Integrating Gender Sensitivity into Faith-Based Humanitarianism

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Abstract

In recent decades, gender mainstreaming has become a prevalent practice in international organizations to promote social justice. However, little is known about gender integration efforts in Muslim humanitarian faith-based organizations (FBOs). Drawing on the intersection of gender and faith humanitarianism, an insider's professional experience, and a review of key academic and gray literature, I critically reflect on the gender integration process for one of the world's largest UK-based Muslim humanitarian agencies - Islamic Relief Worldwide. I explore a dual pragmatic and value-based case for gender integration, including the development of a faith-informed gender policy, and its practical application. This case study suggests that humanitarian FBOs are arguably well positioned in local communities to address gender inequalities by leveraging their shared faith values and contextual understanding while building multi-stakeholder consensus. However, they navigate significant challenges due to their geographical breadth, cross-cultural, and religious diversity, strategically selecting the gender issues they address. The allocation of adequate resources in a gender-sensitive manner, beyond a women-centred approach, to transform gender relations, remains a key barrier to advancing organizational commitments to gender justice.

Keywords: *gender mainstreaming, gender integration, humanitarianism, faith-based, Muslim*

An increasing number of faith-inspired international humanitarian organizations, across faith traditions, are adopting gender equality policies and initiatives, forming coalitions and movements to promote positive change. In this piece, I aim to critically reflect on the process of introducing the integration of gender equality into the operations of the largest UK-based Muslim humanitarian charity - Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) established in the mid-1980s. I draw on my experience as the senior gender advisor at IRW, responsible for developing and implementing its gender policy between 2014 and 2018. Specifically, I draw on my experience of introducing the concept of gender justice to IRW and my organizational knowledge, supplemented by the review of IRW documents related to their gender policy. I identify specific opportunities and challenges that enabled

this process to succeed over time, regardless of the prolonged setbacks witnessed by the organization. I argue that IRW adopted a dual-pragmatic and value-based case for gender integration but continued efforts are required to allocate adequate resources to sustain their commitments and move beyond women-centred approaches.

There is limited scholarship on gender integration in Muslim faith-based organizations (FBO). This case study, by documenting a gender integration strategy at IRW, intends to contribute to debates about the pathways through which gender sensitivity can be integrated by leveraging faith ethics. It responds to the critical research question, "*In what ways has IRW moved toward integrating gender into its work?*" While IRW's approach shows promise and can inform other Muslim humanitarian agencies in developing more inclusive and accountable practices, there are some important lessons to further advance gender justice at IRW itself and in society as a whole. IRW introduces itself as a leading humanitarian agency providing international development and humanitarian relief in more than 45 countries, bringing together its members from both Muslim and Western countries. The organization seeks to shape social justice approaches and Islamic humanitarian policy, drawing on Islamic values (sincerity, excellence, compassion, social justice, and custodianship), and working within the framework of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 5, "Empowerment of Women and Gender Equality." IRW was set up by a group of ethnic minority medical students in response to famine in the Horn of Africa in 1984, establishing a precedent for growing civic activism by minoritized communities (Benthall, 2003). The presence of Muslims in the United Kingdom increased post–WW2, particularly in postcolonial times. Even though the organization originates from a Muslim minority constituting 6.5% of the total UK population - 3.9 million according to the 2021 census (ONS) - it is considered an important player significantly contributing to the aid sector as one of the largest British humanitarian agencies (and the largest Muslim charity in the United Kingdom). For example, in 2022 IRW's income was £236 million, more than half of Oxfam's income for 2022/2023, £400.6 million (Oxfam, 2023). However, IRW operates in a restrictive environment imposed on many Muslim charities in the Western world following enhanced securitization and the war on terror following 9/11. Since then, Muslim charities have been subjected to additional scrutiny in the international banking system to ensure their activities are legitimate. Accounts of many have been frozen by authorities due to suspicion of funding terrorism (Benthall, 2003). Yet, despite the hostile environment against Muslim charities, IRW continues to thrive, adhering to Western humanitarian standards.

This case study focuses on IRW's "gender journey," a typical component of Western NGO standardization – a process leading to adopting gender-sensitive standards. Here, for practical reasons, gender mainstreaming and gender integration are used interchangeably to symbolize organizational efforts to incorporate gender-specific considerations in their

operations and programs. Although gender mainstreaming was the key strategy called for by the United Nations in the 1990s, I here prioritize gender integration as an operational term, drawing on IRW's policy definition:

> Gender integration [refers to] the process of integrating gender justice considerations into organisational development and programme delivery. This covers internal and external processes and procedures, leading to treatment and impact which is fair, but not necessarily identical for both men and women. (2015, p. 7)

I begin with a brief discussion about the origin and concept of gender mainstreaming, followed by an introduction to the motives for the process of, and how "faith" informed, gender integration at IRW. I then look at the implementation of gender policy, focusing solely on the IRW's sphere of program delivery, before concluding. This case study is limited to the program's delivery sphere, so it does not tackle internal IRW arrangements discussed elsewhere (see, e.g., Petersen, 2018).

Background: Gender Mainstreaming

Since the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) was adopted by the United Nations in 1997, gender mainstreaming has become a key strategy to achieve gender equality across various sectors, including humanitarianism. The gendered effects of a growing number of humanitarian crises and conflicts are widely documented, however, less has been written about mainstreaming and integrating gender into humanitarian organizations. Overall, the evaluations of gender mainstreaming have shown it has varied outcomes, often as somewhat underdeveloped and unevenly adopted across international organizations (Daly, 2005; Moser & Moser, 2005; Walby, 2005; Rao & Kelleher, 2005).

Gender mainstreaming is especially rarely discussed in the context of humanitarian FBOs, many of which implement substantial aid programs worldwide. For example, Muslim charities operate with varied but rather considerable budgets; for instance, in 2022 Islamic Relief administered £234.2 million from institutional and individual donors (IRW, 2023a). Globally, zakat (obligatory alms-giving in Islam comparable to a wealth tax) contributions are estimated at up to $600 billion annually (UNICEF, 2019). It is well known that FBOs and local religious actors are often the first responders to crises in remote areas that other actors may be unable to access. However, knowledge gaps remain in understanding how Muslim humanitarian FBOs approach gender equality. They may focus on gender equality in their work for intrinsic (e.g., faith imperatives) and extrinsic interests (e.g., donor requirements).Analyzing the nexus of faith humanitarianism and gender mainstreaming matters as new perspectives for developing gender-sensitive strategies and tools unfold to help progress the Beijing Platform for Action commitments (from the Fourth World Conference on Women) and Sustainable Development Goal 5 (gender equality and women's empowerment). Working closely with FBOs on these

commitments offers the potential to contribute to developing inclusive humanitarian policies and improving aid coordination.

So far, substantial research has focused on the role of religion in shaping contemporary humanitarianism (Barnett & Stein, 2012) and the contribution of FBOs across sectors (e.g., Ager, 2015), with some attending to concerns about partiality and missionary activities (e.g., Tønnessen, 2007; Ngo, 2018). The literature has examined the aid flows and financing of faith-based humanitarian agencies and the theological underpinnings of their operations. Some Christian agencies (e.g., Christian Aid, World Vision, Lutheran World Federation) institutionalized gender equality relatively recently(in the 2010s), despite supporting the most vulnerable women and girls globally for decades. Their strategies address specific faith-centered challenges, often relying on alternative and holistic approaches while also combining advocacy efforts in multifaith gender coalitions (e.g., the Side by Side movement and the Faith in Gender Justice publication by Act Alliance). As for Muslim organizations post-9/11, research has focused on suspicions surrounding the nature and impact of Muslim charities, aid flows, and misunderstandings of the sector as a whole (Barzegar & El Karhili, 2017; Benthall, 2003). Much has been written about the Islamic tenets of humanitarianism and mechanisms to alleviate poverty (e.g., Krafess, 2005; Yasin & Tahir, 2002), and discourse on gender in the operations of Muslim FBOs evolved considerably over the past decade but disproportionally focused on Islamic Relief as a leading Muslim agency (e.g., Petersen, 2018; Le Roux and Bartelink, 2017; Randeree, 2014).

While general literature on gender mainstreaming examines the tensions in theory and practice (e.g., Walby, 2005), it does not contextualize it to FBOs. Research on gender sensitivity in faith-based humanitarianism remains scant despite extensive Islamic feminist literature on gender equality in nonhumanitarian contexts. Islamic feminist research contextualized to humanitarian action is needed to account for the most vulnerable groups of women in fragile settings. Muslim feminists have developed a wealth of scholarship on egalitarian Islam, for example, reviving the concept of gender equality in Islamic scholarship, and so contested the patriarchal influences from within (Ahmed, 1992; Ashraf, 2005; Mir-Hosseini et al., 2014; Wadud, 2004). These concepts, however, remain to be recognized by and adapted into the practices of humanitarian FBOs.

IRW is one of the few Muslim humanitarian charities with a gender policy in place, out of hundreds operating worldwide. Another is Canada's Aga Khan Foundation, whose policy on gender equality preceded IRW's policy.[1] Many British Muslim humanitarian charities implement projects supporting women and girls in crisis and poverty across various regions and sectors, including education, livelihoods, health, water, sanitation, and hygiene, but have no official gender policy. Supporting widows and orphans, as integral

[1]https://www.akfc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/AKFC-Gender-Equality-Policy.pdf.

tenets of Islamic traditions was embedded into Muslim aid work since their early stages. However, gender mainstreaming, albeit a long-standing strategy since the Beijing women's conference for many other organizations, remains new territory for FBOs of various faiths. This is part of their efforts to professionalize and put gender equality high on their agenda, following wider trends in international development. In this context, my work specifically aims to contribute to documenting gender integration at Muslim humanitarian agencies. Thus, the rest of this article examines how IRW has progressed in gender integration, beginning with the underlying motivation before considering the practical steps.

Methodology

This study draws on my reflection and account of professional events using a case study of Islamic Relief, viewed from both insider and outsider perspectives. At the time of this writing, in an academic capacity, I have not been engaged with IRW for the past six years. However, during many of the events recalled herein, I was an insider (2012–2018). Both my insider and outsider perspectives contributed to the knowledge production process (Merton, 1972), and my positionality shaped the research process. To produce a more rounded account, I consulted organizational documentation (publicly available reports and statements) and reviewed relevant academic literature. As the person responsible for spearheading gender policy and integration at IRW (2014-2018), I was deeply involved in the internal dynamics and was likely influenced by the philosophy and working culture of the organization. From the perspective of a social development practitioner trained in gender policy and planning, I followed my understanding of what gender integration into a humanitarian agency entails at IRW.

The closest interpretative framework to my worldview is social constructivism with a faith-based feminist paradigm. My account reflects how I constructed the meaning of different events and knowledge from my own experiences and social interactions at IRW, which informed my temporal understanding. Other professionals could have experienced it in different ways and their accounts could vary from mine. Therefore, the limitations of this case study are that it was a singular account centered around my role as a gender advisor at IRW and subjective interpretations of my experiences. Although there is no "single interpretive truth," multiple, sometimes conflicting, constructions exist (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998), which means that different individuals could have interpreted certain events in contrasting ways. My purpose in this case study is, to the best of my ability, to share an account of how gender integration was enabled at IRW. As any researcher, I am biographically situated - my identity as a person interested in Islam from a Western/Central European background mattered as well. Inspired by notions of Islamic feminism (which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s), intersectional feminism (1990s onward), and my personal egalitarian and emancipatory values, I aimed to connect faith and technical aspects of integrating gender

into humanitarian action, as these seemed mutually reinforcing based on my understanding of the social world. My research commitment was grounded in the quest for social justice.

Other internal and external perspectives on IRW's gender journey would also be valuable in archiving the organizational experience. Further research could solicit perspectives from other stakeholders involved in the process. Nonetheless, my situated positionality and voice, central to gender justice policy development at the time, mattered and enabled me to record the process and nuances of undertaking gender integration at IRW (2014–2018) from its original source. The case study methodology enables a focused account, triangulated with available desk-based evidence.

Islamic Relief's Motives for Gender Integration

For IRW, a compelling dual case for integrating gender emerged in the early 2010s: (1) pragmatism based on practical and strategic interests shaped by extrinsic influences and (2) value-based and faith-based imperatives shaped by intrinsic religious beliefs. For many years, IRW's field teams recorded evidence of the unprecedented needs of women and girls in humanitarian crises and the disproportionate impact of disasters on women. Thus, it became increasingly evident to the organization that gender sensitivity needed to be systematically institutionalized to effectively address the gendered needs of affected populations and provide better aid (IRW, 2015).

On the one hand, in terms of a pragmatic case, given the size and complexity of their operations, a gender policy was a necessity that IRW could no longer ignore because lack of a gender policy could affect the organizational brand and, therefore, income (especially from institutional donors who required gender checklists). Strategically, the organization aimed to institutionalize gender perspectives to comply with humanitarian standards. Thus, gender integration was a coherent step toward providing internationally certified aid and perhaps beneficial in improving gender scorings in funding proposals required by many institutional donors. Cooperation with peer agencies involved in similar processes of adopting gender policies and accountability to donors also supported the leadership's commitment to policy development. On the other hand, it was essential for reputational reasons to clarify through the policy what was meant by IRW's gender terminologies, which could otherwise be misconstrued by its partners, including UN agencies and Gulf-based donors.

Finally, and foremost, to meet the religious requirements of their faith, IRW had to ensure their work equitably benefited women and men, and so had to proactively and systematically identify and address gendered barriers in their programs and communities served. Faith imperatives emerged as the primary driving force behind gender integration, motivating efforts to achieve gender equality in line with IRW's faith ethos (IRW, 2015). The organization's values, including social justice, enabled conversations around gender justice. Additionally, the hard-hitting statistics on global gender inequalities built a sense of urgency to combat injustice against women.

Nonetheless, as a mainstream humanitarian and faith-based agency uniting human rights and faith perspectives (on social justice and human dignity), I noticed that debating gender proved challenging for IRW early on, given the diversity of constituencies it aimed to represent. IRW was located between the religiously conservative, religiously liberal, and secular donors who often have different approaches to gender roles and relational issues, such as sex segregation, women's public participation and leadership, and distribution of unpaid domestic labor. Thus, a gender policy had to strike a middle ground, which was possible by building on the consensus on shared Islamic values among the diverse faith community, drawing on the achievements of Muslim female role models, and adopting a moderate stance on various issues discussed herein. IRW was aware of the wealth of scholarship developed by Islamic feminists and the adverse reactions of communities on the ground to these novel positions. With its mandate of alleviating poverty and the bottom-up calls from the field teams, IRW had to ensure a pragmatic and universal gender policy, responding to local needs and sensitively tackling gender discrimination while avoiding the most contentious issues. For example, issues, such as reproductive health and rights (El Hamri, 2010; IRW, 2021) and early marriage (Pertek & Abdulaziz, 2017), were considered in separate policies. Debates concerning gender identity and sexual orientation were reserved for further examination, as these required further research.

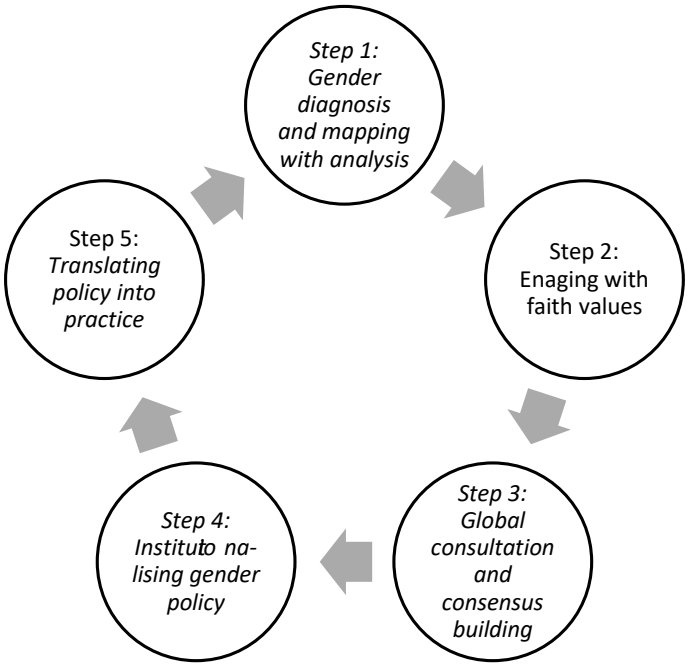
Next, I explore the specific elements of gender integration at IRW.

A Faith-Based Gender Integration Process

The rollout of the gender integration process was also pragmatic and faith-based by IRW (2015 onward). Faith-based gender integration means taking measures to integrate gender considerations into operations by drawing on one's faith motivation and teachings. During earlier attempts to develop a gender policy (in the 2000s), IRW commissioned research on women and Islam (funded partially by institutional donors such as the Department for International Development (DFID, now operating as FCDO) and assessments of gendered needs, creating some knowledge base for faith-sensitive gender integration. Although humanitarian and functional teams were guided to incorporate gender analyses of programs in earlier organizational guidance notes (from mid-2000s through the 2010s) and many individual staff members advocated for sensitivity to the different needs of women and men for years, only in 2014 did IRW advance in their pursuit of gender policy by renegotiating gender terminologies. This gender integration involved a five-step process as illustrated in Figure 1. It began with gender diagnosis and mapping with analysis, engaging with faith values, and global consultation with the IRW federation and partners, which meant building consensus and expanding leadership's buy-in for policy approval. Subsequently, the organization was able to institutionalize gender policy and began to translate it into practice (followed by a gender audit in 2020). I will briefly elaborate on all these steps, highlighting key strategies used to overcome major challenges.

Figure 1

Gender Integration Process at IRW



Step 1: Gender Diagnosis and Mapping with Analysis

First, as gender advisor, I conducted a gender diagnosis in 2014 to identify opportunities for mobilizing organizational commitments to gender justice. The diagnosis used the web of institutionalization for gender in policy and planning (Levy, 1996)—a diagnostic tool that identifies the strengths and weaknesses for integrating gender in 13 domains across the four spheres of power – program delivery (e.g., program methodologies and research), organizational (processes and procedures), policy (political commitments and resources), and citizens (understanding gendered realities of local populations). Typically, Levy's tool helps to identify strengths and entry points to overcome weaknesses in different spheres of power to mainstream gender equality.

In IRW's case, the programmatic experience and evidence from the ground (2010-2015) were leveraged as strengths to develop a gender policy that would institutionalize gender justice. A survey with IRW country offices and consultations with individual staff members, conducted in 2014, supplemented the diagnosis and mapped out additional programs, attitudes, and capacities related to gender justice in the field offices of IRW. Such an assessment led to a better understanding of the local staff training needs and capacities for engagement with gender policy.

The analysis promptly indicated that the staff's key source of commitment to gender justice was their faith values, which shaped their attitudes and motivations to do gender justice work. Therefore, faith insights were treated as key entry points and meaningful factors to begin the conversation and consultations to reach a multi-country and multilevel consensus of what the gender policy of IRW would look like.

Step 2: Engaging with Faith Values

Developing a faith-sensitive gender framework was pivotal in forming the basis of gender integration at IRW, which, to be effective, had to be anchored in the commonly shared faith values guiding the organization (i.e., dignity, equality, and justice as elaborated below). In this process, gender equality and gender justice were perceived as indigenous in Islamic traditions (Chaudhry, 2017; Carland, 2017), despite some critics arguing the opposite. To begin the gender debate in the organization, as the gender advisor, I relied on historical Islamic traditions denoting women's status and religious teachings around justice and equality to steer the conversation about gendered barriers in the distribution of humanitarian aid and its gendered impacts on local communities. Given the diversity of cultures, Islamic thought, and the geography of IRW personnel, the policy process focused on the universal values of faith to bridge differences and celebrate shared principles, which inevitably bore some challenges, as people experience and interpret religion differently. Although I recall little contention existed around key values guiding gender policy, the most contentious debates at headquarters concerned interpretations of gender roles and gender terminologies (e.g. around gender and gender-based violence) in 2014 which raised theological concerns. These were usually resolved through consultation with IRW's advisory board of religious scholars (based in the West) and communicating their key progressive messages to senior management and leadership. IRW developed an Islamic human rights perspective on a range of gender issues which often combined with a scientific evidence in raising awareness on key protection concerns (e.g., medical harms of practices such as FGM and child marriage).

Gender roles were sometimes debated during consultations, for example in relation to a man's authority and his caretaking and protective role in the family versus a woman's child-rearing and household duties. By showcasing a range of roles Muslim women have played throughout history and their rights, especially to work and study, discussions usually moved forward toward appreciating different gender roles in society within a wider framework of reciprocal rights and responsibilities. Discussing the role of Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) as a women's advocate and proponent of social justice was also useful because, according to Islamic tradition, he regularly undertook domestic duties , showcasing the importance of balancing gender roles in the family. Certain sensitive issues, such as a man's religious duty to provide for his family in exchange for his wife's

'obedience', were reserved for separate policy briefs due to their complexity and the need for further research. To date, such briefs have not yet been published, highlighting the difficulty of tackling such sensitive issues given the geographical breadth of IRW and the diversity of cultural and religious interpretations.

A faith-based framework informing gender policy was grounded in the Qur'anic values. Four principles served as reference points in the Gender Justice Policy (GJP) that underpinned the argument for balancing gender relations, namely, dignity (Qur'an 17:70), equality (Qur'an 4:1; 49:13), justice, and rights and responsibilities (Qur'an 4:135; 5:8; 16:90). As the organization was set up to focus on human dignity for human development, this focus was mirrored in advocating restoring women's God-given rights (Aminu-Kano, 2014). When encouraging gender equality, IRW's gender policy stressed the teachings that all humans are created from the same essence of God (Qur'an, 4:1), and are therefore equal before Him. Additionally, it drew on the principle that God ranks people according to their morals and deeds regardless of their gender (Qur'an 16:97).

A wealth of faith traditions showcasing fairness in treatment, care, and empowerment of women helped engage with different mindsets during consultations with staff (see Step 3). Chapter 4 of the Qur'an ("Women," in Arabic "al-Nisa") is entirely dedicated to women's status and rights - including socioeconomic rights, and agency - by referring to teachings of individual accountability of one's deeds and calls for unconditional justice: "You who believe, uphold justice and bear witness to God, even if it is against yourselves, your parents, or your close relatives" (Qur'an 4:135).

Other faith references emphasized, for example, equal access to resources and education (Qur'an 96:1–5), fair distribution of inheritance (Qur'an 4:7), full property and land rights (Qur'an 4:29), control over earnings, and right to work. In particular, Islam's condemnation of violence against women and girls shaped policy commitments to dismantling misconceptions in local communities, engaging men and boys in programming, and ensuring equitable access to economic opportunities. In addition to the Qur'an, IRW's GJP leveraged Prophet Muhammed's (PBUH) teachings to ascertain gender equality and protect women's rights, emphasizing the equal value of women, the inviolability of their rights, and the best behavior in gender relations.

For IRW, the term "gender justice" became a silver bullet, as it encompassed the definitions of both gender equality and gender equity on the premise that gender equality is not achievable without gender equity. It thus bridged faith-based and secular definitions and values, promoting equitable access, participation, and protection by drawing on an equal God-given societal value for all.

> These terms [equity and equality], as complementary, emphasize both the equal value and importance of women, girls, men and boys to society, and the importance of equity in treatment of all people, regardless of their status. This should include

> equal opportunities and equitable access to resources and services according to gender needs, as well as recognition of all. (IRW, 2015, p. 8)

By integrating the Qur'anic principle of justice with gender, the term bridged religious and secular worldviews, appealing to staff regardless of their background (as IRW's 2020 gender audit indicated and as will be discussed later). It simultaneously communicated that gender integration was both a human rights initiative and a faith imperative, indispensable to IRW's social mission.

Carefully selected terminologies, such as above, were essential in introducing gender work to IRW. The scriptural references to the cosmological balance and the story of creation in pairs supported the development of a gender definition. Faith-sensitive gender sensitization, drawing on the concept of balance and mutual support in building healthy families and cohesive communities, aimed to address misunderstandings of gender terminologies. In addition, God's gender specific language in the Qur'an, which addresses both men and women, illustrated that applying gender-sensitive language in program design matters. Indeed, gender-specific language also conveyed God's non-discriminatory nature and indirectly encouraged the use of gender analyses and gender-disaggregated data in responding to gender-specific needs and barriers to reduce gendered disparities.

Step 3: Global Consultation and Consensus Building

The consultative process on gender commitments and terminologies began with global and regional consultations and numerous roundtables discussing the priorities of the policy with staff from different departments at headquarters and partner offices. "Gender," as the social construction of being a woman or a man, was initially misunderstood by some staff at headquarters who perceived it as a woman-only issue. Similarly, gender policy was perceived as a policy about women. As a result, raising awareness of the relevance of gender perspectives in humanitarian work was immediately embedded in consultation with all levels of management, from the top leadership to support staff. Hybrid consultation meetings emphasized understanding the term "gender" as encompassing men and women, highlighting how IRW's GJP was relevant to the interests of men, women, and families. Some key tensions IRW navigated included shifting focus beyond "women only" to "men inclusive" as the key units of analysis of potentially vulnerable groups in crises - a limitation that continued throughout policy roll-out (see Step 5).

Conversely, "gender equality," was initially connoted as a misunderstood feminist notion, which required deconstructing its meaning and connecting with faith principles while building a faith-based feminist case. Thus, references to feminist movements were initially avoided during policy development (2014-2015) due to the negative connotations associated with radical and liberal feminism. Conversely, intersectional and postcolonial feminist approaches were underacknowledged and underutilized in

the organization. Over time, however, IRW paved a middle-way approach in pursuing gender integration to leverage the dual case - pragmatic and value-based - arguably appealing to their different constituencies and translating global gender norms to IRW's terms, which included strategies such as bridging, thinning, and parallel coexistence of gender norms (Petersen, 2018). Such a multifaceted approach aimed to establish a consensus among various actors (IRW staff, trustees, volunteers, and collaborators) on key humanitarian issues and faith principles to form the gender policy.

The emerging policy priorities concerned equitable access to, and participation in, aid programs; gender integration across project cycles; disaggregation of gender data; recognition of specific vulnerabilities of women, men, girls, and boys; protection concerns; gender-based violence; and gender equality in the workspace. The policy commitments emerging from the consultative processes included 22 strategic commitments across four categories: gender responsiveness in humanitarian action, gender programming in a development context, gender advocacy, and gender justice in institutional arrangements (Annex 1). The policy also included a faith-based human rights perspective endorsed by a respected Islamic scholar, Dr. Abdullah Al Judai from Leeds Grand Mosque in the United Kingdom.

Peer advocates and gender champions at IRW field offices played a crucial role in soliciting local commitments and informing the gender integration process by communicating practical concerns from the ground and helping to produce an evidence-based GJP to support programmatic work. Policy development was intended to institutionalize gender justice by securing long-term organizational buy-in and compliance. In addition, the draft policy was reviewed by peers from partner organizations for quality assurance purposes.

Step 4: Institutionalizing Gender Policy

The first draft of the IRW's GJP (IRW, 2015) was submitted for approval to IRW's board of directors in Birmingham in late 2014, and soon after, sought approval from the board of trustees (BoT), who partially accepted the policy commitments but recommended soliciting empirical evidence to ascertain the policy needs. As gender advisor and policy owner at the time, I held individual, informal meetings with some directors and trustees to discuss the policy directly, to understand and address concerns efficiently, and to further the awareness of IRW's approach to gender justice, avoiding misconceptions.

To strengthen an institutional evidence base, a pilot gender study was conducted with Islamic Relief Ethiopia in Dekasuftu Woreda in the Somali Regional State of Ethiopia (Pertek, 2020). The team identified gendered needs, barriers, and enablers in the community for a possible intervention, which materialized a year later with funding from Islamic Relief Netherlands. The study's findings affirmed the necessity for a gendered approach in programming and dismantling religious misconceptions around GBV in local

faith communities, as well as responding to the strategic needs of women (e.g., vocational training and livelihood opportunities). In parallel, further consultations with IRW's advisory board were held on faith perspectives, and they endorsed the policy (IRW, 2015).

With the supplementary evidence, support from the leadership (i.e., IRW's CEO and board of directors), and scholarly endorsements, the policy was ultimately approved by the board of directors in April 2015, enabling the organization to move on to policy implementation, discussed next.

Step 5: Translating Policy into Practice

Translating policy into practice began by launching a compulsory gender justice training sessions, guidelines, and webinars for headquarters and country offices. Some offices adapted the GJP quicker than others, depending on the availability of resources. All country offices were required to assign gender focal points who assisted with local policy adaptation and sensitization and together formed a global gender working group for peer learning exchange and support. Several pilot projects were initiated to facilitate learning, knowledge production, and progress methodologies for gender integration in programs and advocacy initiatives, for instance, at the Commission on the Status of Women and other UN platforms. This included launching the GBV advocacy campaign ("Honour Her") during the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and pioneering a consultation process on the first Islamic Gender Justice Declaration with civil society and faith leaders, attracting the attention of the United Nations and peer agencies. In addition, in partnership with World Vision, IRW adopted the Channels of Hope program to train community champions in faith-sensitive gender theology (Pertek, Almugahed & Fida, 2020).

In line with GJP's commitment to GBV, the organization continued to work to develop a policy foundation to cement its efforts to end GBV worldwide. A three-year consultation process with scholars of the IRW advisory board and a range of scholarly resources (e.g. Lethome & Abdi, 2008; International Islamic Center Population Studies & Research & United Nations Population Fund, 2016) supported the development of GBV policies on domestic violence, female genital cutting (IRW, 2018a), and early and forced marriages (Pertek & Abdulaziz, 2017). All these policies included an Islamic human rights perspective that opposed all forms of violence against women and girls and created an Islamic case against such harms based on *maqasid al-shariah,* which aims to preserve human dignity. Any acts infringing on human dignity were assumed unlawful and harmful practices. For instance, IRW's policy advocated for 18 as a minimum age of marriage to ensure marital unions are lawfully established between individuals with 'comprehensive maturity' and to prevent the disruption of children's education (Pertek & Abdulaziz, 2017). These policies were rather contentious, but through awareness-raising and multistakeholder engagement, a commitment was reached on dismantling misconceptions

surrounding some of these harmful practices. In addition to GBV policies, a policy on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) was developed in 2018 as part of the enhanced safeguarding efforts (IRW, 2018b) and in response to external pressure in the UK charity sector following Oxfam's sexual exploitation scandal. However, the policy on domestic violence/intimate-partner violence (IPV) has not reached consensus that quickly. IRW self-reported in 2022 that it was still awaiting approval for its IPV policy (IRW, 2022b). The different pace of approving different policies indicates that certain topics are more difficult to negotiate at IRW, as a large and multi-cultural organization.

Standalone initiatives mainstreamed into existing programs supported GJP commitments. The first GBV pilot project was developed in 2016/2017, titled "Combating Gender-Based Violence of Women and Girls in the Dekasuftu Woreda of Liben Zone," drawing on lessons from the 2015 gender assessment in Ethiopia. Overall, although the project lacked sustainability, it engaged local faith communities in raising awareness of GBV, dismantled several myths concerning violence against women and girls, and helped several participants reclaim their dowry rights, report abuse, and enter education (Pertek, 2020). As a pilot, the project pioneered community conversations on GBV; however, for transformative results, a long-term and sustainable economic component was needed to provide alternative livelihood opportunities for FGM/C practitioners withdrawing from the practice (Pertek, 2020).

The gender integration strategy in 2017 was subsumed by a broader, new program framework on "Protection and Inclusion," which derived from the gender policy in which an intersectional take on gender, age, and disability guided the capacity-building of country offices and mainstreaming in programs (Pertek, Almugahed & Fida, 2020). Within the Protection and Inclusion framework, Moser's gender analysis was adapted into an intersectional analysis tool, which became a part of inclusive programming and needs assessments in some countries. The intersectional analysis tool examined the gender roles, access to and control over resources, and practical and strategic gender needs of different social groups along the axes of their gender, age, ethnicity, disability, and all social markers of inequalities. Technical advisors in different thematic areas worked together to mainstream an intersectional perspective in IRW's programs while expanding the pool of resources and joint initiatives. Soon, the role of Gender Advisor expanded to Gender, Protection, and Inclusion Advisor, which, in practice, meant expanding the scope of this role and strengthening the intersectional approach to account for different groups of the most vulnerable populations. For example, the organization has announced its commitment to support people with disabilities (IRW, 2023c). However, on the whole, certain imbalances in the implementation of gender policies emerge, as discussed next.

Emerging Imbalances: Women-Centred Approaches and Gender-Insensitive Budgeting

The annual reports of IRW continue to show progress and long-standing commitment to a range of gender justice issues. The narratives of women and men who benefitted from IRW's programs are rich. A rapid review of IRW's reports over the last five years (2017–2022) finds countless examples of tireless activism to support women in crisis and in fragile settings. To a lesser extent, the IRW reporting points to transforming gender dynamics for improved outcomes for entire families and communities, which is central to gender mainstreaming agenda. Reports appear to cover the narratives of women and girls disproportionally from the narratives of men and boys in crisis. A pro-women approach indicates that IRW's programs may be more women-centred than truly gender transformative, as also illustrated in IRW's 2023–2033 strategy, which sets out the following:

> Our primary focus will be on women, children, families and communities. We expect that in addition to emergency response and work with refugees and asylum seekers, we will support women and youth to exercise their rights in many of our member countries. (IRW, 2023c, p. 15)

The concern that IRW's approach is excessively women-centred, instead of gender transformative, is echoed in the organizational gender audit from 2020 conducted by independent consultants who noted:

> Where Islamic Relief projects do go beyond "non-discrimination," "access" and "vulnerability," the focus is on "empowering women and girls" rather than on transforming unequal gender relations, particularly at the household level, including exploring masculinities and gender and social norms regarding gender. (Bell & Hale, 2020, p. 9)

Nonetheless, the audit strongly suggests that IRW has been on a pathway to addressing gender inequality meaningfully through a variety of programs. It found that over 90% of Islamic Relief staff worldwide (sample n=589) supported Islamic Relief's commitments to gender justice. A 2017–2019 program review of IRW and its partners identified that 370 projects out of 1,115 mentioned women and girls, and out of these, 86 were marked as "promising gender justice projects" in total, amounting to around £42 million, including approximately £27 million on GBV interventions (Bell & Hale, 2020). However, these numbers were unverified and subject to the nuances of a sampling methodology as pointed out by the auditors.

IRW's gender justice projects tackle a range of humanitarian and developmental challenges; for example, 64 projects mention reproductive health and 35 projects focus on GBV. One good practice is a GBV prevention, response, and mitigation project, run by Islamic Relief Iraq, funded by Global Affairs Canada (GAC) and UNFPA. Fourteen women's centers in Baghdad, Anbar, and Kirkuk supported survivors of violence with

psychosocial support and healthcare and engaged faith leaders and men and boys to raise awareness about violence against women (IRW, 2019).

Besides standalone projects, efforts to mainstream gender across key programs were noted in the 2020 audit (Bell & Hale, 2020). For instance, 105 projects aimed to improve women's livelihoods, and 31 projects specifically encouraged girls' education, often in collaboration with UN partners in fragile settings. For instance, the IRW's CEO stated:

> We also formed a new partnership with UNDP in Afghanistan, delivering a £19 million ($23 million) project that has so far created employment for 158,000 people, supported 1,200 women entrepreneurs and provided 200,000 impoverished and drought-afflicted farmers with much-needed new irrigation infrastructure. (IRW, 2022a, p. 5)

However, the audit noted that three fourths of the 86 gender justice projects (from 2017 to 2019) had ended by 2019, with only six continuing beyond 2020. In contrast, IRW self-reported in 2020 that it had initiated or continued 34 projects with components of GBV prevention and response at an approximate but unverified value of $20 million (IRW, 2020a). Similarly in 2022, the organization self-reported it had initiated or continued 31 projects with protection and inclusion focus with the two major standalone GBV projects in Bangladesh and Nepal, in addition to 88 projects marked as contributing to SDG 5, including advocacy projects for gender justice in Islam by Islamic Relief Canada (IRW, 2022b). In 2023, the organization self-reported that nearly half (47%) of the projects have a gender equality element as a cross-cutting issue and the organization moved forward with introducing a faith-based approach to safeguarding in 8 countries (IRW, 2023b).

Despite upheld commitments to gender programming, IRW projects tend to be quite short-term which may indicate insufficient investments, and it has been seen that, for community and social change projects to be effective, they require long-term investment for change to happen. More than half of IRW's audited projects (n=44) lasted 12 months or less, 33 projects between 12 and 36 months, and only 8 projects were longer term (3 years +) (Bell and Hale, 2020). Thus, resources need to be allocated to long-term projects and staff capacity built on gender-sensitive funding allocation (Bell and Hale, 2020). The audit also noted that IRW's gender justice programs are often perceived by staff as disconnected from their life-saving humanitarian mission. Specifically, there was a notable lack of investment in gender impact assessments, including the absence of a gender analysis template leading to missing baselines and end-line evaluations with gendered elements. The auditors concluded that "The scope of Islamic Relief's ambition for gender justice is very broad and is not supported by targets, indicators and budgets, which would enable more effective tracking" (Bell & Hale, p. 4).

Similarly, the 2023–2033 IRW Strategy appears to continue valuing gender-blind indicators with one of its general success indicators being the "number of people reached, including the most marginalised, such as people with disabilities" (IRW 2023, p. 20), overlooking the importance of gender disaggregation. Nor does the new Strategy mention

gender justice, which may lead one to question the authenticity of GJP commitments long-term. In addition, the organization's promising Islamic Gender Justice Declaration (IRW, 2019) has experienced very slow implementation and delays (IRW, 2020a).

Although the approximated audit figures above may show promise in financing some gendered programs, the lack of verification of these figures raises questions in light of IRW's wider and increasing income. In a 2022 annual report, the organization self-reported a five-year income growth trend reaching £234.2 million (IRW, 2023a), but it does not report how these resources were allocated and distributed in a gender-sensitive manner.

On the contrary, the organization clearly states its expenditures in other categories, such as caring for orphans and children. Ideally, annual budget reporting of IRW, and other similar organizations, would entail gender responsiveness to remove doubt about gender justice programming value and to enable accurate financial reporting against gender-sensitive causes. For example, the humanitarian expenditure for healthcare, livelihoods, and other categories would benefit from gender disaggregation, especially as the organization is committed to sex, age, and disability disaggregated data (SADDD). Such a shift would be strategic to ensure an equitable share of resources, based on needs, moving beyond being women-centered and toward vulnerable men, transforming gender relations at family and community levels. In practice, dedicated funds based on gender-sensitive budgeting principles would produce more accurate data and evidence, for example, of IRW's contribution to global goals, such as SDG 5.

Discussion And Conclusion

In this reflection, I considered the gender and faith humanitarianism nexus by drawing on the case study of IRW. Although gender mainstreaming was considered by some a failed mechanism toward achieving gender equality, IRW's approach to gender offers alternatives for innovating and progressing gender mainstreaming through translating faith-based values into practice. This study responded to the research question, "*In what ways has IRW moved toward integrating gender into its work?"* showing the many ways in which IRW integrated gender and contributed to the wider literature on gender, faith, and humanitarianism.

A dual, pragmatic, and value-based case for gender integration enabled IRW to incorporate the worldviews of its diverse faith-inspired and secular workforce. Such a process bears inevitable challenges in a multicultural and intergenerational setting. For instance, the organization navigated intraorganizational tensions related to understanding gender policy by adopting multiple strategies such as holding global and regional consultation meetings, building alliances on shared values, engaging peer advocates and local champions, raising awareness, avoiding tensions, and acquiring endorsements from renowned Islamic scholars. Indeed, IRW not only developed new gender-integrated

projects and campaigns but also built new interfaith and institutional partnerships. IRW's gender policy, by recognizing the gendered effects of conflict and disasters and violations of women's dignity and rights, arguably equipped the organization in the long term to better address gendered injustice, advocate for women's rights, and deliver more effective aid.

IRW's efforts in putting gender justice high on its agenda are situated within the wider humanitarian context of large faith-based charities of different faiths scaling up their efforts to promote gender equality, simultaneously reflecting wider sectoral trends. In fact, IRW's gender journey is parallel to some of its Christian peers - such as Christian Aid, World Vision, Tearfund, and the Lutheran World Federation - with firm commitments, programs, and advocacy on gender justice. Christian Aid (2014), for example, developed a theology of gender at similar time that IRW was developing its own policy.

However, while the organizational commitments to gender justice programs show promise, they may indicate a trend in IRW's reactive approach to gender justice driven by funding from institutional donors. As large funds come from donors such as UNDP and UNOCHA (IRW, 2020b; IRW, 2022a) that require gender reporting, future research could examine a correlation between IRW gender justice projects and external funding and analyze the extent to which IRW's internal funds and faith-based motivations promote gendered approaches and requirements across the IRW federation. The GJP's implementation requires a long-term allocation of adequate resources (including internal funds), capacity-building of staff and partners, and further research, including at the institutional level, to better understand and address the concerns of women's representation in senior roles and their gendered experiences at work. Time has shown, the struggle to integrate gender sensitivity in IRW is ongoing, as the organization has yet to meaningfully shift its resources to major impact-focused initiatives to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in sustainable ways, independent of institutional donors. Arguably, such commitments would clearly align with IRW's faith-based and pragmatic imperatives for integrating gender, protection, and inclusion concerns.

The IRW presents a case of a professional Muslim humanitarian charity closely aligned with mainstream humanitarian gender standards. In fact, the organization is just one of the very few Muslim FBOs that have initiated a gender integration journey. IRW has been overcoming gender backlash by drawing on wider points of consensus (such as faith values), leveling tensions with thematic expertise, and avoiding conflict around most contentious issues. However, gender integration in general comes with unique challenges related to the fluidity and social construction of faith values and contested interpretations underpinning gender equality with both feminist and antifeminist influences. Although faith-based gender integration can inspire and build bridges between different worldviews, it can also be contested by actors claiming other truths and challenging gender justice. In such scenarios, FBOs integrating gender are best positioned

to counter resistance with their intra-faith resources and gender-just theologies.

A part of IRW's gender work might seem like a low-hanging fruit (e.g., building on shared universal values and drawing on wider women's empowerment programs), but its efforts should not be underestimated. The organization operates in challenging environments on various fronts. Externally, IRW faces increased scrutiny post-9/11, and internally it serves as a bridge between different religious interpretations and cultural sensitivities surrounding gender issues. For instance, IRW navigates gender issues amid a rise in religious fundamentalism, far-right movements, and a rollback on sexual and reproductive rights (Health Policy Watch, 2024), where many organizations face funding cuts and feminist achievements are jeopardized. IRW's resistance to these shocks indicates that gender, inclusion, and protection work are integral to its organizational identity, as a key humanitarian player operating across the blurred secular and religious divide (Barnett & Stein, 2012). Indeed, IRW's ability to continue its gender work is both pragmatic - as required of any humanitarian actor taking humanitarian standards seriously - and value-based, guided by its faith as an FBO. Anecdotally, other comparable UK-based FBOs still have a long way to go to reach the level of IRW's gender justice ambition.

The methodology used in this case study - a reflection of a professional account combined with a case study and desk-based review - proved useful in narrating the chronological development of events and professional conduct aimed at supporting IRW's gender integration. Such an approach allowed me to capture and make sense of lessons learned from both insider and outsider perspectives. As an insider, I had lived professional experience and access to detailed information, which enabled me to provide a nuanced understanding of the internal organizational dynamics. Conversely, as an academic outsider, I was able to critically review IRW's journey with the benefit of temporal distance and broader organizational data. On balance, it is fair to conclude that this dual perspective enriched the analysis and enabled a more comprehensive response to the main research question. This study, supported by a review of academic and gray literature, allowed me to integrate analytical reflections on my professional experiences with academic insights, contributing to methodological innovation. This combination allowed for a thorough examination of gender integration processes and outcomes at IRW, highlighting both successes and areas for improvement.

To sustain its gender justice commitments, IRW needs to consider systemic change in the way gendered projects are planned and budgeted. Such a shift is likely to enable IRW to achieve its gender commitments and accelerate its impact by delivering more effective and people-centered aid based on a better understanding of its power in alleviating social inequalities. For instance, the organization might consider gender-responsive budgeting to account for funds spent on supporting different groups of people (e.g., disaggregated by gender, age, and ability). In addition, budgeting for

gender analysis and impact assessments at different stages of project delivery will enable IRW to transform its women-focused work to a more gender-sensitive design, inclusive of men, to better account for and address power dynamics and inequalities at household and community levels. The organizational trend indicates a strong focus on women, children, families, and communities; wherein engaging men and boys would be a useful strategy to facilitate improved conditions for prioritized targeted groups. A revision of an existing gender policy would be useful to incorporate lessons learned and account for evolving structural conditions affecting the most vulnerable groups.

Finally, this case study, by connecting humanitarian and faith-based discourses, challenges traditional avenues for integrating gender justice and upholding women's rights in FBOs and in doing so encourages to use contextually (faith) sensitive, and arguably more impactful, approaches. As in IRW's case, for gender policies to move forward, they need to be grounded in their indigenous values of justice and equality. More Muslim humanitarian and charitable organizations need to consider how to best integrate gender sensitivity into their work to improve aid effectiveness and the impact of their operations. In particular, *zakat* administration and implementation would benefit from integrating inclusion measures to ensure all groups benefit from aid and charity equitably. Further research is needed to identify what works best to integrate gender justice into a wider range of humanitarian Muslim charities across different regions.

Annex 1

IRW's Gender Justice Policy Commitments

Gender	Gender programming in a development context	Gender advocacy	Institutional arrangements
Equitable access and participation. Increasing protection and accountability measures. Focusing on women and girls in disaster risk reduction (DRR) programs. Addressing disproportionate vulnerability.	Integration of gender considerations in all programs. Promoting healthy and balanced families and societies. Expanding gender-just economic and training opportunities. Equal opportunities for females and males in decision-making and leadership. Eliminating barriers and expanding opportunities in education. Engaging men and boys as partners in programs targeting women and girls. Tackling gender-based violence (GBV). Integrating a component of women's rights from a faith-literate perspective. Engaging religious leaders in our programs. Providing comprehensive information and services related to reproductive health.	Addressing gender inequities through the promotion of knowledge. Representing the voices of women and men of different social groups equitably. Developing international advocacy capacity and emphasizing the positive role of faith. Gender-based violence (GBV) campaign.	Increasing female representation, participation and engagement. Ensuring an equal appreciation of the roles that both women and men play in the organization. Providing a conducive and safe working environment to women. Increasing flexibility in the workplace. Raising gender awareness in the organization.

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