Chapter 9

Women, Faith, and Social Cohesion

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents findings from a research study examining the relationship between faith communities, social cohesion activity and the leadership role of women. The study examined women’s exercise of leadership or influence in small intercultural, interfaith projects, which they had developed to improve social cohesion in their local communities. Data were gathered using qualitative interviews and participatory research methods, predominantly with women from a range of religious backgrounds. Findings indicated that women involved in interfaith activity often occupied roles with relatively little power within their communities. Despite this they were at times able to affect considerable influence within their own contexts. Contrary to expectations from existing evidence, changes resulting from the interfaith activities under consideration occurred despite rather than because of formal leadership. The concept and practice of leadership in interfaith activity and how this might relate to different conceptualizations of social cohesion and leadership within faith communities are discussed.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8772-1.ch009

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INTRODUCTION

Social Capital in a Diverse Context

Religious networks are recognized as having the potential to enhance community and individual lives through the creation of social capital, defined by Todd as: “increased opportunities or resources […] created for individuals due to their connections within a group (i.e., bonding capital), or for groups due to connections between heterogeneous groups (i.e., bridging capital)” (Todd, 2012, p. 230). Ward and Kagitcibasi (2010) argue that this within-society intercultural contact merits further examination, which this chapter undertakes, particularly considering the undertaking of such contact and the practice of leadership and influence.

Even weak bridging between diverse groups has been found to result in addressing local need through extended cooperation and resource-sharing (Todd 2012). While this contribution of religious networks to cooperative interaction between diverse social groups, or ‘social cohesion’, has been recognized, how this might operate in practice is largely unknown and the need for further research in this area has been highlighted (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). One aspect of the current study was to consider the role of women particularly from religious communities, and how they might lead or influence change in activities which promote social cohesion. Thus this chapter looks at current approaches to leadership from the perspective of women within diverse faith communities and the influence of faith-based organizations on such leadership activity.

BACKGROUND

In terms of intercultural relations, grassroots organizations, including faith-based groups, can provide a bridging mechanism between newcomers and the host country as part of the acculturation process (Paloma, García-Ramírez, & de la Mata, 2010). Such organizations may assist and empower newcomers to make an impact in their new country context, transform their own lives and develop their sense of identity. Thus: “acculturative integration is understood as an active … process in which immigrants become an accepted part of the new society through the development of critical awareness, gaining capacities and opportunities to influence their environment and involving themselves in activities which transform both their ‘self’ and their environment” (Paloma et al, 2010, p.101).

Such empowerment involves affecting local structures, creating new conditions, development and ‘self- construction’ (Paloma et al, 2010, p.101). For subsequent generations that have become established in these contexts, the role of faith orga-
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