In India, when there were *fatwas* against a female tennis star for wearing shorts, many men came out in her support – but would not take similarly supportive positions for the women in their own families.

**The tactical use of religious arguments:** In both Am Nabak and South Darfur, local staff in effect turned religious arguments around. The religiously justified argument for women not being allowed to mix with men was used to ensure that women had access to training for mosquito spraying in those situations where they had no accompanying male and could not under segregation rules allow a male stranger to enter their tents to spray. In South Darfur, too, the logic of the religious argument was extended, thereby exposing the selective nature of the use of the religious argument to avoid the workload involved in chlorination.<sup>52</sup>

**Tactical flexibility and rights-based approaches:** In Am Nabak, the Oxfam programme showed flexibility when it continued to negotiate training for women (which it presumed would contribute to gender equality), in spite of religiously framed objections. A similar degree of flexibility and responsiveness to local conditions, without compromising on an overall commitment to basic rights, is displayed in the Tanzania Education Quality Improvement Programme Through Pedagogy (EQUIP). This programme focuses on

gender equality in education across all communities and stressed equality for all. Yet it also recognizes cultural diversities between different communities. Working at community level, it sensitizes people about the need to eliminate practices (stemming from religion or tradition) that discriminate, or hinder a child's basic needs like education.

**Sharing examples from co-religionists:** When only religious knowledge is regarded as legitimate, participants in the Oxfam workshops noted that networking and the sharing of positive development practice from other countries that have the same religion can be effective strategies. There was a move some years ago in the conservative-dominated parliament in Yemen to introduce legislation enforcing *bait ul ta'a* ('House of Obedience', a provision restricting a wife's mobility). Women successfully collaborated to lobby directly with the President, who was not in favour of the move, and also drew upon information provided by as well as the experience of women's groups in Egypt where such legislation exists.

**What about long-term impacts of development strategies related to religion, culture, and diversity?** While the Am Nabak case illustrates the combination of flexibility and commitment to a rights-based approach, it raises some unresolved questions. Above all, once trained, the women were landed with the hardest part of the spraying work, and this added to their existing heavy workload. Under the circumstances had the search for equality simply made their lives worse? This points to a need to consider the distinctions between equality and substantive equality, and the relative advantages of single-issue and holistic development interventions.

#### ***Case Study 4: Responses to HIV and AIDS, Mombassa, Kenya***

A Mombasa-based development NGO that has a programme with sex workers in parts of the city was faced with a dilemma when a locally popular evangelical Christian minister began pressurizing women to leave sex work and marry husbands he was arranging for them as parts of an AIDS prevention approach. The minister was known to be part of a Christian organization providing essential palliative care for AIDS patients, including former sex workers and their children. He was also reported to have said that a safe sex approach was 'the Devil's work'; the development NGO feared that if the women met with its own safe sex outreach workers, the minister might deny their families access to palliative care.

After a failed attempt to convince the minister to include information about HIV transmission, the NGO sought the opinion of the women. Some openly questioned the pressure on them to leave sex work and even said the minister should 'pay us himself if we cannot find any other way of earning a living. The husbands he recommends are just lazy; they want a wife who will work and who no one else wants'.

The NGO decided to continue to provide information about HIV transmission to those sex workers it could reach. It also collected testimonies from some of the women who left sex work to marry husbands arranged by the minister but who had returned to sex work after their husbands abandoned or abused them. The minister continued to promote abstinence as the only acceptable solution to prevention but did not deny palliative care for active sex workers and their infected children.

**Using socio-economic reality to deflecting religious arguments:** In this case study, the strategy was to allow those most affected by the issue to shape responses, and in this instance, a religiously framed opposition did not necessarily require a religious response (also demonstrated by the Yemen case study above and discussed in more detail in the We Can Campaign case study below).

Some religious authorities and organizations support rights-based development, but as this case demonstrates, others do not accept that there is scope within religion for such an approach. When the Mombassa programme shared examples with the minister of other religious organizations that support condom usage, it did not work to change his approach. But by sharing the documented stories showing the reality of women's lives, the partner organization did manage to get him to tone down his unwanted pressure on the women to leave sex work and marry men he had chosen for them.

Elsewhere, development activists have understood a religiously framed response to be the most legitimate and effective retort to a religiously justified objection to development – but found their well-researched arguments dismissed out of hand. Relying on religious arguments carries the challenge that activists are rarely theological experts and interpretations of scriptures are often highly contested. This reflects the power dynamics involved in knowledge. Often, highly knowledgeable female theologians in various religious traditions are dismissed simply because, as women, their religious knowledge is not accepted as legitimate and interpretation of scriptures is a male preserve. On the other hand, development activists do have considerable expertise in social realities, which can also produce effective arguments for challenging religiously framed positions. Participants in the 2006 Jaipur workshop noted that being *both* 'religiously literate' and aware of one's area of expertise enable confident, proactive – rather than defensive – development responses.

Finally, using religion to counter religion can ironically sometimes foster absolutism and damage plurality. There is a danger that a rights-based approach is presented as the only 'correct' version of the religion's teachings, in effect shutting down debate and dialogue. As discussed at the 2004 Oxford workshop, 'It is not the claim to have found the truth, but the claiming of space to share opinion and challenge historical interpretations, which is important.'<sup>53</sup>

**Unpacking what religious groups claim about their support for the poor:** The women in this case clearly felt that the minister had little real understanding of their dignity and survival, even though he claimed to be working towards their escape from poverty and to restore their dignity. Since rights language and the idea of 'working for the downtrodden' are used by such a range of social and political actors, their use is clearly not a sufficient indicator of a development actor's impact on rights.

One solution is to focus more on examining the actual structural outcome of a religious or any other identity-based organization's development initiative; it is less a question of whether rights language has been used and more a question of whether power dynamics have changed or are likely to change.<sup>54</sup>

The 2004 Oxford workshop shared an example that shows the need for a long-term structural perspective. In Gujarat, India, the 2000 earthquake created an immense sense of loss as the social networks of many displaced communities were destroyed. The widespread failure of state structures to assist victims further eroded trust in the state. In contrast, religious groups (some with links to extreme right groups) had the resources and will to provide almost immediate, visible disaster relief. Displaced communities got much-needed support and a sense of identity from these new structures, which were often divided along religious identities. Solidarity with religious groups brought a sense of security and contributed to the belief that 'safety' was only to be found within the group. Thus it felt safer to rent houses in Muslim or Hindu areas. The culmination of this slow polarisation of religious communities and exploitation of a growing distance and distrust by political groups were the communal riots that took place in Gujarat in 2002.<sup>55</sup> In the short-term, the religious organizations had provided a vital service, but in the long-term their presence deeply undermined a rights agenda of peace and social cohesion.<sup>56</sup>

**Support for rights may be conditional and selective:** In the Mombassa case study, the minister's support for the women was conditional: if they did not agree to leave sex-work and marry the husbands he had chosen for them, they would no longer be allowed to

take part in the skills training his organization offered because, he argued, they were 'not ready to choose a moral life'. However, their access to palliative care was not questioned.

Conditions imposed on women's rights to education and work is sometimes subtle and linked to the high value given by the local culture or religion to 'family stability'.<sup>57</sup> The 2004 Oxford workshop noted how reference to religious traditions can be highly selective; those who promote the view that Islam does not approve of women's autonomy overlook historical examples such as the Prophet's first wife Khadija who was a tradeswoman and who herself proposed marriage to Muhammad.<sup>58</sup> Among evangelized communities in Latin America and Africa, it is increasingly common for women to be required to button their shirts to the neck and cover their bodies more fully, showing that religious rules regarding 'modesty' are often applied in a selective and gender discriminatory manner.

The conditions a religious organization imposes on its support for rights can help determine whether or not they are suitable development partners. Does their understanding of rights include a right-based approach to power and structural change? And what to do if a potential partner is indeed selective in its approach to rights and development?<sup>59</sup> Participants in the 2006 Dhaka workshop provided some answers: 'The background context to the question of whether or how to engage must remain Oxfam's commitment to enhancing opportunities for people to make choices while remaining within the framework of its principles and accountability regarding resources. The participants also noted that [Oxfam GB's] Guide to Mandatory Procedures states: "Appraising a proposed partner organization involves: checking that the organization is compatible with Oxfam in terms of its mission, values, credibility and accountability, including in the way it addresses issues of diversity and gender equality."'"<sup>60</sup>

### ***Case Study 5: The We Can Campaign to end violence against women, South Asia***

The We Can Campaign deals with the sensitive issue of domestic violence. The campaign has effectively sidestepped the pitfalls of engaging in discussions about whether or not religion supports domestic violence, by appealing to people on the basis of human values, and what men (and women) could personally gain from changed behaviour. The message emphasizes that domestic violence and lack of respect for women affect all members of the family and shows the effects of domestic violence on children. It proposes a positive alternative that respect and equality between men and women will promote happiness for all in the family. Family structures and practices were deconstructed to study the influence of religion vs. local culture, and it was found that among ordinary people domestic violence was largely justified on behavioural or cultural rather than religious grounds.<sup>61</sup>

In 2009–2010, the campaign developed a tool for encouraging thinking among Change Makers (the campaign's supporter-activists) about identities and diversity. The *I Am One – I Am Many* booklet and accompanying card games in the Diversity in Society Kit<sup>62</sup> build the player's ability to question their own prejudices as a necessary condition for ending all forms of intolerance and violence in society, including violence against women (VAW). Initial testing among groups diverse in terms of religion, age, gender, class, and region has had positive results, indicating that development work can address diversity – even in contexts where religious identities have produced violent divisions in society.

**Avoiding head-on confrontation over religion and appealing to people's positive aspirations:** The We Can example provides some innovative responses to the basic challenge raised in Part 2: how to discuss culture? Although religion and culture are major influences on social attitudes in South Asia, and are frequently used to justify VAW, the campaign chose not to cite religion (either generally or any specific religion) as a 'problem'. The reason for this was not to avoid offence but out of recognition that

debating the role of religion and culture could be a potential minefield that would distract attention from the more fundamental task of changing attitudes.

The campaign appears to have defined 'culture' in the broader sense of people's shared attitudes and practices, and sought to identify those attitudes and practices which positively support gender equality and non-violence. This is in essence an appeal to the better side of human nature. In particular, it has appealed to a general aspiration – shared by both women and men – for a harmonious domestic setting. The campaign has highlighted the benefits of change for men as well as for women as and thus provides an effective response to the growing influence of gender discriminatory interpretations of religion (which promise men greater control over 'their women'). This win-win approach appears to have had some success in achieving a change in attitudes and practices where a more negatively finger-wagging approach may have discouraged change. The campaign's strategy has addressed not just women who are the victims of culturally justified domestic violence but also the influence of culture on the family complex as a whole.<sup>63</sup>

The power of positive real-life examples of change, which occurred without a head-on discussion of culture or assumption that only religion shapes attitudes, was also illustrated in an example from Sudan shared at the 2006 Dhaka workshop. Having Sudanese women staff members from the more 'liberal' south involved in the northern Sudan humanitarian response helped many women and men in the community to see that educating their daughters is a positive step towards enabling them to improve their livelihoods.<sup>64</sup>

**Discovering the universal in the local:** The appeal to common aspirations and the elements of popular culture that support the We Can Campaign's perspectives on ending violence begin to answer the question of whether rights and culture are necessarily opposites. The campaign seems to have found a way to show how local cultures can and do express universal rights concepts.

**Understanding the local experience of the relationship between religion and culture:** In some instances, religion and culture cannot be disentangled, but the Bangladesh We Can Campaign found that justifications for VAW mostly used cultural rather than religious references. In other words, in some contexts even if religion appears to outsiders to be a dominant local factor, in practice it may not be the most significant driver of attitudes in communities. This indicates the importance of researching and understanding the actual relationships that local people have with religion (and recognising that this may vary from context to context).<sup>65</sup>

**Personal attitudes and practices also matter:** The We Can Campaign's focus on attitudes and behaviour rather than law and public policy emphasizes the individual as the context for development rather than seeing development as something that happens 'out there'. This relates back to the development challenge of how to ensure appropriate analysis is put into practice in staff attitudes and behaviour.

One of the challenges of working on gender equality, raised at the 2006 Dhaka workshop, related to the practice of polygamy; some female staff are second wives while male staff might have more than one wife. Colleagues in African contexts joined in an internal e-discussion on the matter. Aside from the general OGB policy that only one wife is recognized for medical and other dependency issues, the debate revealed just how difficult it can be to discuss and strategize regarding individual behaviour. The unresolved questions included whether or not Oxfam should have a policy beyond its existing administrative approach; how far a person's practice of polygamy relates to their ability to work effectively on gender equality; whether or not to explicitly categorize polygamy as a form of VAW, and how far contextual approaches are needed.

The challenge of addressing individual staff attitudes is a main feature of the final case study below.

**Focusing on agendas rather than labels:** Identity politics emphasize identity categories – ‘Muslim’, ‘Hindu’, ‘African’, ‘Western’, ‘indigenous’, ‘settler’, etc. This labelling of ‘us’ and ‘them’ makes it easy to treat diversity between groups with intolerance and to dismiss diversity within groups through absolutism and essentialisation. But development actors often use labels too.

Rather than labelling, an alternative approach is to focus on the *impact* of a person’s behaviour or of a group or organization’s agenda on the rights of others. The We Can Campaign has consciously avoided labelling men as ‘perpetrators’ or particular cultures and religions as ‘discriminatory’. We Can has consistently worked to analyse the impact of religious fundamentalisms on VAW and on the campaign’s achievements, and its efforts have included the development of the *I Am One – I Am Many* Diversity in Society Kit. While committed to addressing the impact of religious fundamentalisms, work in the field with Change Makers has deliberately not used the term ‘religious fundamentalisms’, preferring instead to talk positively about diversity and plurality.

This approach is similar to the analysis that emerged from the 2004 Oxford and 2006 Dhaka workshops. Although they recognized the value in developing a shared understanding among activists through shared language, developing definitions and applying labels presented many challenges. As the 2004 Oxford workshop participants noted: ‘In our work as developmentalists we need to be aware of the disempowering nature of labelling groups [...]. We should be mindful of the need for people to nominate their own identity and groupings in their own social structures.’<sup>66</sup> Participants also noted that in some contexts, ‘fundamentalist’ has positive connotations for people, which further complicates the use of labels.

On the question of partnerships with religious groups (also debated by the We Can Campaign which relied on local alliances for movement-building), participants in the 2006 Dhaka workshop elaborated: ‘The critical criteria in forming such partnerships should not be the identity of the organization (faith-based) but its goals (which reflect an underlying political vision) and its position (often visible through their actions and affiliations) on human rights, tolerance of religious diversity (including the right not to identify religiously) and poverty alleviation.’<sup>67</sup>

### ***Case Study 6: Dealing with diversity, Oxfam field office***

In Country X, which has a history of ethnic and religious conflict, OGB has been careful to ensure its local staff come from a diversity of religious and ethnic backgrounds. The Country Director is now wondering how this recognition of cultural diversity will in practice affect team-building within the office.

Unlike others presented in this paper, this case study, which is based on a question raised during a workshop, does not yet have a real-life resolution. However, it relates to some of the most critical practical issues in dealing with religion, culture and diversity in development work and so merits some hypothetical discussion.

**Identity politics as an issue in development work:** It would have been easy for OGB to have been satisfied that hiring a diverse staff would ensure that it had sufficiently addressed the matter of ‘culture’. However, the management was sensitive to office dynamics that indicated undercurrents arising from this policy of diversity.

There is no reason to presume that local staff are immune to the rise in identity politics that affects Country X and that is visible globally. The point here is that it is not so much religion or ethnicity that present challenges to development work and the practice of being a ‘culturally aware’ organization, but the *political and power implications* of religious and other identity categories such as ethnicity.<sup>68</sup> Staff and managers may need help in understanding how identities (religious and other identities, and whether self-identified,

presumed, or imposed by others) affect their attitudes and their approach to the people they work with (colleagues and communities alike). The We Can Campaign's Diversity in Society Kit mentioned in the We Can case study above has been an effective tool in encouraging such reflection in the communities where it has been piloted.

**Acknowledging each individual's multiple identities:** Each person is simultaneously part of multiple social groups or identities, based upon, for instance, their age, ethnicity, class, gender, belief, ability, sexual orientation, voting preferences, profession, home town or village, etc. An intersectional approach notes that people experience their religion and belief as a complex package, involving the interplay of several identities. For example, a young Thai Buddhist woman's experience of how her religion relates to domestic violence is likely to be very different to her husband's.<sup>69</sup> It can be easy to make simplistic assumptions about women as victims rather than seeing that an individual woman's reality might be quite different: dominant women also use religiously framed arguments to control younger, less powerful women and girls.

Although identities are experienced as a package, various elements of the package gain priority at different moments. One workshop participant noted that a female Oxfam staff member from India was allowed to go into mosques and talk with men in central Afghanistan because as a non-Afghan woman, she was treated as an 'honorary man'. It was irrelevant that, like most Afghan women, she was also from a Muslim background; in this instance, her identity as an 'outsider' offered space for development work. The complex and shifting nature of identities can provide opportunities for unexpected solidarity along some axes even while there may be tensions along other axes. Identifying and fostering these commonalities – including in the case of Country X a shared professional commitment – can be a way to overcome tensions based on religious or ethnic identities.

Although cultural communities are real and important, a shared culture is not the sole reference for a group of people's behaviour and attitudes. Legal-anthropological research from places as diverse as eastern Tibet and among Quechua-speaking communities in southern Peru has found that a community does not always use its shared religion or ethnicity as a basis for resolving disputes. In the case of Peru, decisions that were made were based 'on equitable principles that could have been equally effective had they been invoked before a state court'.<sup>70</sup>

**Distinguishing between identity and values:** A person's religious identity is not to be confused with their political values or ideology. For instance, both opponents and supporters of the death penalty include people who regard themselves as Christians; some Hindus reject the concept of 'untouchability' while other Hindus practise it. This challenges the common assumption in development policy and practice that a particular identity necessarily means the person has certain political values.

Unhelpful assumptions about a person's views due to their background and identity can be made just as much within the development organization's office environment as out in the field. Development workers whose organization works with their own communities sometimes find their analysis is dismissed as less legitimate because it differs from the stereotypes about what 'the poor think', or from the views of the community's dominant voices. Their analysis may be seen as being heavily influenced by the development organization and therefore not 'of the people'. Everyone is influenced by their work environment, but if one is to recognize agency, then the experiences of those staff, which originally led them to work in rights-based development, have to be acknowledged as valid too.

## 3.2 Alternative approaches to culture, rights and development

As the Yemen case study above illustrates, rights and religion (or rights and culture) need not be seen as opposites that need balancing which implies that one or the other has compromised in the process of development. The We Can case study also reveals how activists' universal principles of gender equality and non-violence can be supported by aspects of popular culture.

**A nuanced understanding of rights and culture:** There also exists scope within international human rights standards, which form the basis of a rights-based development approach, for a nuanced understanding of rights and culture which avoids dichotomized approaches. There have been efforts, led by women's rights activists from minority communities and the global South, to ensure that the baby is not thrown out with the bathwater in the process of emphasising universal rights: human rights standards only require the ending of *harmful aspects* of cultures and it is recognized that cultures can indeed support rights.<sup>71</sup>

Analysts have proposed three ways of looking at the rights and culture relationship: rights *vs.* culture; rights *to* culture; and rights *as* culture.<sup>72</sup> This latter approach perhaps offers the most scope for OGB's work since it positively affirms the space for respecting diversity while at the same time upholding the rights of the marginalized. There are concrete examples of this approach being put into practice, notably in the sphere of indigenous women's rights. Following the election of Latin America's first indigenous President in 2005, indigenous women in Bolivia played a central role in the three-year discussions towards a new national constitution. The ground-breaking provisions that were included in the 2009 constitution show that there is scope for protecting cultural identities while also advancing gender equality.<sup>73</sup>

## 4. Practical tools: mapping and engaging with religious groups

'Religious literacy' requires a deeper understanding of the question: should we engage with religious groups? Specifically, how do we understand 'engagement' and what do we mean by 'religious groups'? Since this is such a live question for OGB workshop participants, they began developing practical tools for mapping religious groups, which could then inform decisions regarding engagement. Although it needs further work, the mapping and accompanying framework for engagement demonstrate that OGB has already made headway towards 'religious literacy'. Nevertheless, the following discussion of engagement and mapping is only intended as a sharing of existing analysis; deciding whether or not to continue developing this tool, and if so how, is a step for the future.

### 4.1 What does 'engagement' mean?

Recognising the centrality of religion in people's lives and the power of religious groups in relation to development processes does not require a uniform response: engagement is a spectrum. It can range from simply finding out more about a religious group's positions, actions, and strategies with the aim of better informing our own critical strategies, to actively involving the group as a partner in a programme. It can include entering into dialogue with religious groups, or being part of a short-term issue-based alliance, or collaborating to make rights-based religious perspectives on development more visible. It can take the shape of 'critical engagement' where the development organization wants to avoid being too closely aligned with a religious organization on account of some of its policies. On occasion it is more effective to engage with religious leaders, but sometimes they are not open to change and it may be more effective to engage with followers.

### 4.2 Mapping religious groups-1: the categories

The first step in any form of engagement is to understand better the religious group involved – specifically, what is their position regarding a rights-based approach to development? This brings us back to one of the central development challenges raised in Part 2: what should be the criteria for partnership with a religious organization?

This question starts with the assumption that religious groups are diverse. However, an example from Indonesia, shared by a workshop participant, illustrates just how subtle the differences between religious groups can be. Indonesia's two largest Muslim religious organizations are Nahdlatul Ulama (NU, established in the mid-1920s) and Muhammadiyah (founded in 1912). NU's women's wings are Muslimat (for middle-aged women) and Fathayat (for younger women), 'The latter has a more progressive stance towards Islam and gender despite its parent organization that is more conservative. Muhammadiyah's women chapter is Aisyiyah (oddly more conservative than the other two despite its parent organization that has a stronger intellectual/scholar base).'<sup>74</sup>

For the sake of manageability, however, the workshops developed the following generalized categories of 'religious groups': progressive, conservative, and fundamentalist. A fourth category – 'the hate-brigade' – was added in the context of South Asia to reflect those groups that use violence.<sup>75</sup> The categories are not watertight – they are on a spectrum and the descriptions (which can function as criteria for mapping) will apply to a greater or lesser degree as a group shifts towards another category. It is vital to note that the four groups are not equal in size and also that numbers may vary from community to community.

In other research related to rights and religion, it has been argued that the complexities of the current social and political environment mean the usefulness and accuracy of terms such as 'progressive' and 'conservative' are increasingly in question.<sup>76</sup> In Latin America, for instance, political parties influenced by evangelical groups may take progressive positions that strongly support indigenous people's rights or the need to address poverty but extremely regressive positions on reproductive rights. One solution to this dilemma could be to make decisions about partnering on a case-by-case basis (especially since partnerships usually arise in the context of a specific development issue). However, OGB and all rights and development organizations need to remain mindful of the legitimacy that is conferred on a religious organization by partnering with an INGO. The visibility and power gained by an organization through being a climate change partner could, for example, make it more difficult for the community's women to challenge its discriminatory position on reproductive rights or women's mobility.

Since this paper is based on analysis developed at OGB workshops, it will use the terms they adopted. Evidently further work is needed to understand how the criteria and mapping may work in practice.

Progressive religious groups:

1. protect and promote all human rights without being selective, usually arguing that the rights outlined in the religion are in harmony with universal human rights;
2. actively resist all violations of human rights, whether by secular forces or in the name of religion, which includes taking an overtly progressive position on women's human rights, emphasising gender equality as a principle of the religion, as well as challenging existing power relations;
3. engage in a continual process of reflection, critique, and development of the religion, acknowledging the authority of a wide spectrum of members to contribute to interpretation;
4. work from within a religious perspective, but are willing to work with atheists and in alliances with secular groups;
5. actively promote a diversity of interpretations of the scriptures and religious laws, and do not claim there is one 'correct' interpretation;
6. respect diversity in matters of religion and belief, including the right not to have a religion, and to convert into and out of the religion;
7. tolerate all sects and a person's right to define their own religious identity (in the case of Muslim groups, this includes accepting Qadiyanis, Ahmedis, Zikris, etc.);
8. oppose the use of violence in public and private spheres;
9. may receive some international or bilateral development funding for NGO-style rights activities.

AWID's four-year research project on religious fundamentalisms found examples of resistance to fundamentalisms by progressive groups in all religions.<sup>77</sup> There are examples of religious development groups who take clear rights-based positions, too. Approaches to the HIV and AIDS pandemic are a notable litmus test, including whether condom usage is promoted rather than an insistence on abstinence, and whether the group recognizes the need to empower women to negotiate safe sex.

Conservative religious groups:

1. generally support the social status quo and focus instead on welfare, charity, and missionary activities rather than structural change;
2. give limited support for rights, but this is usually based on a paternalistic morality rather than a rights-based perspective or power analysis;

3. privilege women's role as mothers, and any support for women's rights is largely framed as a means of strengthening the religion/community and the family;
4. very rarely aspire to become political parties, do not aspire to direct political power and instead remain as localized mass movements, charities, or civil society groups. Any involvement in politics is limited to protecting specific group interests;
5. emphasize the centrality of spiritual life; there is an assumption that most tenets of the religion are fixed, although a degree of diversity in interpretations and sects is tolerated;
6. are willing to work with other religious communities but likely to demand separate treatment or special provisions for their own community, and atheism is understood as 'misguided';
7. tolerate private violence, although it is not respected, but public political violence is usually condemned;
8. receive funding overwhelmingly from local membership, which is often an extensive local/national network, and international funding is minimal.

Fundamentalist religious groups:

1. are critical of UN mechanisms and universal human rights standards, asserting either that the religion has a superior framework for rights or that universal human rights are culturally inappropriate;
2. may selectively support some rights and some conventions, and appropriate some human rights and women's rights language;
3. often use nationalist language, or link national and religious identities or appropriate other cultural symbols and festivals;
4. aim to achieve national state power, using religion as a means of mobilising and increasing their political power;
5. have an absolutist and monolithic definition of how to be a 'good believer' (especially for women), which excludes recognition of historical diversity and does not tolerate minority or opposing sects, atheists, or lesbians, gays and other sexual minorities;
6. claim the 'natural' right to represent all followers of the religion;
7. may promote political violence through the celebration of martyrs and/or intimidation of opponents by youth wings, or refuse to condemn political violence, or may covertly use violence against those not sharing their political or religious perspectives;
8. aim for national spread and membership;
9. have strong international links/networks and significant funding from foreign sources.

Religious fundamentalist groups of all religious traditions were seen to present some of the more serious challenges to gender equality. It was therefore to be expected that the workshops developed the mapping for this category in greater detail.

Several of the more detailed descriptive criteria relate to fundamentalist groups' organizational characteristics and strategic approaches to gaining social and political power.<sup>78</sup> These include:

- being media savvy, and with highly developed capacity in information and communication technologies;

- adopting a strategy of having front groups (especially focusing on service delivery) that appear to fall into the conservative or even progressive faith-based group categories or even purport to be secular; and of promoting a ‘moderate’ public image;
- deliberately placing members in strategic public sector education, youth, media, social welfare, justice ministry, and intelligence services;
- not declaring membership by some senior members (so that they are apparently neutral);
- strategically engaging with the youth, creating a cadre and support for members;
- having a proper infrastructure and hierarchical, centralized, autocratic, and non-transparent organizational structures;
- having a policy of conscious visibility, and claiming authority to comment: ‘being everywhere and having an opinion on everything’.

‘Extremists’ or the ‘Hate Brigades’:

1. dismiss rights language;
2. dismiss existing state authority/structure; their goal is its overthrow and replacement with absolutist authority;
3. claim to be the defenders of the community;
4. tend not to publicly comment on all national issues;
5. brutally suppress internal dissent, and physically eliminate ‘Others’; deny others’ right to exist;
6. openly use violence and extra-legal methods to achieve goals; are proud of violence and ready to die for cause; have training camps; use visible militarist-religious symbols (e.g. *kirpan* [Sikh ceremonial dagger or sword], *trichul* [Hindu trident], sword, etc.) and claim to have direct divine support; may be the armed wing of fundamentalist groups;
7. may have underground, cell-based, or open with public meetings, depending on state policy;
8. idealize renunciation of worldly lifestyles (family, etc.), especially for special cadre;
9. recruit vulnerable people as ‘cannon-fodder’;
10. are involved in criminal activity – arms, drugs, and people trafficking;
11. depend heavily on the use of foreign members, foreign training, and foreign funding.

### 4.3 Mapping religious groups-2: gender criteria

In most societies, women are seen as the repositories of culture and the community’s collective identity, and for this reason the community imposes rigid controls on women’s dress, mobility, sexuality, and reproductive capacities. Women’s behaviour – rather than men’s behaviour – becomes a focus of the tussle between the various forces that seek to determine a community’s understanding of its identity and path towards development.

Therefore, a religious group’s position on gender equality and women’s roles and rights becomes an important indicator of their wider positions on power relations and can help us to understand their underlying agendas and their tacit or otherwise support of ‘fundamentalist’ ideologies.<sup>79</sup> This approach also raises the need for OGB to define its position on engaging with religious groups that are regressive on gender equality and women’s rights, but may appear to be progressive on other issues such as the

environment or poverty in general; or on engaging with religious groups that provide essential social services but block progressive family law reform.

Workshop participants identified several indicators that could be used to assess the commitment of religious organizations to gender equality, and thereby map where they fall within the broad categories of religious groups outlined above. These indicators included a group's position on:<sup>80</sup>

- women's right to **decision-making and leadership** (including being judges, political leaders, heads of state, and leading prayers);
- matters relating to **sexuality** such as punishments for extramarital sex, or attitudes towards non-heterosexual orientation, or sex work;
- dress codes, **women's mobility** and access to public spaces, including places of worship;
- women's right to **work and education**, as well as the division of labour within the family, sharing of social roles, and the question of who heads the household;
- whether men have a 'divine' right to **beat or 'discipline' their wives**;
- women's right to **choice in marriage**, including the possibility of inter-faith marriage, and the choice of remaining unmarried;
- **family law** matters such as polygamy, and divorce;
- women's property rights;
- **bodily and reproductive rights** such as women's right to choose when or not to have children, abortion, and FGM.

As an example, progressive groups accept women as religious and social/political leaders; conservative groups place women on a pedestal but in practice relegate them to lesser roles in the group; fundamentalist groups may have a conscious policy of allowing women to be visible in their ranks, but actual decision-making positions are generally closed to women; among extremist groups, women are excluded from decision-making within the group or society.

Progressives often engage in women-friendly reform of family laws, whereas conservatives are generally silent on the matter or regard mistreatment of women as an individual rather than structural issue. Fundamentalist groups, however, may be strategically willing to take apparently pro-women positions on specific issues in family law, but will not support equality between the spouses.

#### 4.4 Mapping religious groups-3: a guide for mapping

The first step in any form of engagement is to understand better the religious group involved. In other words, mapping is at heart a knowledge-gathering exercise, ensuring that informed decisions are taken based on a religious group's actual positions (rather than our assumptions). But since knowledge is related to power dynamics and is hardly a neutral process – in some instances workshop participants were reluctant to label the religious groups that belonged to another religious community – the mapping requires a method that takes these dynamics into account.

##### **A framework or rules for mapping**

1. There is a need to be self-reflexive about the purpose of the mapping, the power dynamics involved, and the positions of the person who is doing the mapping.
2. Aside from knowing the superficial and underlying content of a group's positions, a power analysis requires being aware of the local and global forces the group represents, and their stake in change.

3. Good mapping requires a solid body of information, which is gathered from a variety of sources (see 'Sources for mapping' below) and which avoids generalisations, assumptions, and rises above a group's claimed status or perceived identity.
4. The development of the mapping criteria requires a highly contextual approach; a religious group's position on a particular issue may be more meaningful or critical to the mapping in one context than a religious group's position on the same issue in another context.
5. Silences and issues on which a group has no official position are a crucial part of the analysis. It is important to assess why there is no public position on an issue. It could be a strategic decision, as having a public position may affect the group's ability to operate on other issues or fund raise, or the group may prefer to keep their regressive position on an issue off the record.
6. Mapping can only be a snapshot of the current moment, and a group's positions, strategies, personnel, membership numbers, and the local social, economic, and political environment shift constantly. To remain accurate, mapping requires constant review.
7. Like all groups, religious groups are not internally homogenous. If an organization is judged according to an individual representative, there must be some judgement of how far they are representative of the group as a whole. A religious organization or a party's women's wing may differ slightly in its positions from the main organization.
8. Mapping must take into account the extent of internal cohesion: is the group very hierarchical with little room for internal disagreement, or is there space for alternative tendencies (either pro-rights or moving towards the opposite end of the spectrum)?
9. The mapping categories are not watertight and especially individuals or groups of individuals within a religious organization may simultaneously be part of more than one trend, either openly or secretly.

### **Sources for mapping**

There are multiple avenues for finding out a group's positions, including their:

- events (what kind of people come to the event, its objective, the programme's content);
- current and previous development work;
- public statements in the media, publication materials, websites;
- structure (who are in decision-making positions; the number of decision-makers who are women or from other marginalized groups, and their position in the hierarchy);
- affiliations and partners, as well as of decision-makers' membership of other organizations and any spin-off or front organizations; however, this is not always clear-cut: some religious development organizations will not partner with secular organizations or the public sector,<sup>81</sup> but feminist research has found that many organizations with an absolutist religious agenda may use alliances with secular development organizations as a means of gaining legitimacy as development actors or may themselves operate as apparently secular organizations;<sup>82</sup>
- support for or condemnation of other groups who take strong positions on an issue (especially when a group is silent on the issue);
- funding sources.

Other avenues to explore include:

- entering into dialogues with the group to hear their views and positions;
- asking the views of the community the group works in, and asking Oxfam partners associated with the group in question;

- asking other Oxfam staff (including out of country);
- trusting one's own experience-based assessment of similar situations.

Using multiple indicators to map or categorize all 'religious groups' within a particular context is beyond OGB's resources. For this reason local staff must identify their priorities for this analytical process according to the significance of local religious groups to the work at hand, and according to the more relevant issues.

### Some cautions about mapping

Real-life exercises in mapping religious groups reveal numerous practical challenges to the neat boundaries and criteria listed above. The cautions that arise from these challenges include:

- At times it is difficult to place a group in a specific category, either because there is insufficient knowledge about their positions or because groups take similar positions on certain matters. For example, one of challenges for the incomplete 2006 Jaipur workshop gender mapping exercise was that there were minimal differences between the positions of conservative, fundamentalist, and 'hate-brigade' groups on certain gender issues (such as rejecting women's right to guardianship of their children) – the differences were more of degree than quality. Other problems in distinguishing between the categories included that individual members of conservative groups may also (covertly) be part of a fundamentalist group.

A category simply may not exist locally or not be visible. For example, Bangladesh's history has meant it is uncertain whether there are any local progressive religious groups.

- Each category is internally diverse. For instance, some fundamentalist groups may hark back to an idealized past and ancient ritual, while others are distinctly modernist in their approach and are impatient with excessive ritual.
- It is inaccurate to see 'fundamentalists' as 'traditionalists' since their vision of the religion and society may be quite different to past practice. For example, the pan-Islamic form of *hijab* currently spreading throughout the world is not 'traditional' for Kashmiri Muslim women, who used to wear different coloured *chaddars* (large shawls) around their upper body or a colourful headscarf, or for Nigerian Muslim women who traditionally wear colourful sarong-type *wrappers*.

The more modernist fundamentalist groups in particular may state one thing and do another, or declare very different positions in front of different audiences. Analysing the positions of these religious groups may present challenges because they often co-opt the language of human rights and women's rights, which can make them seem more progressive than conservative groups. On closer inspection, however, this is highly conditional and selective: they may call themselves secular and/or engage in secular alliances (although their understanding of secularity is very different to that of the progressive religious variety); may strategically engage in inter-faith work while retaining discriminatory attitudes towards other religions; may appear to be resistance movements on the side of the oppressed and dispossessed but once in power pursue anti-union policies and favour globalized capitalist development.

Certain Muslim fundamentalist groups in particular also defy globalized stereotypes of 'extremists' which can lead to mistaken assumptions about their positions. For example, they frequently have highly educated, apparently softly spoken and 'modernist' spokespeople, have mastered modern communications techniques and technologies, and use globalization to their advantage.

## 4.5 A framework for engagement

Once a religious group has been mapped, decisions can be taken about whether or not to engage with them, and if so how. These decisions have their own framework.

- It is vital to recognize that religious groups are social and political forces and not 'neutral' potential partners in service delivery or outreach to communities.
- Concrete information about its positions forms the basis of decision-making regarding engagement with a particular religious group.
- Drawing upon the knowledge of local field staff, there must be a context-based analysis of the development question at hand and the part played by the religious group, especially the extent to which any religiously framed arguments against the development initiative are masking other interests.
- The full diversity of locally influential religious groups and organizations (including charities and NGOs) must be understood, with a particular awareness of more progressive, but possibly less visible, groups. The reasons for choosing to engage with a particular group must be clearly articulated.
- In multi-religious contexts, care must be taken to engage with groups from diverse religious traditions.
- Engagement may be more sustainable and may minimize the risks if it takes place under the auspices of other local partners, particularly in relation to religious groups.
- The entry points for engagement may be unexpected. Marginalized communities, and especially marginalized women, may feel they have little left to lose from challenging religiously framed discrimination. Conservative groups deeply engaged in welfare work at the grassroots level may in principle take a retrograde position but in practice often will not completely close the door in the face of a real social problem.<sup>83</sup> All religious groups are in a state of constant flux and this presents entry points and spaces for change.
- All of the usual organizational guidelines for engagement with a partner in a development programme apply to the question of engaging with religious groups as partners: be aware of the short-term and long-term, as well as local and global, impacts of the relationship; internally identify non-negotiables; ensure there is a clear statement of aims as well as grounds on which the relationship may be ended; constantly re-evaluate the relationship; make strategic decisions about which staff will lead the engagement, etc. O GB's Guide to Mandatory Procedures (available to Oxfam staff only) lists various conditions, including gender equality.
- In highly volatile situations, including humanitarian emergencies, decisions on engagement are fairly complex and led by various considerations, both internal and external. Often it will need a balancing act between organizational imperatives, government rules and regulations, and regional and global politics. Alliances should be regularly re-assessed to examine how long the 'humanitarian imperative' can be justified as the reason for collaboration.

## 5. Conclusion

It seems most likely that Oxfam will confront the question of partnering with religious organizations in humanitarian crises and conflict situations. In some regions, religious organizations also play a significant role in service-delivery and various forms of advocacy relating to poverty. Partnering with religious organizations is most likely to surface as a challenge when issues relating to gender rights, and also to reproductive, sexuality, and religious minority rights, arise.

At present, many development actors lack the degree of 'religious literacy' that would enable them to develop fully effective responses to challenges that are couched in religious terms. Developing religiously framed responses requires expertise in theology as well as the legitimacy to speak on the religion, and this is unlikely to be a viable short-term strategy for most development actors. However, there are sound alternatives, as the case studies on successful strategies have illustrated. First, recognising the diversity within each religion regarding rights and development offers a way of responding to religiously framed resistance to change; there are religious arguments and groups that fully support a rights-based approach to development. Second, it is important to recognize that issues other than religion may actually underlie religiously framed opposition.

Whatever the strategic response, 'not wanting to interfere' with religion or culture cannot be an excuse for inertia in instances where rights violations are being justified with reference to religion, especially in the sphere of gender equality work. In the case of OGB, this is already a non-negotiable part of the organization's mandate.

The essential strategy for successful and sustainable development where religion and culture are involved is to concentrate on a sound analysis of all the various local and international religious groups that may have a bearing on the given development initiative. This includes mapping their agendas and structures, and being conscious of identity politics. This should be coupled with OGB's existing strengths in development analysis and strategies, and should use local staff knowledge and expertise regarding local contexts. As one workshop participant noted, 'We know the people we work with at the grassroots level because we are working and living with them on a daily basis.'<sup>84</sup>

As demonstrated by the analysis in this paper, which is based primarily on various OGB workshops held between 2004 and 2010, OGB has built up a solid body of knowledge and expertise on the issues of religion, culture, diversity, and development. In each instance, participants expressed enthusiasm for taking the analysis and tools forward and for incorporating them into country-level practice and programme delivery. It is now time for this experience to be shared more widely and deeply within the organization, and for it to be used as a basis for discussion with development allies and partners.

### 5.1 Some future steps

Most of the workshops suggested future steps towards strengthening OGB's work in the field of religion and development. Below is a synthesized list.

- Undertake further research and wider level networking and consultation with other groups (especially women's groups) on rights-based approaches in all contexts where religion is used to justify resistance to change.
- Further refine the mapping process, including identifying locally relevant indicators (especially gender criteria), and begin mapping at the national level, involving programme and local staff so as to take advantage of their expertise.

- Map existing approved partners to understand in greater depth whether a partner actually matches the guidelines (notably gender guidelines) for partner selection.
- Maintain a dialogue among workshop participants on the issues through an email group (or possibly more formally as a 'community of practice'). Enable cross-programme and cross-regional visits to facilitate exposure to alternative strategies and contextual analysis.
- Share analysis regarding religion and development within OGB (including line managers and local staff) and with partner organizations. Support the exposure of senior level OGB management on issues of identity-based politics (notably the gender impact) through workshops.
- Document and share more case studies illustrating the challenges and solutions for religiously framed (or culturally justified) resistance to development.
- Increase resources allocated to gender and diversity work, which focuses on the impact of identity-based politics (religious and ethnic 'fundamentalisms') on gender. The regional gender initiative funds (not available in all regions) should be made more visible and available to regional and country level staff to enable them to take forward country-level work on the mapping of religious groups.
- Review the Programme Implementation Plans (PIPs) in line with the workshop learnings, and introduce and integrate a comprehensive analysis of the interaction of gender and religion in relevant PIPs.
- Introduce a critical understanding of links between gender and identity politics in the inductions of humanitarian staff that are being deployed in affected countries, and include a gender and religion analysis in emergency preparedness and contingency planning.
- Feed back to the HR Director on diversity issues, including identifying the challenges and importance of implementing policy and providing learning and development opportunities for under-represented personnel.
- Develop region-specific staff diversity strategies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For instance, none of the several resource guides and dossiers on the Eldis development information portal focus on culture or religion.

<sup>2</sup> In 2010, Jack van Ham, the Director of the Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation (ICCO), defined 'faith literacy' as, 'Knowledge and understanding of the values, language, motivations and culture of religious communities' (Van Ham 2010). At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) commissioned a study of religion and development. This found an apparent global consensus among development workers that development was missing an element of spirituality, and also that because international aid agencies did not welcome this finding, the development workers had developed two languages – an internal one for actual development work and another for external presentation (Jones Kavelin 2008).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example Sen 2000, p.2.

<sup>4</sup> An example is the Association of World Council of Churches related Development Organizations in Europe (Aprodev): 'Together, the Aprodev members have an annual income of some Euro 720 million.' See:

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/dplc/dv/dplc20100223aprodev\\_/dplc20100223aprodev\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/dplc/dv/dplc20100223aprodev_/dplc20100223aprodev_en.pdf)

The Catholic World Vision partnership's 'annual budget is in excess of US\$1.5 billion'.

See:

<http://www.worldvision.com.au/aboutus/OurOperations/FastfactsaboutWorldVision.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> Van Ham 2010.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* See also UNESCO's website: 'As demonstrated by the failure of certain projects underway since the 1970s, development is not synonymous with economic growth alone. It is a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence. As such, development is inseparable from culture.' See:

[http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=35030&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=35030&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

<sup>7</sup> 'As poverty and urbanisation increase there has been greater polarisation and violence expressed through "religion" based identity at the community level' (Oxfam GB 2006). 2010 was also UNESCO International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures, so discussion of the relationship between religion, development, and conflict is timely. See: <http://www.unesco.org/en/2010-international-year-for-the-rapprochement-of-cultures/>

<sup>8</sup> This paper uses the term 'religious organizations' rather than 'faith-based organizations'. It is acknowledged that 'based' may be more accurate since development organizations may have a religiously inspired philosophy, but a focus on development or education, etc. rather than religion per se. However, 'faith' is not a neutral term; it has an aura of moral superiority and implies that organizations not working from within a religious framework are somehow lacking. Since this paper is about challenging the many presumptions we hold about religion, the more direct term is preferred.

<sup>9</sup> Oxfam GB 2004, p.4.

<sup>10</sup> Oxfam GB 2004, p.3.

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<sup>11</sup> The link between religious fundamentalisms and violence was noted in the We Can Campaign workshop held in Bangkok in February 2009, specifically the concern that religious fundamentalisms had the potential to undermine the many gains of the campaign. The link is also discussed in detail in Balchin 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Oxfam GB 2004, p.4.

<sup>13</sup> For an interesting and succinct list of 'What culture is *not*' from the perspective of a member of the World Bank's Development Research Group, see Woolcock 2002.

<sup>14</sup> OGB is by no means the only development organization to be facing these challenges. ActionAid documents also note that understanding culture is central to the process of change, internal organization, and partnerships (see Cohen 2004, p.14).

<sup>15</sup> A 2002 Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) strategy document is another example. It impressively articulates the challenges of promoting diversity while retaining a shared global ethic. But the suggestions for how to resolve these challenges are only discussed in the context of 'mutual cultural respect', promoting 'respect for other cultures', 'ethnic and religious minorities' and 'different cultural groups'. The internal diversities are somehow lost. Also, 'There is inadequate understanding and appreciation of the diversity of Muslim contexts within Oxfam at policy level and at the regional or national level' (Oxfam GB 2006, p.6).

<sup>16</sup> Bhasin 2004, p.13.

<sup>17</sup> Bhasin, 2004, p.29.

<sup>18</sup> 'Participants from Afghanistan, India and Yemen all mentioned the reality that large numbers of women are being attracted to fundamentalist groups (in India including the extremist Hindutva)' (Oxfam GB 2004, p.4). 'By portraying women only as veiled victims, the agency of Afghan women was not acknowledged [...] Further, patriarchal characteristics were inaccurately attributed to religion and didn't recognise the aspects of this society identified by culture, tradition, livelihoods and ethnicity' (Oxfam GB 2004, box on p.5).

<sup>19</sup> Balchin 2010. Other differences include the fact that while there are progressive organizations working on sexual and productive rights within both the Catholic and Muslim traditions, this is not a major preoccupation of Hindu or Buddhist organizations. Most rights-based Christian organizations are based in the global North whereas comparable Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, and Catholic organizations tend to have South-based identities.

<sup>20</sup> For example, UNESCO's website landing page about culture and development (<http://www.unesco.org/en/cultural-diversity/culture-and-development/>) states that, 'the major challenge is to convince political decision-makers and local, national and international social actors to integrating the principles of cultural diversity and the values of cultural pluralism into all public policies, mechanisms and practices, particularly through public/private partnerships'. From other UNESCO documents it is clear that such diversity is understood as protecting the rights of minorities vis-à-vis the dominant culture, but that dissidents within majorities or minorities are not included in the equation. UNESCO's proposed 'alternative approach to human development' would prioritize, among other factors, cultural identity, noting that 'the social unit of development is a culturally defined community and the development of this community is rooted in the specific values and institutions of this culture (UNESCO 2010b, p.4; see also UNESCO 2010a, p.3).

<sup>21</sup> 'It is important to be aware of the political motives of those (groups or individuals) claiming to represent Muslims. "We need to be careful who we give voice to", as any

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engagement with Oxfam may inadvertently lead to support for their underlying political motivations' (Oxfam GB 2006, pp.6-7).

<sup>22</sup> For example, Bano 2009, concludes that, 'On a development policy level' her paper 'illustrates the potential these parties provide for becoming partners in development, due to their extensive networks of voluntary organizations, which have potential to be more cost-effective than regular NGOs as they rely on managers from within the party rather than paid professionals.' However, Bano's preceding paragraph states, 'Further work is needed to assess whether they do in practice provide good quality, sustainable and appropriate services; and to analyse whether the voting behaviour of beneficiaries of the services they provide does in fact change.' (p.13.) Thus, despite the uncertainty of their impact, such religious organizations are judged to be suitable potential development partners purely on account of their reach and financial cost. An identical conclusion is drawn in Kroessin 2009, who argues that the large budgets available to UK-based Muslim development organizations mean they can make 'a significant contribution to development activity' (p.18) although 'clearly more needs to be known about the work of Muslim NGOS'.

<sup>23</sup> For example, Barton (no date).

<sup>24</sup> "'Fundamentalist" groups are using their involvement in disaster relief to introduce narrower interpretations and definitions of Islam. Often these target women's dress, mobility and behaviour. [...] It can be difficult to help strengthen women's right to control land in post-disaster situations if "modesty" is emphasized as a religious requirement thereby reducing women's public mobility' (Oxfam GB 2006, pp.4 and 5).

<sup>25</sup> This point was raised at the 2006 Dhaka workshop by an Oxfam participant from the Middle East working on public health issues.

<sup>26</sup> The Religions and Development Research Programme (RDRP) based at the University of Birmingham in the UK is an example. Unlike the mapping of religious groups developed by Oxfam GB workshop participants, which places the groups' positions vis-à-vis rights and power centre-stage, the RDRP prefers a more functional typology, albeit with some comment on political perspectives. See Kroessin 2009, pp.4-5.

<sup>27</sup> For example, van Ham 2010.

<sup>28</sup> In 2010, following their long-standing and outspoken criticism of FGM, Dr Isatou Touray and Amie Bojang Sissoho of the Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (GAMCOTRAP; <http://www.gamcotrap.gm/content/>) were subjected to an unfair trial by Gambian authorities (see <http://www.wluml.org/node/6810>).

<sup>29</sup> There are examples of the practical outcomes of this wariness: 'Money donated to women's groups in Afghanistan is still only being used to deal with superficial aspects of women's status as the international community is hesitant to challenge more fundamental aspects of women's rights as they are unsure of what is culturally or religiously acceptable' (Oxfam GB 2004, p.5).

<sup>30</sup> This critique has been raised for example in an ActionAid document - see Bhasin 2004a, p.15.

<sup>31</sup> In a report commissioned by ActionAid, the need for understanding culture is placed at the top of a list of factors contributing to successful development (Cohen 2004). However, ActionAid's major report *Destined to Fail? How violence against women is undoing development* (2010) barely mentions harmful aspects of culture, religion, and tradition as factors that needed to be addressed.

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<sup>32</sup> Oxfam GB 2004, p.3. See also p.4-5: 'There has been greater suspicion of Muslim groups from national governments who have had to demonstrate their support for the "war on terror". In the Philippines religious institutions and schools have come under much scrutiny, some schools that had been operating for years have been closed down by the government for fear of their political agenda. The mobility of adult men has been reduced in these environments as suspicion has grown over their motives for travel overseas or to visit other Muslim communities.'

<sup>33</sup> Oxfam GB 2004, p.3.

<sup>34</sup> Oxfam GB 2006, p.5.

<sup>35</sup> Oxfam GB 2004, p.5.

<sup>36</sup> All workshops were facilitated by the author.

<sup>37</sup> Other learnings from the campaign have been discussed by Oxfam. See:

<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/applications/blogs/pressoffice/2010/09/21/how-change-happens-campaigning-on-early-marriage-in-yemen/>

<sup>38</sup> Shaheed 2005. There are historical cases of women using marriage contracts to impose monogamy, and going for legal redress when the contracts were not upheld – some recorded as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In some instances, religious leaders were also brought in to mediate, and acted in favour of the women. In Nigeria, there was the practice of 'sitting on the man': in response to cases of domestic violence or threats to take a second wife, women in the community would act in solidarity. In a culture where it is traditional to welcome and feed any guests who visit, all the women in the village would go to the house of the offended woman to stay and eat, draining the husband's resources until he reformed his behaviour.

<sup>39</sup> Information and analysis that highlights the diversity within Muslim traditions is often located at the national or sub-national level, and not translated into international languages. In many contexts, alternative visions can be found in very localized literature, traditions, and practices such as the unique *Baool* poems of Bangladesh. In the Indian sub-continent, Sufi poetry and syncretic religious traditions have historically been part of popular culture and resistance to social oppression.

<sup>40</sup> Anecdotal evidence shared with the author from contexts as diverse as Kenya (Celestine Nyamu-Musembi) and Pakistan (Sohail Akbar Warraich) particularly relate to women's inheritance rights. The law may legislate for equal or guaranteed shares in an inheritance, but in interviews community members will state that daughters do not inherit a share of their family's assets. However, in practice many families do make provision for their daughters to be financially secure.

<sup>41</sup> For details, see ICHRP 2009, p.34.

<sup>42</sup> Oxfam GB 2006, p.3.

<sup>43</sup> Oxfam GB 2004, p.6.

<sup>44</sup> AWID, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> [www.musawah.org](http://www.musawah.org)

<sup>46</sup> This demand has been reported elsewhere. See Kamis and Mahdi 2006.

<sup>47</sup> Oxfam GB 2004, p.13.

<sup>48</sup> Exercises at the 2004 and 2006 workshops revealed to participants that they were already familiar with the essential ingredients of strategies for change, including in contexts where challenges to rights are framed as a matter of religion or culture.

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<sup>49</sup> The only example where the religious argument did not immediately appear to have another issue behind it was when all men and women in a particularly conservative region of Yemen categorically stated they would not engage in livelihood programmes that involved earning interest because *riba* (benefiting from profit on money) is against the principles of Islam. In some Muslim contexts, the *riba* issue has been sidestepped by introducing 'profit and loss sharing accounts/banking', although it is debatable how far these are really different from interest-bearing banking.

<sup>50</sup> A PhD thesis by Ainoon Naher, a Bangladeshi woman researcher, examines the relationships between gender, religion, and development in rural Bangladesh in the context of a series of attacks on NGOs by 'fundamentalist' forces in the country in the early part of the 1990s. Based on fieldwork carried in the village of Jiri in Chittagong, Bangladesh, the author argues that while it is possible to see the attacks against NGOs as 'resistance' against 'Western' or 'elite' domination/exploitation, a closer look of events reveals that forms of gender inequality operating at domestic and community levels are largely behind the targeting of women beneficiaries of NGOs by the 'fundamentalists'. See Naher 2005.

<sup>51</sup> Morgan 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Another example was shared at the 2004 Oxford workshop: many Iranian women lost husbands during the Iran-Iraq War. The law at the time said that mothers did not have the right to custody of their children beyond infancy, after which the children belonged to the husband's family. Women from secular and religious groups formed an alliance and went to the government and religious leaders to demand 'social justice', emphasising that this had been one of the religious-political slogans of the Revolution. After a powerful campaign from mothers who acted in solidarity to illustrate the impact of this law on their lives, the custody law was changed at least to favour the war widows' rights.

<sup>53</sup> Oxfam GB 2004, p.9.

<sup>54</sup> This is indeed true for any development organization. Bhasin 2004a, p.15, notes comments from a senior staffer, 'People talk of rights and justice, he said, without even mentioning exploitation, oppression and deprivation. One of our team members said: "There is rights related activity but little understanding and articulation of power". Therefore, in spite of a lot of talk of RBA and some really good rights based work, it is difficult to say AAI's work has led to any changes in power structures or tackled the causes of poverty at the local, national or global levels.'

<sup>55</sup> This account by a participant at the 2004 Oxford workshop reflects analysis from other sources. For example, see 'British Public Is Funding Hindutva Extremism': <http://www.human-rights-for-all.org/spip.php?article28>

<sup>56</sup> Research by AWID has uncovered significant evidence of the negative impact of religious fundamentalisms on development, questioning claims that they stand for the poor. See AWID 2008, pp.18-21, and Balchin 2008, pp.22-28.

<sup>57</sup> See Balchin 2010, pp.23-32.

<sup>58</sup> Oxfam GB 2004, p.8.

<sup>59</sup> This is not just a challenge facing development organizations. In 2010, Gita Sahgal, Head of Amnesty International's Gender Unit at the International Secretariat, resigned in protest at the International Secretariat's partnering with the CagePrisoners organization, and the undermining of the principle of universality. See: <http://www.human-rights-for-all.org/>

<sup>60</sup> Oxfam GB 2006, p.11.

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<sup>61</sup> Oxfam GB 2006, p.7. This description related specifically to the Bangladesh We Can Campaign, although it broadly applies to the sister campaigns in other countries (Afghanistan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and, more recently, British Columbia in Canada, Kenya and Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Netherlands). More about this Oxfam GB spin-off campaign and specifically its strategic approach – relevant to this paper – can be found at: <http://www.wecanendvaw.org/campaign-approach> The campaign’s publications (see: <http://www.wecanendvaw.org/documents>) provide additional detail about strategy and impact.

<sup>62</sup> See:

<http://www.wecanendvaw.org/sites/default/files/Diversity%20in%20Society%20Kit.pdf>

<sup>63</sup> Other examples of initiatives that have involved men in anti-VAW work include work by the Indonesian organization Rifka Annisa; see Hasyim 2009. The Sauti Ya Wanawake or Voice of Women groups in Kenya have also initiated a dialogue with some religious leaders on religious/traditional practices that violate women and their rights. See Bhasin 2004.

<sup>64</sup> Oxfam GB 2006, p.8.

<sup>65</sup> ‘The relationship between Islam and culture is complex. On the one hand, one of the reasons Islam spread so quickly around the world was because of its ability to accommodate culture, and one of the principles of Muslim jurisprudence is the acknowledgement of *urf* (custom). On the other hand, Muslim jurisprudence’s acceptance of custom is limited to those who are in agreement with the principles of Islam, especially the question of the general public good (*maslaha*). Moreover, many regressive cultural practices are acknowledged by Muslims to be against the principles of Islam – see Oxfam GB 2006, p.9.

<sup>66</sup> Oxfam GB 2004, p.3.

<sup>67</sup> This approach is not unique to We Can’s work. After four years of research, AWID’s Resisting and Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms initiative suggested that, regarding the term ‘fundamentalist’, ‘Presently there is the dual danger that some throw the net too wide, whereas others bring too few actors into the scope of their analysis [...] ‘It may be more effective to lable *agendas* rather than actors as ‘fundamentalist’; it may at times be strategic to “name and shame” a fundamentalist leadership or organization, but the advantages of labelling followers is far less certain’ (Balchin 2010, p.114). While AWID has concluded that labelling and rigid definitions may not be effective strategies for addressing rights violations in the name of religion, it has nevertheless found that having a shared understanding of the common characteristics of fundamentalist agendas does help strengthen resistance to rights violations. See Vaggione 2008.

<sup>68</sup> In a similar vein, Cohen 2004, pp.18–19 notes, ‘Just as failure to attain a “progressive realization” of human rights is not acceptable, so is letting cultural constraints go by without their being addressed is equally harmful to advancing RBA. Being intentional requires finding appropriate ways to discuss these hard matters and not just dismiss them by saying it’s in the culture.’

<sup>69</sup> According to Buddhist rights activist Ouyporn Khuankaew in Thailand, Buddhist monks say, ‘When your husband beats you, [it is] because [in your] previous life you did something to him, so you better not do anything bad; you have to accept the karma’ (Balchin 2010, p.27). International human rights standards increasingly recognize the idea of multiple identities or ‘intersectionality’. For example, see the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) General Recommendation No. 25 on Gender

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Related Dimensions of Racial Discrimination (see [http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/76a293e49a88bd23802568bd00538d83?OpenDocument](http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/76a293e49a88bd23802568bd00538d83?OpenDocument)) and Human Rights Council General Comment No. 28 (paragraph 30)(see <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/gencomm/hrcom28.htm>) .

<sup>70</sup> ICHRP 2009, p.19.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, Human Rights Council General Comment No. 28 (paragraph 5)(*ibid*); CEDAW General Recommendation No. 19 (see <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm#recomm19>); and The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Report to the Commission on Human Rights, E/CN.4/2003/75, para. 62.

<sup>72</sup> Cowan, Dembour and Wilson 2001, p.6.

<sup>73</sup> In Mexico, a document produced by the indigenous women's movement in the Chiapas region stated that they sought 'to find paths through which we may view tradition with new eyes, in such a way that will not violate our rights and will restore dignity to indigenous women. We want to change those traditions that diminish our dignity.' Ultimately, the San Andrés Accords signed by Zapatista commanders and Mexican government representatives committed the government to respecting indigenous autonomy in the following terms, 'Indigenous peoples have the right to free self-determination, and, as the means of their expression, autonomy from the Mexican government [...] to [a]pply their own normative systems in the regulation and resolution of internal conflicts, honouring individual rights, human rights, and specifically, the dignity and integrity of women' (Hernández Castillo 2002, p.4).

<sup>74</sup> Among Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia there is a strong tradition of progressive scholarship and support for less conservative interpretations of Islam.

<sup>75</sup> Participants at the 2006 Jaipur workshop suggested adding a fifth category: opportunist groups; in other words, those for whom religion is purely instrumental and a means of gaining political power. This approach is similar to a case study published by AWID: see Sumaktoyo and Rindiastuti (no date).

<sup>76</sup> Balchin 2010, p.112.

<sup>77</sup> Examples of religious groups working within a rights-based framework are included in the *Resource Kit: Analysis and Research on Culture, Religion and Development* accompanying this paper.

<sup>78</sup> While these were developed vis-à-vis Muslim contexts, they are broadly applicable to other religious contexts, as, for example, found in AWID's research regarding religious fundamentalist strategies (see Balchin 2010). See also Vaggione 2008 regarding the general shared characteristics of religious fundamentalisms.

<sup>79</sup> Reflecting critically on their own work, the participants who developed these gender criteria also briefly discussed the extent to which gender equality is in practice accepted within Oxfam itself.

<sup>80</sup> We Can workshop participants in Jaipur 2006 worked on this in considerably greater detail but due to time constraints the exercise remained incomplete and not sufficiently developed for sharing publicly. Some of the challenges they encountered while attempting this detailed, fact-based mapping are discussed in Part 4.4.

<sup>81</sup> Kroessin 2009, p.18.

<sup>82</sup> Vaggione 2008, and Balchin 2008.

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<sup>83</sup> An example is the position of church groups on condom use in AIDS-affected areas: while officially the position is to promote abstinence and faithfulness, there is anecdotal evidence that in practice condom use is being encouraged – possibly in order to avoid becoming irrelevant in the face of the crisis.

<sup>84</sup> Oxfam GB 2006, p.15.

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