
Gender Mainstreaming and Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy Organizations: Introduction

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Introduction

This special issue of the *Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy* journal is focused on bringing to the forefront and tackling a major issue that exists in evangelical organizations affiliated with the Accord network and beyond: the lack of the full inclusion of women in the theologies, cultures, practices, and leadership of Christian organizations. For organizations, like those in Accord, who are committed to restoring shalom, pursuing right relationships, and empowering those around them, this lack of inclusion hinders their mission.

The articles in this issue come from a variety of scholars and practitioners, some based at Accord organizations and others connected with NGOs inside and outside the United States. In some ways, these articles are the product of years of conversation in the faith-based development sector as a whole. For example, a report by the World Humanitarian Summit (Boan 2016) highlights the need for faith-based academic institutions to more rigorously engage in research with development groups, especially around macro-level development issues. We see research and conversations around gender mainstreaming as one such effort. Indeed, motivated by this charge, a group of Christian development practitioners and scholars came together around this topic in 2018, leading to the formation of the Wheaton Network Initiative on Gender, Development, and Christianity. This group collaboratively launched the first round of the Principles for Gender Equality in Development Organizations (2019) [www.wheaton.edu/gender]. These working principles are intended for Christ-centered development agencies and are included directly following this introduction (6-8).

The co-editors of this special issue are aware that naming gender inequality and calling for increased gender mainstreaming may immediately rub some in the evangelical sector the wrong way, because of the association of this topic and those terms and words with a liberal perspective. This topic has become even more

controversial as this issue goes to publication in March 2025, because of the very strong political pressure to move back from intentional efforts to create more inclusive environments. In fact, one of the six articles that was to be featured in this special issue, a case study on gender mainstreaming in an evangelical organization, had to be pulled because of current political realities.

Yet relegating certain key issues to the domain of those deemed to be more progressive, and washing one's hands of them as part of that process, is a poor and spiritually dangerous excuse for not engaging and thus avoiding scriptural and prayerful testing of the arguments in this important conversation. In other words, simply dismissing concerns about gender equality and other issues of inclusion within our evangelical organizations as arising from inherently suspicious and threatening viewpoints may limit the work of and quench the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22). Therefore, we hope and pray that all who read through the articles of this issue, including this introduction, will approach this topic prayerfully, humbly, and with openness to the leading of the Spirit; as co-editors of this issue, we have tried to do the same.

To this end, and in this context, it is important to provide clarity on how the term "gender" is being used and focused on in this special issue, since different people mean and perceive different things when they use or see this term. When we use the word gender, we are not talking primarily about issues of gender identity or sexuality. Rather, we use this term to be able to talk about how perceptions and expectations around roles, attributes, and capacities of males and females vary greatly between countries and cultures where most of our organizations do our work, and because framing women's equality as gender inequality helps us acknowledge that these gender roles are culturally shaped. Gender as a term also acknowledges that the experiences of both women *and* men must be

considered when we discuss equality and justice for women.

Our prayerful hope is that this special issue will both challenge and encourage everyone in Christian relief, development, and advocacy organizations who seek to be faithful in pursuing the call to gender equality and gender mainstreaming in their institutions, and we have assembled this set of articles to try to achieve that goal. In what follows, we provide what we hope will be helpful background to them, first briefly exploring the concept of gender mainstreaming in development and discussing the central role of theology in informing such efforts. We then describe how and why this special issue as a whole came about and why we believe this topic to be so important for Christian relief, development, and advocacy efforts. Finally, we summarize the key themes of each of the articles that follow.

Development as a Gendered Issue and Gender Mainstreaming

Within the international development sector, gender inequality is recognized as a central concern that impacts the well-being of communities. Although the topic of women's marginalization has been discussed in many development conversations over the last 50 years, the focus on organizational structures and more systemic issues became more important in the last several decades.

As discussed partially in Reynold's article in this issue reporting on the demographics of Accord organizations, there have been different movements in the development space as regards gender equality. Early on, in the 1970s, specific questions arose around how women were faring in development, and the Women in Development (WID) paradigm gained prominence. It focused attention on the well-being of women in development efforts, given the fact that most of the world's poor were women, and that women were often not given equal access to development resources (Tinker 2004). WID was replaced in the 1990s by the Gender and Development (GAD) paradigm, which shifted attention to the systems (such as policies, market dynamics, and cultural understandings) that shaped gender relationships and ideas. Instead of considering particular challenges faced by women in development projects carried out within an unquestioned system, the focus was turned to the systems that created these conditions (Tinker 2004).

Gender mainstreaming is related to this latter approach. *Gender mainstreaming* as a term was popularized in the late 1980s, but its roots lie in the broader history of international development, rights movements, and organizational change. Gender mainstreaming is an approach that suggests that all areas that impact women and men—legislation, policies, or

programs, in all areas and at all levels—must consider the concerns and experiences of both women and men so that both benefit and inequality is not perpetuated (Beijing 1995). In practice, the idea of gender mainstreaming presents gender equality not as a separate agenda for women alone, but as a central organizational aspiration to be integrated into all shared efforts by women and men. First proposed at the Third Conference on Women in 1985, and formally featured at the Fourth Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, it built on key milestones, such as the First World Conference of the International Women's Year convened by the United Nations in Mexico City in 1975 and the UN General Assembly's proclamation of 1976-1985 as the United Nations Decade for Women.

Gender mainstreaming is thus a long-standing approach, recognized and emphasized by NGOs, governments, and agencies worldwide, that seeks to address gender disparities and promote gender equality in every facet of organizational and societal life. Over these last thirty years, it has been both lauded as having led to significant improvements as well as critiqued for how it has been implemented and for not having done enough (see, for example, Moser and Moser 2005, Tiessen 2007, Meier and Celis, 2011, Keleher 2013, Milward et al. 2015, and Kotze et al. 2021). As with all ideas, paradigms, and movements, it is crucial to subject them to the testing of Scripture and the Spirit; to that end, as we have interacted with gender mainstreaming over the years and come together to share our organizational experiences, we have become convinced that unless we address underlying theological perspectives and practices, any efforts around diversity will stall. What makes the articles in this issue so truly powerful is that they do just that; they build upon the principles of gender mainstreaming, add the theological component, and direct this integrated offering toward our Christ-centered organizations.

This offering is needed more than ever in this present moment. Although evangelical Christian organizations represent a significant segment of the relief and development sector, they do not make up a significant percentage of those engaged in the gender mainstreaming conversations, at either the national or international level. This may be in large part because of a polarization that appears to exist between the "secularized" international development sector and the religious sector out of which these evangelical sectors were birthed, leading the latter to shy away from that kind of engagement. This chasm has been the subject of commentary by scholars, in particular Marshall (2010) who notes that the "secular" development sector sees religion as having a mostly negative impact on women's agency, whereas religious actors often believe that common development models undermine the family and religious values. Still, she notes that these

actors often share an emphasis on dignity and have some similar programs.

Whether or not this is a significant driving force behind the lack of engagement by evangelical Christian relief, development, and advocacy organizations with gender mainstreaming issues, it is also the case that there is a dearth of adequate research around the intersection of gender, faith, and development. Some groups studying religion, like the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, stand out for their research focus on a number of issues around faith-based development, including research on gender based and sexual violence. Further, a volume on *Gender, Faith, and Development* (Tomalin 2011), delves into a number of case studies around how religious actors engage with gender in development programs and efforts. But these are more exceptions than the norm in research on religious efforts around gender equality. In the current context it is even more vital to help those working in evangelical relief, development, and advocacy organizations understand the importance of prayerfully considering how they might be called to engage with their own gender mainstreaming issues. This special issue of *CRDA* is an attempt to do that, as well as to remedy the gap in the research itself.

Theology and Commitments to Gender Equality

Given these gaps in the development literature on both the secular and faith-based side, it is not surprising that there has been a lack of adequate research on how theology shapes the gendered work of development organizations. Three elements came to the fore along those lines as we began our work on this special issue. First, in the literature that does exist, religious communities are either often viewed as playing the role of merely pushing back on real feminist goals (Marshall 2010), or as inappropriate communities to critically assess and critique (Tomalin 2011). Those involved in gender and development work tend to view religious ideologies and assumptions as being a negative factor, or they tend to leave them unexamined in relationship to that work. This is despite the fact that there are good examples of organizations that use theology and biblical texts as foundations for seeking transformation of harmful gender norms in programming, including those mentioned below and in the articles that follow. In short, how religion shapes the ideologies and assumptions around gender in Christian relief, development, and advocacy organizations as well as among the people they serve, whether through current ideas or the continued importance of historical ideas (as highlighted in Jones and Odhiambo contribution on patriarchy), is understudied by the research community.

Second, one crucial area that has been underserved in the scholarly and practitioner attention in this field has been the implications of religion for women's representation in Christian development organizations. Many Christian organizations lack clear and transparent statements about women in leadership and gender equality; in fact, senior leaders of many Christian nonprofits disagree on what the official theological views of their organizations are regarding gender equitable relationships and women in leadership. Reynolds explored this confusion in her original work back in 2014 that considered the broader constellation of Christian nonprofits. Part of this confusion likely stems from the fact that a majority of Accord members have ecumenical identities (Offutt and Reynolds 2019) and may bring together groups with dissimilar ideas around gender; this also points to the crucial fact that an examination and clear enunciation of theology is a necessary first step for Christian organizations in implementing gender equality and inclusion efforts (Birmingham and Simard 2022, Reynolds and Curry 2017). This is something that appears still to be missing, as shown by Reynolds's updated study in this issue.

This is not to say that all Christian development organizations have failed to examine or are not currently probing these questions about the role of their faith when it comes to gendered realities. For example, World Vision has been involved in asking these questions for several decades (Tripp 1999); Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has pioneered a couples strengthening approach known as "The Faithful House" with a strong set of tools for facilitators (CRS 2009; Brewster-Lee 2011). As highlighted by Deepan and Blake (2025), Tearfund has a long list of resources and programming around issues of Christian theology and gender. Others in the Accord community, although a minority, could be mentioned as well, and we hope more examples can and will be shared in subsequent issues of the journal. But in general, the evangelical Christian development sector lacks this deep theological reflection, something Smith's contribution (2025) alludes to when he analyzes how attention to Scripture and gender in development theologies often engages with gender only superficially.

Third, we find that theologies in general have gendered implications even when gender is not the focus. The article in this issue by Lee, for example, highlights the way that theological language around rescue, and the process (including the who) of theologizing in anti-trafficking work has had negative unintended impacts for many marginalized women. While Lee focuses on anti-trafficking, she brings up broader questions for organizations involved in the work of women's empowerment.

In summary, while the enduring problem of gender inequality is an issue for the development sector as a whole, this problem is even more entrenched and significant for evangelical Christian international development organizations. Few of these organizations have robust gender equity or inclusion efforts or are actively pursuing gender mainstreaming, and as highlighted in Reynolds' contribution to this issue, women's representation in leadership of Christian organizations falls short of what we see in the sector more broadly, meaning that men are largely leading the work of organizations in the Accord Network. Moreover, there seems to be a tendency for many male leaders to see gender inequality as a women's issue. Deepan and Blake's article here stands out as an example of a male leader rejecting this narrative.

Conclusion

As signaled by the various articles in this collection, good resources exist that point toward ways to institute gender mainstreaming. We especially emphasize the "Principles for Gender Equality in Development Organizations" mentioned above and published following this introduction. Drawing on a history of past sources, most recently the Gender Practitioners Collaborative (2017), these principles are specifically aimed at Christian organizations and were created by the Wheaton Network Initiative for Gender, Development, and Christianity. They start by emphasizing the shared commitment to shalom (#1), before delving into five specific principles related to gender mainstreaming efforts—clear theological commitments (#2), measurement and accountability (#3), resourced intentionality (#4), appropriate HR policies/protocols (#5), and gender inclusive programming (#6).

The articles in this issue embody these principles. Reynolds starts off the issue by providing a quantitative overview of the gendered leadership realities in Accord organizations, which highlights the lagging presence of women at all leadership levels. The second article, the original case study of how an organization implemented these principles, unfortunately had to be pulled just before this issue went to press, as noted above. This special issue moves then to theological concerns that underpin the topic of gender mainstreaming in critical way: first Jones and Odhiambo discuss the historical embeddedness of patriarchy and its impacts for Christians, and then Smith provides different approaches organizations might find helpful in doing a deep dive into the Old Testament and God's heart for gender justice. To round things out theologically, Lee, while not focused solely on biblical studies or theologies, provides a helpful call to expand the Christian theological voices that development

organizations consult and that shape our approaches to justice.

This issue concludes with a testimonial by Deepan, one of the central architects of Tearfund's Transforming Masculinities curriculum, co-written with Blake, who draws on the insights of those around Deepan. In sharing his personal and ongoing journey toward being an ally to women around issues of gender inequality, he invites male allies to engage more deeply in this work. We hope this concluding article reminds all Christian organizations of the ongoing, never-finished work of Christian individuals and organizations in learning, listening, and pursuing shalom in this world, especially around matters of gender. We hope and pray too that the ideas, resources, and underlying theologies will help Christian organizations and leaders think further about what new directions championing gender equality might look like in their organizations, and what useful tools might help us all along the way.

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