

Comments on World Bank gender strategy: Addressing religious roles

“Yet achieving gender equality is uniquely challenging and complex. It calls for changes spanning country laws and policies, public and private sector activities, and personal lives.” [WBG Gender Strategy 2024-2030: Accelerate Gender Equality for a Sustainable, Resilient and Inclusive Future](#) builds on the Bank’s evolving and deepening approaches to the many links between gender and development. It is heartening to see the breadth of analysis and proposals for positive initiatives and commitments.

The document has a notable gap and would be strengthened with efforts to address what may be one of the most significant dimensions of both theory and practice affecting gender norms and practice: religious roles.

The document is almost devoid of references to and analysis of religious dimensions of both gender norms and frameworks as well as more formal religious roles, for example in situations where family law is de jure or de facto addressed in a religious context. Religious factors are barely mentioned, only as examples in cases that are somewhat dubious (Guinea, Niger, Haiti, Bangladesh, Nigeria).

The analysis of how, when, and where religious teachings and influence contribute to negative norms and practices (abuse, tolerance of GBV, SEA/SH) and positive change is highly complex and deeply dependent on context. Acting to address these complexities may not be the World Bank’s forte, though undoubtedly in some instances dialogue and engagement are likely to be feasible and productive. However, failure to address religious roles including positive and negative dimensions and initiatives to address them is a large gap.

Religious ecosystems are large and at least as diverse and complex as “the private sector”, but the prominent example of direct (civil society) and indirect (via member governments) pressures and influence on gender issues at the United Nations, centered on “family” issues, is significant, for example taking the form of opposition to GBV. Happily there are positive examples, notably on family planning and education of girls. Navigating these influences should be part of strategic engagement on gender.

Suggestions:

- include references to the diverse and important roles of religious teachings, global influence, positive and negative, including references to some of the literature on the topic. (Box 2.1 for example). There is substantial literature on the topic.
- more robust examples of positive and negative. Afghanistan and Indonesia examples abound. In Bangladesh education and progress towards girls’ enrollment is linked to Alia Madrasa actions. Religious engagement in family planning has positive examples including in the high fertility West African region and Kenya.
- A commitment to engage strategically with religious bodies that include the Vatican, Muslim leadership at country and regional level, and, more difficult, some of the “doubters” who overtly and actively oppose gender reforms (Family Watch International, parts of the Vatican and WEA). Positive allies include Indonesian institutions and the World Council of Churches.

To cite a specific example, this extract from a very recent speech highlights the “third rail” nature of varying perceptions about family and “family values”:
From speech at the opening session of the Sant’Egidio annual gathering in Berlin, September 10, 2023, Ahmed Al Tayeb, Sheikh of Al-Azhar; he is citing major obstacles to global progress:

“Second point: the injustice against the family as humanity has known it since the time of Adam, peace be upon him, which disfigures its nature and puts the future and rights of children at stake, in addition to the orientations that religions refuse, warning of their danger, and that this wrong path will inevitably lead to the extinction of the human race.”¹

Places where elaboration would be desirable:

Box 2.1 The Policy arena

A more robust and nuanced analysis of experience in the Sahel (even looking pre coups):

‘The Sahel Women’s Empowerment and Demographic Dividend project seeks to accelerate the demographic transition by empowering women and adolescent girls in Sub Saharan Africa. It has been testing, iterating, and replicating innovations such as creating safe spaces for adolescent girls, promoting their life skills and entrepreneurial mindset, supporting their access to menstrual hygiene and reproductive health services, and engaging husbands and “future husbands” on issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights. Framing narratives included publicizing the contributions of women’s and girls’ empowerment to the demographic dividend, community well-being, and human capital. The project mobilizes local religious leaders, teachers, midwives, policymakers, and influencers to support a shift in mindsets and norms. “

In Niger, World Bank analysis revealed how gender norms, high rates of child marriage, low educational attainment for girls, and limited access to reproductive health services contribute to Niger’s high fertility rate and limited economic opportunities for young women. These findings advanced policy dialogue, which involved community influencers and local leaders who are key enforcers of existing norms. Reforms included the establishment of local and national structures and plans to discourage child marriage, enhanced access for adolescent girls to sexual and reproductive health services and lifting of restrictions on the education of married or pregnant girls. The broad coalition built through these efforts helped spur an ambitious, 15-year multiphase agreement with the World Bank and the Global Financing Facility to scale reform implementation across Niger. “

SEA/SH Sexual abuse and Exploitation, Sexual Harassment

A report cited: Maruo, Mirai, Diana Arango, Ariana Grossi, and Manuel Contreras Urbina. (2023). Addressing Gender-Based Violence to Accelerate Gender Equality. Forthcoming, World Bank Gender Thematic Notes Series. World Bank.

No references to religious factors beyond sparse mentions.

¹ My translation from Italian.

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