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Commentary

Religion, Gender, and Social Welfare: Considerations Regarding Inclusion

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Abstract

There is increased interest in faith-based social service provision in recent years, both in the United States and across Europe. While faith-based organizations provide welcome and needed services, there are several potential problems of social inclusion which involve gender, including decreased availability of social services when faith-based organizations are expected to compensate for cuts in government spending, potential for religious discrimination in employment, and potential for religious discrimination against recipients.

Keywords

gender; inclusion; religion; social welfare

Issue

This commentary is part of the issue “Exhausted Women—Exhausted Welfare: Understanding Religion, Gender and Welfare in Social Inclusion”, edited by Martha Middlemiss Lé Mon (Uppsala University, Sweden).

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1. Introduction

In recent years there has been increased interest in faith-based social service providers across the United States and Europe, including the Nordic states (Baker, 2012; Rommelspacher, 2017). Drawing on my background as a sociologist of religion studying the United States, I aim to raise questions about religious social services and social inclusion, urging readers to consider how they may translate to a Nordic context despite differing approaches to social welfare and religion.

Even in a more secular era, 90% of American adults say they believe in a higher power and 38% claim to attend religious services weekly or almost weekly (Fahmy, 2018; Newport, 2018). 83% of congregations, comprising 92% of service attendees, provide assistance to people outside the congregation, most often short-term assistance for food or clothing (Chaves & Eagle, 2016, p. 54). Large religious non-profit organizations receive a substantial portion of their funding from the government and are among the major human service providers in the United States. Public policy in the past two decades has demonstrated increased emphasis on faith-based social service provision.

According to Birgit Rommelspacher (2017), although church membership and attendance is declining in Europe, faith-based social service agencies have become more numerous. Rommelspacher (2017) claims that despite critique of religion, the services of faith-based organizations are welcomed by people, while politicians appreciate their “economic advantages” and “their image of offering more personally-motivated services” (Rommelspacher, 2017, p. 799). She notes how churches provide more than half of social services in Germany (with Christian social welfare organizations employing over 1 million people) and notes that faith-based social services have greatly expanded in Sweden as public welfare expenditure has decreased (Rommelspacher, 2017). Christopher Baker (2012, p. 6) similarly claims that in England, “millions of pounds of government money [are] being pumped into helping faith groups become ‘service provider’ ready”.

“Faith-based social service provision” is broad, ranging from individual congregational volunteers to large professional organizations. It also ranges in intensity of religion in the operations of social service provision—from none to extremely intense (Rommelspacher, 2017). Women make up the majority of congregational volun-

teers, professional service providers, and service recipients (Edgardh, 2011).

Regarding social inclusion, there are several issues which have arisen in the United States that can translate to Nordic countries: (1) If faith-based organizations are expected to compensate for cuts in government spending, there is a fundamental question of social inclusion—will all who need services receive them? (2) If faith-based social service providers can discriminate in employment, social exclusion of some applicants or employees will occur, and (3) Social exclusion also arises when organizations can discriminate against potential recipients. Gender issues are salient in all of these questions.

2. Recent Policy Background on Religion and Social Welfare Provision in the United States

Religious organizations have long been involved in social service provision in the United States, through small-scale efforts in congregations to large religious nonprofit organizations (Hall, 2016). Political and scholarly interest in faith-based provision of social services intensified after the 1996 welfare reform law, which contained a clause encouraging partnerships between religious organizations and government in service provision. While partnerships between religious service organizations and government had previously existed for decades, religious organizations had to set up separate non-profit organizations that did not display religious symbols, and they could not discriminate in hiring on the basis of religion (Cnaan & Boddie, 2002). Under the new law, religious symbols and principles were permitted in programs receiving government money, which could hire staff using religious criteria. Individual congregations were permitted to apply for government funds to support social services (but not religious activities); proselytizing and rejecting recipients on the basis of religion were prohibited. Recipients also had the right to have alternative non-religious providers available (Cnaan & Boddie, 2002). In 2001, then-President Bush established the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives to further develop religious partnerships. Numerous states, cities, and federal agencies developed their own faith-based offices. Executive orders controversially exempted religious organizations from non-discrimination clauses in hiring (Wright, 2009). Scholars note that the Clinton/Bush era laws did not result in largely increased partnerships between government and faith organizations. According to Peter Dobkin Hall:

The debate over charitable choice stemming from the welfare reforms of the mid-1990s was not so much an argument about church-state separation as it was an effort to codify government support for faith-based social services that had been a feature of America's human services regime for decades. (Hall, 2016, p. 23)

Former president Obama continued to work with faith communities, renaming the office the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. He created a faith advisory council composed of clergy of different backgrounds and non-profit leaders to provide advice on policy priorities; partnership offices also worked in 13 federal agencies (White House Archives, n.d.).

In 2018, President Trump announced an executive order replacing the Obama era office with a new White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative, saying:

This office will also help ensure that faith-based organizations have equal access to government funding and the equal right to exercise their deeply held beliefs. We take this step because we know that, in solving the many, many problems and our great challenges, faith is more powerful than government, and nothing is more powerful than God. (White House Briefings, 2018)

The executive order allows every department to incorporate partnerships with faith communities. It removes language requiring alternate service providers be made available for people who do not desire a faith-based service provider as well as raises concerns about potential for discrimination against LGBTQ persons and others (Levine, 2018).

3. Conclusion: Services, Gender, and Social Inclusion

Returning to the three issues posed at the beginning of this commentary, it is clear that while religiously-affiliated social service provision is an important part of social welfare, it is wise to be attentive to potential for social exclusion. Despite differing social welfare contexts, these concerns extend beyond the United States to Europe, including the Nordic countries.

Most fundamentally, religious social service providers do not have the capacity to substantially replace the role of government (Green, 2017). The notion that “faith is more powerful than government, and nothing is more powerful than God” cited above in President Trump's 2018 remarks, coupled with his proposed drastic budget cuts to human services, points to a notion that religious institutions should have an increased role in providing services in light of decreased governmental provision—a notion also occurring in Europe. However, large religious non-profits in the United States receive substantial percentages of their funding from the government, while individual congregations provide needed services but at small scales (Chaves & Eagle, 2016). Social exclusion, then, will occur when people are denied needed services. Ninna Edgardh states that “women will suffer disproportionately from any diminution in the role of the state as responsible for the welfare of the citizens” (Edgardh, 2011, p. 64). Some women will suffer as recipients losing services, while some will suffer overwhelming

care burdens as default presumed caregivers of family members (Edgardh, 2011). For my book, *Living Faith: Everyday Religion and Mothers in Poverty*, I interviewed urban women in extreme poverty. While appreciating the good that religious social services do, many women raised concerns. Said one:

I think that they [churches] do what they can do, but they have a lot of limitations as far as funds and raising money....Every church I know helps people with food banks, clothing drives, or things like that. I think they do a lot, and I think the government should be doing more. (Sullivan, 2011, p. 222)

Second, faith-based service providers in the United States can legally use religious preferences in hiring. Large religiously-affiliated professional social service nonprofits hire from all religions and none. However, religious organizations are permitted to use hiring preferences, even if financially partnering with government. While laws permitting religious hiring preferences are designed to allow religious social service providers to retain their core identity, in practice it is necessary to be attentive to potential for social exclusion. Gender issues arise here in that employees are primarily women (paid social service work is primarily provided by women in both the United States and Europe; see Edgardh, 2011), as well as because of potential for discrimination due to sexual orientation. Discrimination concerns have impacted Europe as well, as Josef Hien (2017) details in a discussion of employment discrimination by faith-based welfare providers in Germany, where 80% of social care workers are female. Hien describes cases of people who lost their jobs due to “morally and socially conservative” faith-based welfare organizations, legally exempt from labor discrimination laws, disapproving of employees’ lifestyles (such as having a same-sex partner; Hien, 2017, p. 535).

Third, in the United States, recent changes have brought concerns regarding discrimination against recipients, prohibited for organizations partnering with government in earlier laws (Cnaan & Boddie, 2002). While large professionalized religious nonprofits do not discriminate against recipients by religion, this may not hold true for all types of faith-based providers. Furthermore, recipients are no longer required to receive information about alternative secular organizations. Gender issues are salient, as substantial concerns have been raised regarding discrimination against LGBTQ populations (Levine, 2018). Even without active discrimination, exclusion may still occur, as noted by the women in poverty I interviewed who feared that people unaffiliated with religion would have less access to social services: “There’s people who don’t have a church home...so what happens to those people? The services wouldn’t be spread among the people equally” (Sullivan, 2011, p. 222). Finally, some types of faith-based service providers promote conservative gendered views which

may not be beneficial to recipients. For example, Rachel Ellis (2018) found in research on prison ministry to female inmates that Christian and Muslim volunteers encouraged inmates to find a religious husband and be submissive to him.

To conclude, in both the United States and Europe, governments are looking to faith communities as possible sources of increased social service provision, sources viewed as less expensive and more personal. Despite the welcome and needed social services that congregational volunteers and faith-based organizations provide to their communities, it is necessary to remain alert to issues of social inclusion—especially as they relate to gender.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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