

Channels of Hope for Gender: Using a participatory process for examining the religious origins and values beneath cultural beliefs on gender roles and relations

A case study for Navigating Culture and Gender: Learning from Local Gender Advocates

Introduction

Faith and religion are integral aspects of culture, with implications for those advocating for gender equality, yet in development practice they are frequently not examined overtly. Secular development practice tends not to engage with issues of faith at all, whilst often viewing religion as an obstacle to progressing the advancement of gender equality. In navigating culture and gender, gender advocates need to be informed by an understanding of issues of belief drawn from or associated with faith, as part of an awareness of broader issues of culture. Similarly, a critical examination of the strands of faith-based and culture-based belief can be powerful for leaders and women and men in communities in thinking about concepts of gender.

This case study highlights the experiences of World Vision with the *Channels of Hope for Gender* model, an intensive process that enables a critical examination of cultural and faith beliefs and which has been successful in changing mindsets on gender norms among faith leaders in Africa since its development. World Vision has adapted this model for use in the Solomon Islands, as a tool to address gender-based violence (GBV). The case study explores the model used, and both challenges and achievements experienced, including issues encountered in adapting the approach across different cultural settings.

This paper is based on an interview conducted by IWDA's Ali Capp with Michelle Lokot, Gender Advisor, World Vision Australia. Michelle participated in some *Channels of Hope* workshops in Burundi, has been trained as a *Channels of Hope for Gender* facilitator and has been involved in the adaptation of the model for Solomon Islands. The author of this paper, while herself working for a secular development agency (IWDA), attended an introductory workshop on *Channels of Hope for Gender* in Melbourne in 2011 and has also drawn on material from that workshop. Michelle Lokot, along with Maclean Dlodlo and Logy Murray, *CoHG* originators and lead facilitators in southern Africa region, as well as Koisau Sade and Lavinia Baniatawa from World Vision Solomon Islands, reviewed an initial draft of this paper and provided additional input and reflections. The author thanks each of them for

sharing their knowledge and perspectives, and for the time and energy they gave to the development of this case study.

How the *Channels of Hope for Gender* process was developed

Channels of Hope for Gender grew out of an earlier model, *Channels of Hope (COH) for HIV*, which was developed by the Christian AIDS Bureau for Southern Africa (CABSA). In the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, church leaders were seen as influential, sometimes in negative ways such as perpetuating stigma and moral judgment on people living with HIV. *Channels of Hope for HIV* was developed to enable critical examination of attitudes from a Biblical perspective, and by arrangement with CABSA, World Vision offices across the globe began implementing this model, which was centred upon HIV prevention, care and advocacy with faith leaders.

Issues of gender and power were recurrent themes in these workshops, particularly issues about who has the power to make decisions and negotiate about sex. Seeing a need to address gender issues in more detail, World Vision sought to use the principles of the HIV model to create a model specifically looking at the issue of gender inequality. The World Vision Southern Africa Regional Office worked with author Elaine Pountney to develop training materials using material from Elaine's book *Reclaiming the Wonder of Sexuality – Towards a Biblical Understanding of Male and Female*. This became *Channels of Hope for Gender (CoHG)*, and, like *COH for HIV*, was based upon the idea of mobilising faith leaders. The model was piloted in Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, and to a lesser extent Uganda, and has since been used successfully in other countries of sub-Saharan Africa.

World Vision Australia has been working with the World Vision Southern Africa Regional Office and its offices in the Pacific to adapt the materials and model to address gender-based violence in the Solomon Islands. Other *Channels of Hope* models are also being developed by World Vision to address the specific issues of Maternal and Child Health and Child Protection.

How does the *Channels of Hope for Gender* model work?

CoHG, implemented through a series of workshops, is a process of dialogue that asks participants, mostly faith leaders, to look deeply into the beliefs and values they associate with their religion and its texts. Beliefs connected with Scripture can form an obstacle to people engaging with gender issues. *CoHG* challenges these beliefs by taking participants back to the original texts to analyse the intended meanings, helping people to understand the context in which the words were written and the processes through which they have been handed down.

Often texts are taken literally without consideration of how it has been interpreted and reinterpreted over time, across languages and in different social, political and cultural contexts. People may hear a particular passage over and over, and particular interpretations and beliefs are repeatedly reinforced by faith leaders and others in positions of authority. Individuals may not have read the passage themselves, or if they have, they are often unaware of the context from which it comes. A significant part of the *CoHG* model, Michelle Lokot explains, is ‘getting the people who are the holders and communicators of that information to be challenged in the information itself, so they themselves stop to think a little more.’

Texts analysed include aspects of the creation story in Genesis, emphasising that men and women were created equal. Logy Murray explains that the reference in Genesis 2 to a woman being a “helpmate” for the man, is often used to position women as subordinate, but a deeper exploration of the text reveals that this term actually refers to a “lifesaver” who comes alongside.

New Testament texts examined include Paul’s letters to Timothy, often understood to mean that women must learn in silence and submission and must not teach in the church, and to the Ephesians, which is often interpreted as giving husbands the right to rule over their wives. Other texts such as Luke 7:36-50 and John 8:1-11 are examined to reveal the values by which Jesus lived and the radically different model of leadership he demonstrated in the context of his times, particularly in relation to women.

Facilitators are careful to emphasise that the purpose of examining the texts is not to challenge or discredit any church or theology, but to ‘go back to God’s intention’. Recognising that challenging people’s dearly-held beliefs can be fraught, facilitators ask participants to put aside preconceptions and ‘put down their stones’. In one exercise, each participant is given a rock and piece of clay as an analogy for opening hearts and minds to new ideas. Michelle says,

‘We tell the participants that sometimes our hearts are like rocks, our mindsets are really entrenched and we don’t want to allow new ideas in, so we can be like rocks. But when we let ourselves be like clay, which is malleable and open to new things, and which can be shaped into different directions, that’s when real change can take place.’

This encourages participants to be open and give new thinking a chance. The analogy resonates profoundly for faith leaders, Michelle says, who are familiar with the same analogy from Biblical texts (Isaiah 64:8, Ezekiel 36:26) about having a heart that is soft like clay.

The *CoHG* approach reminds participants of and reconnects them to core beliefs and values concerning the meaning of the creation story and the primacy of love – for

God, the self, creation and one another - as a core Christian value. The model emphasises the responsibilities that arise from these values for which Christians are accountable; this includes honouring everyone, male or female, as equal.

CoHG also facilitates participants to reflect deeply on their own personal life journeys, using a new lens. This starts with a consideration of what it means in one's own cultural context to be born male or female, and to think about the ways that different kinds of love, or a failure of those kinds of love, have impacted on one's life. Participants are also asked to reflect upon how well they have or have not embodied different kinds of love in their adult lives, as partners and parents.

The model helps participants distinguish between cultural beliefs and faith beliefs, as the two interact in ways that can be difficult to disentangle, particularly from the inside, and are rarely examined. In delving into beliefs commonly ascribed to the Bible, participants sometimes discover that some beliefs actually derive from other aspects of culture rather than from the Bible. Michelle says, 'Then it's a matter of asking "so if faith and culture conflict, which do you follow, which has precedence?" People often say, "my faith does." This causes people to have a different perspective.'

The initial *CoHG* workshop takes three days. At the end of the workshop participants make personal action plans. The workshop ends with an opportunity for participants to share what has struck or challenged them, using the rock and clay analogy.

A much longer, residential training is then conducted for those who are strongly engaged or for those whom the organisers see as key facilitators to bringing about change. Criteria for the facilitator training specify that participants should be church leaders or youth leaders in the church, and should be experienced and confident in presenting and engaging with large groups. This interactive and intensive training builds the capacity of participants to enable them to facilitate workshops and processes in the community. At the end of this training, participants engage in Action Planning for their churches and communities.

CoHG workshop participants are mostly faith leaders; however in the Africa region, as this meant that participants would be almost exclusively male, it was decided to involve faith leaders' wives as well. Not only men but also women can be challenged by hearing new ideas about gender roles and relations; male leaders had sometimes encountered difficulty returning to their homes after the training, when their wives struggled with the changes in the men's attitudes and behaviour.

In the Solomon Islands, participants have also included local chiefs or heads of women's groups along with faith leaders.

Adapting the model to different cultural contexts

World Vision staff, through their own experiences and stories heard from communities, felt a strong need to respond to the issue of gender-based violence in the Solomon Islands. Through hearing about the *CoHG* approach in the Africa context, and recognising that GBV is a reflection of how women are valued and treated in any society, the idea was born to adapt the process to the Solomon Islands context and to address not only gender issues broadly, but specifically the issue of GBV. In a context with a 97% Christian population, it was felt that taking a biblical approach would be helpful in challenging common misinterpretations that contribute to the practice of GBV, and that transforming these perceptions could be a powerful catalyst for change.

In 2011, Logy Murray and Maclean Dlodlo, visited Australia, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. Together with World Vision staff of those countries, they unpacked what was relevant from the Africa contexts and considered which things would need to be changed. An intern undertook a literature review mapping issues of culture, faith and violence in Melanesia. Adapted materials have been drafted, trialled and revised through a series of workshops, initially with staff and then with groups of faith leaders. These materials are being continuously improved. Some faith leaders and staff have now been trained as *CoHG* Facilitators.

The original material, *Channels of Hope for HIV*, has also been adapted for Muslim contexts, and has been effectively implemented in a number of countries. World Vision hopes to adapt the GBV materials for Muslim contexts in future.

What has been achieved using the Channels of Hope model?

The *CoHG* process can be quite emotional and powerful for both women and men participants. For women, the workshops can be very personal, providing an opportunity for some to disclose experiences of violence in their own lives. The process enables women to put these experiences in context, providing a framework for understanding how they are being treated as women, and how certain attitudes and beliefs perpetuate that treatment.

Responses among male participants can be varied. Some men resist, arguing and disagreeing with the process and concepts. Michelle observes that in some cases it is the men who resist the most during the initial workshop, who experience dramatic personal change and who, by the second workshop and during the training of facilitators, are engaging most actively, asking questions and absorbing the most information.

Some male participants have admitted to having themselves perpetrated violence against women, acknowledging that they had simply accepted that this is the way to treat women. This view is often connected with ideas understood to originate in the

Bible, such as the idea that men need to discipline their wives in order to correct their wives' behaviour.

Maclean observes that a number of men participants have disclosed that they had used biblical scriptures to validate their view that women are natural subjects and men are natural leaders. As such, women may be treated as inferior and may not be given opportunities to lead or participate in key decision-making. Analysis of Biblical excerpts can help both men and women to reassess the original intent of the text and to realise that they can behave and relate differently. Through this process women have reported that they feel affirmed in their value as human beings created in the image of God, and are more confident in using their gifts and talents.

Maclean and Logy tell of a workshop in which two men were struggling with the concepts but kept silent. The facilitators put the two men together to enable them to grapple with their ideas together, feeling this would be more helpful than keeping them apart. Eventually the men began to speak up about their concerns and were able to work through them.

Maclean further observes that one of the notable contributions of *CoHG* has been promoting unity among churches. Where ordinarily church communities have been divided by peripheral theological issues, church leaders who have experienced this model have begun to rally together in promoting the rights of women and children. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, stories have been documented of how church leaders have formed movements whose mission is to advocate for the equal treatment of women and men and equal access to resources and opportunities.

Beyond its impact on faith leaders, Maclean also notes that people with traditional-cultural functions in the community and government have acknowledged the unique influence of *CoHG* on community relationships. A traditional chief in Lesotho who attended sessions on *CoHG* openly endorsed the tool, saying: 'Although I am not a church-goer, I have found that this teaching makes a lot of sense. I have been questioning myself why we have allowed women to have positions in government and yet forbade women to lead in our villages. This workshop has given me a different experience.' The same workshop was attended by professionals from education and culture, health, social welfare, and police and correctional service. Most of these found the approach refreshing.

Maclean believes that a key strength of *CoHG* is in training facilitators who have the responsibility of guiding the process of learning and creating a safe environment in which participants can wrestle with issues without duress. Training of *CoHG* facilitators is undertaken with care and thoroughness. It is critical that facilitators have had ample opportunity to work through their own doubts and insecurities. Trainee facilitators must understand the responsibility inherent in leading a process

that can be enormously confronting and which has potential to bring participants to profound personal transformation. Facilitators must be ready to deal with the emotion, tension and sometimes conflict that arise through the process.

Stories from the life of Jesus are used to illustrate the model of leadership that is required of facilitators, a 'servant leader' approach marked by equality and respect, not of 'power over'. The success of the *COHG* model relies on strong facilitation that models this kind of leadership to the participants.

In workshop settings, it is preferred that facilitators work in pairs, a man and woman facilitating together. This not only underscores the importance of female-male partnerships in addressing gender issues, but emphasises that gender is not just about women.

During the facilitator trainings, lead facilitators first present some content, then participants have time to prepare that content and then present it back within smaller groups, reflecting both presentation of content and the way in which it ought to be presented. Lead facilitators and co-participants give feedback on the presentations. Each trainee facilitator has several opportunities to present during the training. This enables lead facilitators to monitor how each participant is progressing and the extent to which they are internalising their new understanding, and to identify those who are struggling.

The Solomon Islands context is one of a small population with Christianity as a common faith but a diversity of denominations. The country has also seen divisive civil conflict within the past decade. *CoHG* seems to be working well in this context, building on the significance of faith for so many people in the Solomon Islands as an inherent and cherished part of individuals' culture and identity. However, there are also risks of tension and conflict. Reflecting on the facilitator training in the Solomon Islands, Michelle says:

'Participants prepare their flipcharts overnight and practice presenting to each other. It helps build their rapport as they all come from different churches and denominations. Often in this context there can be inter-denominational clashes and disagreements, but there has been none of that so far – participants worked well together and supported each other, and most of them know each other anyway, so there was rebuilding of that and having a closer friendship with people.'

The residential format of the facilitator training creates a space of intimacy, collegiality and safety. Close proximity over ten days allows facilitators and participants to work through issues together, including outside of the formal sessions, and for lead facilitators to strategise to address emerging issues.

Michelle shares that, during the residential workshop in the Solomon Islands, certain statements were spoken from time to time by both women and men that raised concern amongst the lead facilitators. Men, with the support of some women, repeatedly said that women are often beaten by men because they ‘talk too much.’ Men complained that they are irritated by women who say ‘men are slow’ (implying that men are slow thinkers). Violence against women was repeatedly attributed to these two issues. Michelle observes:

‘When the women said “my husband hits me because I talk too much”, and when men nodded their heads to confirm this, it was really startling for us as lead facilitators. One lunchtime the male lead facilitator sat with the men and we sat with the women to talk these issues through, to find out what the behaviours were and what the beliefs were about those behaviours. The men said, “she’s always nagging and complaining towards me.” They were encouraged to think about why women might ask about issues repeatedly and the possibility that perhaps the women did not feel they were heard by their husbands. The women talked about the way they treat their husbands and expressed regret that they had sometimes despised them. In the end, two men stood up and publicly apologised to the women on behalf of the men, saying “we recognise that there is no reason or justification for violence and we want to be better husbands and fathers.” Women also apologised to the men for at times speaking negatively about men.’

As this occurred towards the end of the workshop, the lead facilitators and participants were getting to know each other well and were able to use dialogue effectively to help people reframe their own beliefs and behaviour.

The focus on dialogue and personal enquiry is a point of difference between the *CoHG* model and some other approaches to gender training. Michelle says:

‘When we do gender training in the field it can be: “here are the laws, here are the human rights we need to uphold”. That can come across as telling people what to think, whereas this process is all about taking people on a journey. It’s more about “here is one way of thinking about it; what do you think and how does it relate to you?” It relies on the faith leaders themselves looking into things more deeply because they’ve had that trigger point of someone asking a question.’

Maclean relates how Beatrice Kumwenda, the Gender and Development Manager for World Vision Malawi shared similar sentiments when she expressed a frustration she had faced with ‘gender mainstreaming’ often being viewed as a ‘feminist agenda’, and thus being perceived as undermining the traditional status quo of male domination. ‘Whilst the WV Gender tool kit was helpful in building gender awareness amongst staff, up until now we did not have a tool friendly enough to engage communities,’ she told him.

What challenges have been encountered and what lessons have been learned?

Using language that is meaningful to participants is key to the success of the model. In adapting the approach to the Pacific Islands context, consideration was given to terminology, recognising that even the term 'gender' can be misunderstood. For the Solomon Islands, the title of the approach has been changed to *Community Channels of Hope*. In-country staff felt that the term 'gender' in the title would discourage some people, particularly men, from participating. Michelle says 'local staff wanted to give the message that "this isn't about gender, it's about violence, it's about family relationships and about communicating in the language that we use.'" The term 'gender' is still used in the workshop process. In the PNG context it is felt that the term has more negative connotations, and when the model is adapted there in future, it is likely that the term will not be used.

While the *CoHG* model has been transformative for many participants, evaluations show that some participants are still not convinced after the training. Michelle says, 'There will always be some people who may take a longer time to process new ways of thinking.' She tells of one man in a workshop in Burundi who the team hoped would become a facilitator but he continually resisted and tried to also keep others in the group he was presenting with from changing their views. 'Ultimately the lead facilitators had to say, "You're still on your journey and you're still thinking about these issues, so we'll have to have someone else present instead." There are a few cases like that, but the model acknowledges that it's not going to change overnight. It's all about little triggers that start a process.'

A challenge in Solomon Islands has been to ensure that the right people participate in the training to become *CoHG* facilitators. While it was easy to get people to the initial training, people at higher levels of the church, who WV wanted to become facilitators, found it hard to commit ten days. Some candidates delegated this to others and some of those delegated did not fit the criteria. A longer lead-in time and clear communication about who should participate may help in future.

An unexpected challenge for World Vision Australia has been the huge interest and demand from other stakeholders in accessing the model. Michelle says it has been a challenge to hold their ground and ensure they have time to be ready before sharing the approach with others. She says, 'we've almost had to pull the reins in. We've just had to say, hold on, this is an adaptation, we haven't used it for the issue of GBV before. We've had to say, "wait!" We don't want to see it being rolled out in different places where we can't control the quality of the way it is used.'

Adapting the materials is a long and costly process, but necessary as cultural relevance is key to the success of the model.

World Vision is currently developing a 'Barefoot' version of *Community Channels of Hope*. This will contain some key, simple messages presented visually in a small flip-style booklet, that can be easily transported for use from house to house and in schools. Using a simple, illustrated, less text-based medium will help to communicate with groups with limited literacy. The Barefoot version also aims to reach more men, given that more women than men attend church in the Solomons, more women will access the messages from the trained faith leaders.

Conclusion

The *CoHG* model has been used successfully in many countries in the Africa region to address issues of stigma relating to HIV and AIDS, and unequal gender relations. Trialling of an adaptation for addressing gender-based violence in the Solomon Islands is showing promising results. The model works well in contexts where faith is an integral part of culture. By facilitating faith leaders to challenge their own understandings of biblical texts, the model enables participants to unpack the origin of particular beliefs and reconnect to the spirit of their faith. While changing long-held beliefs and challenging unequal power relations can be difficult and take time, *CoHG* has brought profound insight and transformation for many men and women, enabling them to understand the message of equality that is at the heart of Christian teaching, and to move towards embodying this in their own lives.

Di Kilsby,
Gender and Development Consultant
for IWDA GenderWise
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