NEGOTIATING A LANGUAGE OF GENDER

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The Francis Chronicles 174, from National Catholic Reporter, 12 November 2015
http://ncronline.org/blogs/francis-chronicles/francis-comic-strip-174

1. Summary
This paper argues that the concept of gender has acquired moral, sociological and political implications that undermine its usefulness, and that these implications form a hidden substratum to the conversations we have on the subject. This is particularly evident where some religiously-based discourses are involved. There is an urgent need to examine the language we use, to address these no-go areas, and to work towards a more collaborative dialogue between international religious and secular bodies.

2. Why a Catholic view matters
The Roman Catholic Church is an influential player in the politics of world development. Its reach is global and its programmes reflect a holistic, comprehensive approach to human need. It prioritises poor, marginalised and powerless people who are not always well served by statutory services. It’s no surprise, for example, that the Catholic Church (along with the Salvation Army) was at the forefront of developing coordinated localised responses to the HIV pandemic, especially (but by no means only) in Africa.

The Catholic Church is also disproportionately influential in the global politics of development, mainly because the Holy See, via Vatican City, has permanent observer status
in the UN, supported by permanent missions in New York and Geneva. The only religiously-based organization to enjoy this status, this gives it a level of influence on the world stage that some envy and others resent. Its delegations and missions to the UN have the right to speak, make alliances, lobby, and in practice do anything they want to except to vote. In this role, the Church has operated as a focal point for a number of (mainly conservative) religious leaders and religiously motivated pressure groups and governments; and in consequence, Holy See delegations have tended to become something of a cause celebre, especially where issues of gender are concerned. For example, at landmark international conferences of the nineties (Beijing on women, Cairo on population) this alliance of interests fought against proposed new approaches to women’s rights, rejecting the very idea that women might have identifiable rights, objecting even to such apparently-anodyne language as ‘safe motherhood’ and ‘unwanted pregnancy’.

Second, the Catholic Church is a prime (though not unique) example of an institution where a culture of patriarchy has become so much part of its DNA that many of its members are unconscious of it. For example, take the Sunday morning Mass, held in St Peter’s, Rome, to celebrate the opening of the recent Synod on the Family (October 2015). If you include the crowd outside in the square, almost half a million people gathered to witness and applaud and take selfies of themselves in the presence of this display of entrenched institutional authority and male power. Inside the Basilica, we watched a procession: rank upon rank of dour-faced men, elderly for the most part, dressed up to the nines in long dresses and hats. I counted to 350 and then give up.

It is easy to mock this kind of display. But that brings me to a third reason for watching what is going on, at present, in the Catholic Church. One can criticise the Synod on the Family, despair over its almost-all-male participants, and wring one’s hands over the more hard-line, inflexible views expressed. Nevertheless, the fact that the synod has happened, that these conversations took place and were reported, that participants were free to disagree with each other and argue different points of view: all that is, in itself, extremely hopeful. The message is that questions of sex and sexuality, gender and family may be talked about by Roman Catholics (rather than just accepted with dumb obedience).

3. SDG5: “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”
CIDSE (International Cooperation for Development and Solidarity) is an influential international alliance of 17 Catholic development agencies from Europe and North America. With the blessing of the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, it has recently published a position paper on gender, under the title Gender Equality: CIDSE’s Understanding and Definition1. This paper sets out to begin the task of unpacking the language in which we talk about gender-related matters. “We believe that by adopting a common and clear language, not only are we contributing to addressing one of the most, if

not the most unjust of inequalities and its consequences, we are also … strengthening our political space and capacity to influence local, national, regional and international arenas.”

This paper defines a gender approach as “opening the doors for a stronger analysis and understanding of the inequalities between women and men that cross cut all development areas (food security, climate change, economy etc.). This,” it says, “is by no means a concept that attempts to erase or deny the biological differences between women and men. It rather focuses on the social fabric that produces gender-based inequalities and questions the roles and activities seen as ‘natural’ depending on whether one is born male or female.”

“Biological differences cannot mean the subordination or discrimination of one sex over the other, as much as they cannot justify the widespread domination of men over women. CIDSE and its MOs strive to re-establish the power balance and justice between women and men.

“For CIDSE and its member organisations, the gender concept refers to the socially constructed roles, attributes, activities and opportunities that a given society considers appropriate for women and men, learned through socialization processes and institutionalized through education, political and economic systems, as well as legislation, culture, tradition and religion. It relates to the stereotypes that shape and condition the relations between women and men and their roles in society, affecting their access to resources, health, education and decision-making.”

This carefully expressed understanding is broadly shared by UN Women, who state, “[Gender] Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same.”

The paper distinguishes between gender equality and gender equity. Gender equality refers to “the equal enjoyment by women and men, girls and boys of rights, responsibilities, opportunities and resources.” Gender equality is “a pre-requisite for poverty alleviation, human development, human well-being, justice and dignity, and requires a commitment to challenging and transformative approaches.” Gender equity, then, should be seen as a means to achieve the goal of equality. It involves “fairness and equal treatment of women and men according to their respective needs considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities.”

The writers use bold type to make the statement: “Poverty is not gender-blind”: women, that is, are disproportionately affected. The feminisation of poverty is driven by a historically dense combination of cultural, institutional, political and economic factors. As examples, the paper cites economic systems based on GDP growth, the vulnerability of women to HIV, and the prevalence of domestic violence against women: but one could have suggested many more. Hence, it says (again using bold type): “Promoting women’s

rights and gender equality is a pre-requisite for poverty alleviation, human development, human well-being, justice and dignity, and requires a commitment to challenging and transformative approaches.”

The CIDSE paper is important because it explores a topic that Catholic organizations sometimes hesitate to address in public. It’s important because it makes a welcome, well-argued proposal for defining gender. It’s welcome because it has come from an influential, well respected source. It’s a sane, balanced, rights-based position paper, well in tune with the mood music coming from Rome, and capable of forming a basis for further discussion. And its careful attempts to define the English term ‘gender’ are backed up by advice on how the terms translate (or fail to translate) into other languages.

It is, however, impossible to ignore what the paper fails to say. In practice, the CIDSE paper feels less like a stand-alone declaration than a kind of ‘Chapter One’, designed to lead logically on to ‘Chapter Two’, which could be expected to pick up its more obvious implications and run with them. And these implications are:

1. Gender equality and the de-feminisation of poverty are empty dreams unless women are in a position to influence decisions about childbearing;
2. Attempts to retrieve the language of gender are welcome and valuable, but doomed to failure unless we name and deal with the much broader variation of meanings that the term has acquired in recent years;
3. Rights-based talk about gender will continue to breed suspicion and fear until we can develop an open, rational, ethically coherent and mutually respectful debate about the supposed horrors that lurk beneath the term ‘gender ideology’.

Sadly, though, there is no “Chapter Two”, and the next section reflects on why that might be.

4. Divided by a common language
The cartoon at the beginning of this paper is a telling example of people who are divided by a common language. While not an exact parallel, it can feel something like this moving between the cultures of Rome and the UN, academia and the religion. I had an American friend who was told, on her first visit to London, "There are two words you will need in order to survive in London: 'the tube' and 'the loo'. One means the Metro, the other means the John (or toilet)." She dutifully committed those words to memory. But when she arrived she found she could never remember which one was which, and she got into all sorts of trouble. So language can unite: but it can also divide.

And on that note, let us go back to the CIDSE document. What it does not say is that in recent years the language of gender, reproduction and sexual health has become increasingly coded and polarised. Let’s start with gender. I've worked in the field of development now since the mid-eighties, and for most of that time, gender-based analysis has been seen as an invaluable tool for analysing sociological, economic and political factors
related to whether one is born a woman or a man: the sense, indeed, in which the CIDSE document is defining it. Today, in many circles, it is just as likely to refer to LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual or Transgendered) rights, or to a view that one’s sex (being born male or female) is not a biological given at all, but rather is determined by cultural factors: so that basically one can choose whether one wants to be female or male despite physical and biological attributes.

Of course I fully support the need to reflect (and act) on injustices based on sexual orientation: which I am sure is also true of the CIDSE authors. However, the consequence of conflating these issues has been that gender-theory has lost some of its capacity to target ‘gender inequalities’ as defined above and in the CIDSE paper. Meanwhile ‘gender-based rights’ has become a more fluid term: what some regard as an untrustworthy, catch-all concept that can be used to smuggle in whatever the speaker wants.

Similar things may be said about the language of SRH3 (Sexual and Reproductive Health) and RR4, (Reproductive Rights). The UNFPA definitions of these terms are clear. Despite fears to the contrary, advocacy for abortion is not part of them – except in the sense that where abortion is legal, it should also be safe. But there are many people who believe that ‘RR’ is an evil plot designed to encourage women to murder their unborn children and that ‘gender’ is an umbrella term to support advocacy for sex-change and eliminate (God-given) biological differences. There is also a powerful body of religious opinion, which thrives on conspiracy theories, and which genuinely does believe that the UN is the great Satan.

So that’s the task I wish to draw attention to in this short paper: namely to identify the meanings that are attached to these concepts, in particular how they are being misused, politicised or demonised; and to explore the reasons why the task of communicating a coherent message is being lost in translation between groups with different interests. The question is: do we have available to us a language that will allow us to have this kind of conversation?

We can approach this difficulty in different ways. CIDSE deals with it by not crossing the Rubicon that takes us into this territory. There is a fear among development professionals that if they are too specific about the SRH/RR agenda, their words will be misread. As I wrote the above paragraphs, I myself started worrying who would be upset, and if what I was saying could be misinterpreted as anti-gay, or pro-abortion.

5. So I am seeking collaborators for a piece of research that will:
   1. Review the ways in which the concepts of ‘gender’, ‘RR’ and ‘SRH’ and ‘SRHR’ are commonly used by speakers/writers and received by listeners/readers;

4 http://www.unfpa.org/sexual-reproductive-health
2. Identify (a) the coded understandings, positions and beliefs the speakers/listeners are assuming they represent, and (b) the fears they evoke in some quarters;
3. Suggest ways in which increased consensus about these terms might reduce suspicion and facilitate a deeper engagement between international development and religious discourses on gender and reproductive rights.

Yes I know: it’s a minefield. But it does need doing.