Promoting Gender Equality

Summary statement

‘The Church has the duty to contribute to the recognition and liberation of women, ...Giving women opportunities to make their voice heard and to express their talents through initiatives which reinforce their worth, their self-esteem and their uniqueness would enable them to occupy a place in society equal to that of men...Bishops should encourage and promote the formation of women so that they may assume ‘their proper share of responsibility and participation in the community life of society and ...of the Church’ Pope Benedict XVI

What do we mean by ‘gender’?

Gender refers to the roles of women and men of all ages, which are defined culturally, socially, economically and historically. These ideas vary across cultures. ‘Gender’ itself is a term that evokes various debates and controversies. At a minimum, to use the word ‘gender’ rather than ‘sex’ is to indicate that male and female roles in a given society are shaped not only by biology but by social practice, and that the roles of women and men will not be identical in every society.

While a clear understanding of what we mean by gender and the difference between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ is essential to developing our policy and practice, CAFOD’s motivation in prioritising the gender dimensions of our work is rooted in Catholic teaching and its deep commitment to justice, solidarity and the equality of women and men. We believe that gender equality is vital to our mission to tackle poverty and promote the development and wellbeing of the communities in which we work.

For these two reasons – the needs of development and the clear values embedded in scripture and Catholic teaching – the promotion of gender equality is a deliberate and explicit part of CAFOD’s work. A deep commitment to justice and rejection of all forms of unfairness is at the core of CAFOD’s mission.

Why gender is important for development and for CAFOD

In recent decades there has been growing awareness in the development sector of the crucial significance of gender questions for both understanding and promoting development. Issues surrounding gender equality are therefore not peripheral or secondary to CAFOD’s work. A deep commitment to justice and rejection of all forms of unfairness is at the core of CAFOD’s mission.

Firstly, poverty itself is not ‘gender-blind.’ The situations of men and women in the poorest countries differ so that, by most measures, development outcomes are consistently worse for women than for men. Some brief examples can be seen below:

- Gender discrimination is the world’s most widespread form of social exclusion.
- 70 per cent of the world’s one billion poorest people are women and girls producing half the food but owning less than 1 per cent of the world’s property.
- One in three women are beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused.
- Women account for just under 20 per cent of all parliamentarians worldwide.

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1 Post synodal apostolic exhortation Africae Munus of his holiness Pope Benedict XVI, to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated persons and the lay faithful on the Church in Africa in service to reconciliation, justice and peace, 2011, part1, chapter 2.2 D
2 Unicef, Gender Equality – the big picture, 2007
Confronting gender inequality involves transforming unequal power relations between men and women. In this context promoting equal opportunities for women and men is a major priority. Restrictive attitudes towards gender roles can lead to a denial of the basic human right of equality. As such, stereotypical gender roles can prevent human development and social justice. Equal opportunities means women and men:

- have equal access to and control over resources and decision making processes;
- enjoy equality under the law;
- have autonomy to make life choices free of violence; and
- systems and structures perpetuating inequality, disempowerment and gender stereotyping are challenged.

Historically, interventions to promote development have not necessarily served women and men equally. Projects which seem to have nothing to do with gender equality often benefit men more than women because of the way economies are structured – for example: because of greater visibility of men’s work in the easily measured formal economy. Because more men are employed in the formal economy in developing countries, more women are left outside of initiatives that promote labour rights, minimum wages, safe working conditions and so on. There is therefore an onus on agencies to develop projects which will more explicitly target the development needs of women and girls.

Further, since income brought into a family by men tends to be spent according to different patterns than income by women, such gender inequality in the impact of development projects has significant consequences for development more broadly. There is strong evidence that many projects focusing on women and girls bring enhanced benefits to families and to the wider community. A 2012 World Bank report articulates a now widely accepted view that gender equality, as well as being intrinsically important, contributes to a range of ‘key development outcomes’ more broadly.4

The teaching of the Church

As an agency of the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, CAFOD seeks to give expression to the compassion, concern for solidarity and social justice which are integral elements of the Catholic faith and our organisation. Our work in promoting gender equality is rooted in the Church’s teachings, traditions and scriptures which place a particular significance on the fundamental dignity, the ‘transcendent worth’, of every human being.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church leaves no room for doubt: ‘Man and woman have the same dignity and are of equal value’. This is not merely a truth to be acknowledged but a statement that needs continuous and active promotion. In regard to gender equality, Pope John XXIII spoke with approval of women becoming increasingly confident of their natural dignity, and of their ‘demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons’ (Pacem in Terris).

Gaudium et Spes insisted on the need for greater recognition of the equality of all, and for the eradication, as ‘contrary to God’s intent’, of every kind of discrimination, including that based on sex.

Since in many places poverty falls disproportionately on the shoulders of women, the notion of the Church’s ‘preferential option for the poor’ is also significant, as it argues for a greater concern for the physical and spiritual welfare of those trapped in poverty. For the Church to make an option for the poor is for it to make the needs of the poor a particular focus of its love and attention; and equally to allow the perspective of the poor to shape the Church’s own thinking and practice.

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Pope John Paul II, who often affirmed this preferential option, was careful to insist that a 'preferential option' is not something exclusive, and this point is clearly significant for CAFOD. CAFOD will not ally itself with one gender alone, in opposition to the other: nevertheless, given the realities of world poverty, the situation and concerns of women deserve special attention.

**Our commitments**

Both women and men with their different interests, needs and attitudes should be able to benefit from, and participate in, the activities of CAFOD and our partners. Our aim is to help eliminate disparities based on sex. We aim to recognise the gifts and attributes that women and men have to offer, to look for ways of promoting gender equality and acting on our understanding of gender awareness in human development. We are therefore committed to promoting gender equality across all our work:

**Overseas:** We will develop positive action to promote full participation of women and men in our overseas programmes, in such a way that women are empowered along with men. CAFOD will seek to promote gender equality across our development, humanitarian and advocacy programmes. Programme staff will be expected to engage in active dialogue with partners on promoting gender equality in their projects and monitor progress.

**At home:** We will ensure that all communications, educational and promotional work carried out by us and our associates or contacts in England and Wales incorporates CAFOD's own critical awareness of gender issues. The importance of gender equality will be a consistent message in all these communications. Information about gender equality can be found in CAFOD’s brand guidelines and photographic policies.

**Within CAFOD:** In the context of our equal opportunities policy, we will strive for gender equality in our recruitment, training and skills development practices and will promote gender awareness in our strategic planning and decision making processes. We strive to build gender awareness and equality in our management, organisation, committee structures, and everyday working practices. CAFOD is committed to an Equal Opportunities Policy which seeks to ensure that no applicant or employee receives differential treatment on the grounds of, inter alia, sex, gender reassignment, marital status or sexual orientation.

‘Think of how much more we can do, when women are fully empowered as agents of change and progress in their societies.’ (UN Women Executive Director Michelle Bachelet, 2011).