Blind to faith?

Participation of faith leaders in a gender-based violence prevention project in Liberia

Alice Keen

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Supervisor: Kersti Wissenbach
Preface

Paolo Freire’s words resonate with me: ‘My curiosity never stops’. This Degree Project is a snapshot of the ideas I have explored over the Communication for Development Masters Course and it has been hard to choose what to share with the examiners. I am grateful to Malmo University and to the Swedish government for its generosity in enabling me to learn so much over the last 2.5 years and for treating me so well as a fellow European Union citizen. This feels poignant as we approach the Brexit deadline with no deal and an uncertain future awaits. I hope that, whatever happens, other British students will still be able to benefit from your teaching and remote learning opportunities, albeit at a cost.

Over the years of journeying in faith myself, I have grown to love the way that Jesus dialogues with everyone around him in the Gospels, from pharisees, to beggars; women and men; Jews and Gentiles. He asks questions to intrigue, to challenge, to aid reflection and to respond to people’s real thoughts and feelings. He also calls an unlikely set of people to share in his ministry: unschooled fishermen, hated tax-collectors and prostitutes, stigmatised people with disabilities. Dialogue and participation are at the heart of Jesus’ practice and I greatly enjoyed the opportunity to reflect deeply on these concepts during the course of this DP.

My life and ideas would be so much the poorer without the wonderful dialogue I have on a daily basis with people who enrich my thinking and show me new aspects of the intriguing and incredible world in which we live. Thank you to Tearfund for giving me time and space to write this piece and for giving me a rich seam of experience within which to develop my ideas about Communication for Development. Thank you to my wonderful team who work to improve the lives of others and do so with creativity and dedication. I think Freire would be proud of you.

Thank you to my parents, and Luci for all your help as I’ve juggled many things to make this Masters possible. I couldn’t have done it without you. Thank you to Kersti Wissenbach, my supervisor for your encouragement and insight, and to Kirsten Laursen Muth from Episcopal Relief and Development for sharing your thoughts, project documents and your journey to develop a project which would have deep impact for Liberian women.

I dedicate this dissertation to my fiance, Andrew. Dialogue with you is a joy and I am more because we live life together. Thank you for all your support and encouragement. I’m so looking forward to the years ahead.
Abstract

Sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls is a major challenge across the world which requires engaged and sustained action to see change (Abramowitz and Moran, 2012). Communication for Development approaches are often used in GBV-prevention programmes because they provide a means of engaging people at a community-level, whether that is through one-way behaviour-change messages on mass media or through participatory community projects engaging people in dialogue. Through analysis of the Episcopal Relief and Development (ERD) Project on ‘Engaging Faith-Based Organizations to Prevent Violence Against Women & Girls and Increase Survivors’ Access to Services (2015-2017)’, this degree project explores the question of whether engaging with the faith-realities of communities will increase the depth of participation amongst participants. The ERD project focusses on equipping faith leaders, both Muslim and Christian, to engage in activity which shares GBV-prevention messages with their congregations and points victims and survivors to relevant support services. From the available data, it is not possible to conclusively argue that engagement with the faith context enhanced the depth of participation. However, applying three of Freire’s concepts, namely conversion to the people, dialogue and context, I argue that the ERD project aligns with Freire’s conceptualisation of participation more closely than similar projects that are ‘faith blind’.

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Introduction

This degree project aims to answer the following question: Does Episcopal Relief and Development’s faith-based approach enhance the participatory elements of their 2015-2017 project tackling gender-based violence (GBV) in Liberia and thereby contribute to the project meeting its objectives? There are three reasons that this contextually-bound, technically-formulated question matters.

Firstly, and most importantly, because across the world, the World Health Organization (2013) estimates that 1 in 3 women will experience violence from a man during their lifetime. In Liberia, it is estimated that at least 39% of women will experience SGBV. Movements such as #MeToo, #HearMeToo and initiatives like the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence highlight growing energy to address this issue. However, according to Abramowitz and Moran (2012), despite huge investment, GBV rates remain unacceptably high.

Secondly, whilst levels of religious observance vary, according to the Pew Research Forum (2019) 84% of the world’s population identify as belonging to a religion, with only 16% unaffiliated (52% of China’s 1.4 billion population fitting into this category). In Liberia, this unaffiliated segment makes up only 1.4% of the population, with 98% of Liberians identifying as Christian or Muslim. Faith influences the everyday lives of a large majority of the world’s population, especially in the less economically prosperous regions of concern to Development studies and so is worthy of further study.

Lastly, within the Communication for Development field, practitioners and academics alike are grappling with how to design and evaluate effective projects and develop approaches which will be able to address the major issues (like GBV) facing poorer people in the 21st century. Whether they take a more broadcast behaviour-change approach or a Freirean dialogue-rich participatory approach, there is a recognition that context matters. The cultural turn in Development Studies, alongside post-colonial scholarship, has highlighted the importance of understanding, engaging and enabling the lived reality of poor people to drive development thinking.

If participatory approaches to Communication for Development can be strengthened by engagement with communities’ faith realities then there is a huge potential to enhance the impact of programmes seeking to address some of the most important challenges of our times.
A. Structure of the Degree Project (DP)

First, I will provide context for my case study, namely Episcopal Relief and Development’s (ERD) gender-based violence prevention project in Liberia. I will cover background on the role of faith groups in development and on SGBV before providing more specific information on the religious landscape of Liberia and introducing the project under analysis. I will also explore the current engagement of faith groups within development and how this affects the approach taken by Episcopal Relief and Development. I will briefly introduce the work of Paolo Freire and liberation theology.

Secondly, I will lay out my methodology, assess its strengths and weaknesses in regard to my research questions. This will lead onto my theoretical framework where I will major on the work of Paolo Freire, particularly his concepts relating to participation.

Thirdly, I will analyse my case study, drawing on a GBV-prevention toolkit, the final project report and interviews to draw out the participatory elements of this project and to analyse how its engagement with faith might deepen the impact it has. I will also introduce a parallel toolkit written by Restless Development in Sierra Leone to contrast ERD’s approach with a secular project related to GBV in West Africa.

Lastly, I will attempt to draw some conclusions from my case study analysis and theoretical discussions, focussing on the ways in which Freirean ideas have been actualised in contemporary practice and how engagement with the faith-realities of communities might deepen the impact of participatory approaches to communication for development.
Chapter 1: Literature review

My case study is located within a specific geographical context and also within contemporary development practice. In this chapter, I will provide an overview of two general areas (Faith and Development, and Sexual and gender-based violence) followed by a more specific focus on the Liberian context (economy, gender, conflict, and religion). I also introduce the work of Paolo Freire and liberation theology. The analysis which follows rests on this informed understanding of the context of the ERD project.

A.1 Faith and Development

Discussions of the role of faith, religion and spirituality and development have been increasing over the past 20 years for both academia and practitioners (Lunn, 2009, p.937). For clarity, I will follow Lunn’s (2009) definition of these key terms:

‘religion as an institutionalised system of beliefs and practices concerning the supernatural realm; spirituality as the personal beliefs by which an individual relates to and experiences the supernatural realm; and faith as the human trust or belief in a transcendent reality’. (p.937)

However, for ease, I will use simply ‘faith’ when meaning all three.

The question of why there has been a resurgence of interest in faith has been debated (Marshall and Van Saanen, 2007, p.2). Lunn (2009) argues with a critical theory lens, particularly focussing on the concept of ‘emancipation’ (p.938) that it is due to three main factors. Firstly, the retreat of certain intellectual movements that were highly secularist in nature e.g. Marxism and positivism (p.939) and the ensuing emergence of a ‘post-secular’ world (p.941). Secondly the increased visibility and interest in non-Western scholarship, which is more comfortable with talking about religion (p.940). Thirdly, and perhaps due to the aforementioned factors, an increasing interest and confidence amongst scholars who have previously published within faith-related journals to share their work more widely (p.941).

Outside the academic context, practitioners have perceived pragmatic reasons for increasing their engagement with faith groups and increasing sensitivity to people’s spiritual needs within their projects and programming. This can be linked to the general ‘cultural turn’ within Development Studies which began in the 1990s (Schech and Haggis in Desai and Potter, 2008, p.50) and historical events, such as September 11th, which highlighted the role that faith can play in major world events (Lunn, 2009, p.942). Lunn (2009) argues that
‘[development agencies] have started to realise that sustainable development can be achieved only if it incorporates cultural values and beliefs and that in many cases faith-based organisations are the most effective agencies to deliver development on the ground’ (p.942).

She cites the ‘World Faiths Development dialogue’ initiated by the World Bank in 1998, the Jubilee 2000 debt campaign (initiated by church-based campaigners, drawing on the Biblical concept of Jubilee i.e. total debt relief every 50 years) and the seminal ‘Voices of the Poor’ report which highlighted that faith was an ‘integral factor’ in the lives of those surveyed, as evidence of turning points in the acceptance of faith within Development practice (ibid). Since she wrote in 2009, the increasing rise of identity politics, populism and the decolonising academia movement across the world, could also be argued to be contributing towards an interest in faith.

Engagement of faith-based organisations (FBOs) and religious groups is not without controversy. The colonial era saw many missionaries as key actors in destructive ‘civilising’ activities in the name of modernisation and progress as well as ‘salvation’ (Lunn, 2009, p.945). Catholicism's continued opposition to contraception is a more contemporary example. The damage done by ‘short-term mission trips’ is frequently noted in Christian and secular discussions alike (Denskus, 2016; Corbett and Fikkert, 2014, p.1-3). There is a rich discourse within FBOs and religious institutions about how best to engage with development issues. As Olsen points out ‘religious values are not fixed in time or space, rather being negotiated, adapted and contested through development projects.’ (quoted in Lunn, 2009, p.946).

**A.2 Faith and Communication for Development**

It is noteworthy that Melkote and Steeves’ (2015) ‘Communication for Development: Theory and Practice for Empowerment and Social Justice’ includes two chapters on this topic; one on Liberation Theology across religions (p.305-332), another on ‘Communication and Spirituality in Development’ (p.333-366). However, there is limited academic literature on faith, religion and spirituality within the field in general and limited, if growing, visibility of communication for development approaches used by faith-based NGOs within contemporary discussion (Melkote and Steeves, 2015, p.329).
A.3 Role of faith leaders in influencing behaviour

Faith groups’ high level of grassroots presence is coupled with higher levels of trust within communities compared to trust of secular NGOs (Lunn, 2009, p.945). In a society with high levels of religious adherence, faith leaders play an important role. The Ebola crisis of 2014-15, which claimed nearly 5000 people’s lives in West Africa, caused international organisations to reflect on the role that faith leaders could play in behaviour change. The 2015 report ‘Keeping the faith: the role of faith leaders in the Ebola response’ found that there was a significant delay in engaging faith leaders in community health communication but that as one UN staff member in Sierra Leone said, once they were engaged ‘the participation of faith leaders was a game changer’ (p.8). Another Senior UN Staff member in Monrovia, Liberia observed:

“Lofa County had been a hot-bed of Ebola-denial and it was difficult to get health staff in to assist. The Imam and the local chief worked together using messages from the Quran and the Bible to discuss behaviour change with the communities. This paved the way for health staff to get access to the County.” (Featherstone, 2015, p.8)

Following this West African Ebola crisis, engagement of faith leaders in similar crises has been seen as a more important part of health communication planning for many international actors (Gill, 2018).

A.4 Freire on the Church’s role within society

Freire’s work on the topic of the Church’s role in societal transformation has not been as widely explored within Communication for Development as it has been in theological and social justice circles. During his lifetime Freire was influenced by and in turn, influenced, Christian thought. Unlike many other thinkers informed by Marxism, he believed that the Church has a role to play in the liberation of the people from oppression. He recognised the power of the institutional church and its grassroots penetration, as well as its ability to share ideas and enable action through social mobilisation (Freire, 1985 p.137). Freire speaks directly to the church, across denominations, calling them to take up their role as ‘prophetic’ church, rather than either withdrawing or being co-opted by the powers of the day. ‘This prophetic attitude [...] is accompanied by a rich and very necessary theological reflection’. (Freire, 1985, p.139).
The church, as other institutions and individuals possessing power (and therefore an interest in the status quo) must be willing to embrace a sort of ‘death’, whereby it renounces power in order to engage meaningfully in liberating processes of education. He warns the church to avoid two temptations which it might believe will help it to avoid the discomfort of deep change. Firstly, he rejects the naive and ‘idealistic vision’ that claims that there is no cost to renouncing power in favour of the oppressed. This view claims that by conscientization, ‘there would be neither oppressor nor oppressed, for all would love each other as brothers, and differences would be resolved through round-table discussions- or over a good whiskey’ (Freire, 1985, p.121). Secondly, he rejects the idea that taking no action is a neutral path, a position taken by churches throughout history. For Freire the church should not abnegate its responsibility: ‘Washing one’s hands’ of the conflict between the powerful and powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral’ (ibid). Both these routes are marked by cowardice; instead Freire has a vision of a prophetic church which is ‘utopian, prophetic, and hope-filled movement rejects do-goodism and palliative reforms in order to commit itself to the dominated classes and to radical social change’ (ibid. p.137). It should invite the oppressed to ‘a new Exodus’, alluding to the Hebrew exodus from Egypt in the Passover story (ibid).

A.5. Liberation theology

Freire’s work strongly influenced, and was influenced by, the liberation theology movement within Catholic Latin America, spearheaded by Gustavo Gutierrez (Steeves and Melkote, 2012, p.329). Melkote and Steeves (2012) point out that most major world religions have a form of liberation theology within their teaching but that ‘few of the writers on devcom in mainstream traditions consider the positive impact of religion and spirituality’ (p.305). They define liberation theology as ‘work with and activism on behalf of the poor, the study of sacred texts, and spiritual practice’ (ibid, p.330) ‘to reject exploitation and injustice and promote compassion and tolerance’ (p.307). Within Christianity, this stream of thinking emphasises the importance of intentional practice ie ‘direct work with the poor and oppressed’ combined with ‘Bible study and prayer’ (ibid, p.316). Gutierrez’ seminal work A Theology of Liberation argues that God shows a so-called ‘preferential option for the poor’ and is calls Christians to work to counter oppression wherever it is found (ibid).

A more comprehensive study of liberation theology is not possible within the scope of this DP but it is important to note that it has had a profound influence on theology across the world. It gave rise to the many faith-based movements and organisations from the 1970s onwards. Sometimes viewed by theologically conservative churches as overly-political and
overtly Marxist, it is embraced by more liberal denominations, such as the Episcopal church (see below) and is therefore pertinent to our case study.

**B.1 Sexual and Gender-based violence**

UNHCR defines Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) as ‘any act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and is based on gender norms and unequal power relationships. It encompasses threats of violence and coercion. It can be physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual in nature, and can take the form of a denial of resources or access to services. It inflicts harm on women, girls, men and boys.’ (United Nations, 2019). Sometimes, as in the case study project final report, the shorter GBV is used as a synonym; where this is the case, I have quoted it as it is used.

Worldwide it is estimated that 35% of women have experienced SGBV (WHO, 2013, p.1). The 5th Sustainable Development Goal relating to gender inequality has specific targets around SGBV (UN, 2019). High-profile initiatives including the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI) run by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) have given greater visibility to this issue within the development community and the wider public, with subsequent donor investment (FCO, 2018).

SGBV prevalence is influenced by multiple factors and is complex to address. Programming aimed at preventing GBV often focusses on changing social norms, through addressing underlying beliefs about gender equality, in order to see changed behaviour (Tearfund, 2018). This makes it a relevant topic to study how engagement with faith might enable deeper engagement with underlying beliefs and participation in programming aimed at changing social norms.

**B.2 SGBV in Liberia**

Abramowitz and Moran (2012) give a useful overview of the types of interventions delivered by the many INGOs working in Liberia. Their list is worth quoting in full:

> ‘These well-documented interventions include (but are not limited to): creating shelters for abused women, providing training to local leaders about GBV issues, training police and military forces about GBV enforcement, providing training and material for rape kits to local clinics, providing counsellors to act as psychosocial advocates for victims of domestic abuse and rape, and moving throughout the country to provide community-based education...’
initiatives to transform local social norms and values regarding gender and the role of violence in society. But despite the tremendous international investment in these initiatives in Liberia, gender violence as defined by global institutions continues to be rampant. P.128 (emphasis added)'

The last sentence of that quotation is worth further examination as it points to a lack of success in combating SGBV despite extensive programming. The quest for positive outcomes and innovation in this field is one reason that understanding and exploring the potential and challenges of a faith-based approach in relation to preventing SGBV is the subject of my analysis.

**B.3 Conflict**

Both economic poverty and the high prevalence of SGBV can be linked with the period of civil war, from 1989-2003:

Throughout this period, civilians endured horrendous and brutal violence at the hands of both rebel and government-supported troops. Towns and villages experienced mass terrorization and wanton property destruction. Brutal maiming, rape, torture, and murders were common, as was the enslavement of women and abduction of children to serve as soldiers. More than 250,000 civilians were killed (including tens of thousands of children) and over 2 million people were displaced. Countless survivors experienced physical, psychological, and/or sexual trauma (Stepakoff et al., 2006 in Ochu et al, 2018 p.105)

Abramovitz and Moran (2012) argue that the ‘long duration of the war, and its resulting trauma, have contributed to a normalization of violence in many social and political domains.’ (p.126). Theobald (2012) points to the specifically gendered nature of the impact of civil wars which have more civilian victims, who are predominantly women and children. Women and girls risk being ‘systematically and strategically targeted by sexual or gender-based violence that is used as a weapon of war’ (p.45).

‘[The effects on women] included, rape and other forms of sexual violence, torture, abduction, slavery and forced marriage or forced recruitment. Women were also indirectly affected as the fighting destroyed infrastructures, among others public services, utilities and the economy, leaving them with augmenting rates of illiteracy, unemployment and thus poverty.’ (ibid, p.46)
B.4 Gender

The root causes of SGBV are located in gender inequality and the resulting societal norms. The majority of programming which seeks to prevent SGBV focuses on challenging gender norms which give women and girls lower status and deny them power over their own lives (Tearfund, 2018). In a baseline study preceding an SGBV intervention in Liberia, Tearfund (2017) conducted a study with 15 focus groups and 45 key informant interviews, looking particularly at the interaction between gender and faith. They concluded that ‘in the area of gender equality and gender norms in daily and domestic life, most participants interviewed held the view that men and women are not equal in society: the man is regarded as the head of the household culturally and religiously’ (p.3). These views came from both Christians and Muslims interviewed. An Imam in Margibi commented that:

‘Islam talks about equal treatment even though the men are the head and paying dowry gives the man entitlement. But this does not mean subjugation of women. Your wife is your property of course, but the law prevents you from abusing it or using it as you wish.’

A Christian focus-group male participant drew on the biblical narrative to argue that

‘Women were created from the man’s ribs and as a result the man is the head of the family. Man and wife must be taught how to respect this order of things. Anything else brings confusion.’

A female participant also supported this hierarchy: ‘God made me a woman. Why should I question that? Even if things are difficult for me sometimes, this is how I am.’ (Lesjane, 2016).

Abramowitz and Moran (2012) make several insightful observations which challenge the notion that within ‘traditional’ Liberian culture, gender has always been viewed in this way or justified using religious arguments. They acknowledge that pre-war Liberian indigenous societies were patrilineal with ‘institutional structures that grounded an ideology of male dominance and female subordination’ but they argue that women’s key role in food production and their ability to act together as a group which they argue ‘served as a check on the authority of men’ (p.124). They also see the gender norms of the settler class (freed slaves and their descendants) present in more urban contexts as being highly influenced by
Victorian social norms, brought through colonial mechanisms, most notably the Christian church (p.125).

B.5 Women’s status, education and political power

According to Theobald (2012), ‘Liberian society is traditionally patriarchal, patrimonial as well as patrilineal, and marked by strong gender inequality.’ (p.35). High bride prices are required from the groom and his family prior to marriage and which Theobald (2012) argues means that women are often married off to much older (and often polygamous) husbands and expected to work in the domestic sphere with few rights (p.35). Only 18.5 percent of adult women have reached at least a secondary level of education compared to 39.6 percent of men (UNDP, 2018, p.5).

Women were instrumental in the peaceful conclusion to the civil war, brokering peace talks and monitoring implementation of the peace deal (see section below for a deeper exploration of this topic). In November 2005, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf won the Presidential elections, attributing her victory in part to the mobilisation of voters undertaken by women activists (Pray back the Devil to Hell, 2008). Her election as the first female President in Africa is seen by some as the high point of the Liberian women’s movement (Theobald, 2012, p.55). However, Theobald (2012) argues that men, unthreatened by peaceful protests were less receptive to determined political action on women’s issues: ‘Although Liberian women’s peace movements partly managed the transition from the informal to the formal, they often remained excluded from the decision-making arena and their concerns were marginalised’ (p.55). There are ongoing challenges for women seeking political office, only 9.9% of parliamentarians were women in 2017 (UNDP, 2018).

B.6 Men and Masculinities

Masculinities is a term used to describe the socially constructed ways that the male gender is expressed. The plural form of the word is used intentionally: ‘masculinities’ is used as opposed to ‘masculinity’ (singular) to emphasise that different forms of masculinities exist – shaped by class, ethnicity, race, culture and sexual orientation (Deepan, 2017). Exploring notions of masculinity as a key part of gender discussions is increasingly being seen as key to changing attitudes and ultimately reduce gender-based violence (ibid).
A 2017 study of attitudes to gender amongst communities in three countries in Liberia, commissioned by INGO Tearfund, found that:

‘Patriarchal norms informed by religion and culture still dominate people’s world views and inform opinions and perspectives on gender relations and SGBV. Patriarchal norms are accepted with scant consideration of the possibility of any change to the status quo.’ (p.16)

C.1 Wider Liberian context

My case study is located in Liberia, a country in West Africa, with a population of 4,731,906 in 2017 (World Bank, 2018). That same year, it was ranked 181 out of 189 countries listed in the UN Human Development Index (UNDP, 2018). Liberia was founded as a political entity in 1822 by African Americans to serve as a homeland for freed slaves from America and the Caribbean (Theobald, 2012, p.31). It became independent in 1847, becoming the first African republic (Theobald, 2012, p. 32). This creation history set up a conflict between local ethnic groups and the settlers which even today influences Liberian politics and which played a role in the civil war which took place between 1989 and 2003 (Ochu et al, 2018, p.105). This war was characterised by extremely high levels of gender-based violence (Hodson (2007) in Abramowitz and Moran, 2012, p.126) and the presence of many child soldiers (Sesay et al, 2000). To situate my case study, I will briefly examine the following aspects of Liberia’s context: economic poverty, conflict and religion.

C.2 Economic poverty

Since 1990 life expectancy at birth has in Liberia increased from 47.2 to 63 years and whilst this and other key trends (years of schooling, GNI per capita) show improvements, the country remains amongst the lowest performing economies in the world. War and, more recently, the Ebola crisis have led to many underlying contributors to poverty, including poor infrastructure and transportation systems, poor education (Theobald, p.43). One woman interviewed as part of a study SGBV in the country, describes the everyday experience of poverty in this way:

‘Unemployment is very high in Liberia. Food is still scarce and very expensive and people are very poor. Many parents cannot properly care for their children. Some of them send their children to give sex in return for food or money, but some children decide to do so
The underlying context of economic poverty as a driver for SGBV is emphasised in Abramowitz and Moran’s (2012) anthropological study of an SGBV intervention. One of the key findings of Lesjane (2017)’s study was that ‘poverty overshadows almost everything else in communities and relegates gender issues to secondary concerns’ (p.3). This emphasis on the context of economic deprivation within which communities are experiencing high rates of SGBV, challenges the notion that high prevalence is exclusively the result of beliefs about gender, rather than also influenced by the context in which those beliefs are being actualised in behaviour.

C.2 Religion
As my research questions focus on the role that faith-based actors and approaches can make in communication for development programmes relating to SGBV, the context of religion, faith and spirituality is very important to my study.

The 2010 Pew Research Centre report on African Religion, entitled Tolerance and Tension, offers significant insights into the complex picture of religion in the region. Liberia was one of the 19 countries where face to face interviews were conducted and I have drawn extensively on their work for this section. Liberia is a highly religious country, with less than 1% saying that they do not see themselves as affiliated to a religious group. Most identity with an Abrahamic faith and around a quarter also practice features of traditional African religion (Pew, 2010, p.144). This simple overview masks a highly complex picture of diverse beliefs and practices within Christian and Muslim groups, as well as varying degrees of syncretism and class/ethnic differences, particularly regarding beliefs about gender (ibid).

C.2.1 Abrahamic faiths

According to the Pew Research centre, in 2010 85.9% of Liberian were Christians, projected to rise modestly to 86.2% by 2020. Muslims make up 12% with a small decline projected by 2020 to 11.7%. 1.4% are unaffiliated and the remainder is made up of very small numbers of adherents to other religions.

These high-level statistics give a picture of affiliation but it is important to examine the lived reality of what this affiliation means at a community-level. In a major Pew research study in 2010, 87% of the Liberians polled said that religion was ‘very important’ in their lives. This
was compared with 8% in Sweden, 19% in Britain and 57% in the USA (Pew, 2010, p.3)

‘Large majorities in all the countries surveyed say they believe in one God and in heaven and hell, and large numbers of Christians and Muslims alike believe in the literal truth of their scriptures (either the Bible or the Koran). Most people also say they attend worship services at least once a week, pray every day (in the case of Muslims, generally five times a day), fast during the holy periods of Ramadan or Lent, and give religious alms (tithing for Christians, zakat for Muslims). Indeed, sub-Saharan Africa is clearly among the most religious places in the world.’ (Pew, 2010, p.3)

The following features of religious adherence in Liberia are pertinent to our case study: the high level of belief in the inerrancy of Scriptures (90%) (p.25), high levels of attendance at religious services (55% said they went more than once a week) and high level of prayer: 84% of Christians and 93% of Muslims reported praying more than once a day outside of religious services (Pew, 2010, p.204). 68% of Christians and 62% of Muslims read scripture outside of religious services and 70% of parents surveyed said they read Scriptures with their children. Their attitudes to the legislative framework were also noteworthy ie 63% supported making Biblical law the national law and 52% of Muslims supported replacing national law with Sharia law (ibid).

The link between belief and practice should not be viewed uncritically. For example 28% of Muslims and Christians reported believing in reincarnation and 22% of Christian men reported having more than one wife: beliefs which are not in line with orthodox understandings of their faith. The relationship between stated belief in scriptural imperatives and observable behaviour is complex and needs to be questioned in order to design interventions which shift behaviour rather than containing themselves to shifts in belief (Pew, 2010, p.54).

There were not many questions in the survey relating to gender but one was noteworthy in the context of the case study: 18% Christians and 62% of Muslims believed that only men should serve as faith leaders (Pew, 2010, p.55).

C.2.2 Traditional beliefs and practices

According to Pew (2010), Liberia was the only country in their sample of 19 countries where more than 10% of respondents identified primarily with a traditional African religion rather than an Abrahamic faith (p.20). However, a total of 24% of the Liberian sample answered
questions which identified them with high levels of traditional African religious belief and practice. So-called ‘Secret societies’ play a key role in the life of many Liberian communities, particularly regarding transition to adulthood and associated rituals (Pemunta et al, 2017, p.3). The syncretic nature of the religious landscape is an important feature of many coastal West African countries and has relevance to the analysis of my case study where the focus is on sacred texts which relate to Abrahamic faiths only.

**C.4 Religious conflict and interfaith collaboration**

My case study involves both Muslim and Christian faith leaders engaging with issues of SGBV from their respective perspectives and engaging with each other during this process. Therefore the context of religious diversity is important, particularly where it relates to conflict and collaboration.

The Pew survey (2010) shows a relatively low level of knowledge of religions other than their own: 13% of Christians say they know a great deal about ‘Muslim religion and its practices’, 15% of Muslims said they knew a great deal about ‘Christian religion and its practices’. 9% of Christians and 10% Muslims say they know a great deal about traditional African religion (p.100-102). 60% of Christians believed that Muslims were respectful towards women with 83% of Muslims believing that Christians were respectful to women (ibid, pp.120 and 128). Over 50% of respondents had participated in interreligious meetings.

**D.1 Project background**

The project I am examining as a case study is called ‘Engaging Faith-Based Organizations to Prevent Violence Against Women & Girls and Increase Survivors’ Access to Services’. The project was run by US NGO Episcopal Relief and Development (ERD), in collaboration with the Episcopal Church of Liberia Relief and Development, between January 2015 and December 2017. The United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women funded approximately 70% of $1 million project costs. Grand Cape Mount and Rivercess counties (see Annex 1) were chosen by the Liberian government because of low levels of women and girls accessing ‘knowledge and support services’ related to SGBV (p.24) and ERD were invited to implement the project alongside their local partner. Islamic Relief USA was also a partner in this project (ERD, 2019).

ERD describe themselves as the ‘compassionate response of the Episcopal Church to human suffering in the world’. Founded in 1940 in response to the refugee crisis in wartime...
Europe, they now focus on three main programmes: Early Childhood Development, Combating Gender-Based Violence and Resilience & Climate Change (ERD, 2019). The Episcopal Church is part of the worldwide Anglican communion, with the majority of its nearly 2 million baptised members located in north America. It is known for its focus on issues of social justice and is regarded as a more liberal wing of the church; ordains women and LGBT people and, in 2015, it made provision for LGBT marriages to be blessed in churches in contrast to many denominations (Episcopal Church, 2019). The Episcopal Church in Liberia was founded following missionary activity in the 1830s and works closely with the US church on a range of church and community initiatives.

D.2 Faith and development

The case study in Liberia intersects with the role played by faith at a number of levels. Firstly, the INGO receiving UN funding is a faith-inspired organisation (ERD), indeed a specific denomination’s expression of compassion, according to its strapline. This highlights the willingness of UN agencies to work with non-secular agencies, which represents a growing openness within international institutions and funding bodies (Marshall and Van Saanen, 2008, p.4). Secondly, ERD is working with the national Episcopal church in Liberia’s relief and development agency as a partner. This highlights the strong cross-continental links within many faiths, particularly where structures have been built up during the spread of the religion i.e. Christian or Muslim proselytization within colonial or in contemporary contexts, or the spread of Buddhist or Jewish diaspora links back to the country where the religion originated. Thirdly, both INGO and national NGO are working with local faith leaders who, in turn, are engaging with others within their congregations who share a faith-perspective. Lunn (2009) argues that this access to local level actors makes engagement with faith groups particularly fruitful:

‘They operate at every level of society and are present in every community; in particular they have unrivalled rural reach and are grounded in some of the world’s most troubled areas. This representation on the ground makes for effective distribution systems, particularly in times of emergency or disaster.’(p.944)

E. Conclusion

The context of Liberia makes it ideal for examining the question of faith-based communication for development interventions relating to the topic of SGBV. The ERD programme case study takes place within a country with high rates of SGBV and high levels
of religious affiliation and practice: a location where assumptions about the level of engagement engendered by integrating both faith leaders, and their sacred texts into programming, can be usefully explored.
Chapter 2: Methodology and Theory

In this chapter, I will build the theoretical framework for my analysis. I will lay out my methodological choices and why they are relevant to my research question. I will then draw out the concepts from theory which will be my tools to examine the data within the analysis chapter, in order to answer that question.

A. Methodology

I began my research with the intention of answering the following question: does engagement with the faith-realities of people involved in development interventions or projects enhance the impact and outcomes of said projects? I was interested in this question on a professional level, working, as I do, in a faith-based NGO within a Communication for Development team. I was aware that there was an assumption amongst my faith-based peers that engagement with people’s worldviews, including the aspects influenced by faith, were key to enabling sustainable change. This could be across a range of types of projects: from those aimed at specific behaviour change (e.g. inclusion of people living with HIV/AIDS) to those mobilising faith groups to advocate for policy and lifestyle change (e.g. climate change, debt relief etc).

A.1 Case study approach

I chose to analyse a specific case study in order to ground this theoretical question in a concrete reality. When taking a positivist view, selection criteria become key in order to confidently draw out general principles from the particular case study (SAGE, p.5). My criteria for case study selection were as follows:

1. The project be located in a country where faith, specifically a religious faith, plays a significant role in people’s everyday lived realities, and in their sense of identity.
2. The project should be engaging people of faith in working to meet one of the SDGs, whether consciously or unconsciously, using an approach which was broadly situated within Communication for Development.
3. The project should be run by a group identifying itself as faith-based and specifically referring to either sacred texts within its tools or working with faith leaders.
4. The project should be able to give me access to project documents and provide interview time with project staff in order to have sufficient material for my analysis.
5. To avoid bias, the project should not be run by an organisation I had worked for or with.

The ‘Engaging Faith-Based Organizations to Prevent Violence Against Women & Girls and Increase Survivors’ Access to Services’ project run by Episcopal Relief and Development in Liberia appeared to fulfil these criteria. I had begun by looking for two projects, each working with a different faith community but the chosen case study was able to combine both Islamic and Christian faiths so fulfilled the criteria and added another dimension: inter-faith collaboration.

A.2 Literature review

For the literature review and background, I have drawn from a wide range of disciplines: development, communication studies, history, political economy, theology, pedagogy and gender studies. I believe that this interdisciplinary approach is in line with Communication for Development as a field. Hog Hansen (2013) points to the need for such an approach but also to its relatively recent emergence within academia: ‘In ComDev, interdisciplinarity is not necessarily width, but a particular sort of depth that can be hard to manage, since tradition is not so well established.’ (p.4) It can be argued that Communication for Development is inherently interdisciplinary because of its origins and the range of disciplinary backgrounds in which academics have been schooled. There is not sufficient space in this essay to explore the contested nature of the Communication for Development field but it is worth noting the Choi and Richards’ (2017) observation that before receiving firm status as a discipline, fields of study may go through an interdisciplinary phase (p.47). Wiesemes and Karanika-Murray (2009) see this growth in interdisciplinary studies as being part of a wider trend:

‘The focus on interdisciplinary research is perhaps a by-product of a shift in the way that knowledge is produced. The hierarchical, homogeneous mode of disciplinary work and certification is being replaced by one characterised by complexity, hybridity, heterogeneity, and transdisciplinarity.’ (p.41)

Choi and Richards (2017) argue that this interdisciplinary approach is particularly well-suited to analysing and seeking solutions to complex contemporary issues, such as terrorism (p.41-2) and, I would argue, to addressing issues of SGBV.
A.3 Positionality

As a Communication for Development practitioner within a faith-based context, I am surrounded by a rich and dynamic theological discourse about development which influences my practice. I acknowledge my own position in the intersection of the faith-based and secular development worlds, both in my intellectual and academic hinterland and my practical experience. I am a European, a woman and a Christian, identities which influence my relationship to the subject of a Liberian, faith-based prevention programme on gender-based violence. I believe that these identities, and the experiences which they have afforded me, are not neutral. Where they are positive and brought privileged access or insight, I have sought to build on them, and where they may create bias, I have sought to mitigate them (see below).

A.4 Limitations

I want to acknowledge three weaknesses in my methodology:

Firstly, I acknowledge my Christian bias in my understanding and experience of religious practice and faith-based approaches to Communication for Development. I have made particular efforts to include another faith in my case study but the depth of insight I have is limited by my comparative lack of experience of non-Christian religion.

Secondly, I acknowledge my Anglophone bias. Although I speak and read French and Russian, my sources, academic texts and interviews have been almost exclusively in English. Wierzbicka's (2014) provocatively named book, 'Imprisoned in English' advocates for an awareness of the biases which come from English-language dominance, particularly in the social sciences:

>'Like any other language, English, too, has its own in-built culture-specific “forms of attention”- and native speakers of English are often blind to them because of their very familiarity. Often, this blindness to what is exceedingly familiar applies also to Anglophone scholars and lead to various forms of Anglocentrism in English-based human sciences, not only in description but also in theory formation.' (p.4)

To mitigate against this bias, I have attempted to draw from scholars from a wide-range of nationalities, linguistic backgrounds and disciplines, albeit writing or translated into English. These included scholars from Malawi, Brazil, India, Korea and Liberia.

Thirdly, I acknowledge my lack of fieldwork. The project would have been richer for more in-depth interviews from project staff and beneficiaries but time and financial constraints have made this impossible. I had no direct access to participants and limited reported qualitative
feedback from them. Their voices are not as present in this study as I would like them to have been and this is to the detriment of the DP.

Lastly, the data reported within the project report only had a control case for one indicator (ie overall levels of GBV at baseline and endline in an adjacent county where no intervention had occurred). This means that it is hard to verify the specific impact of the participatory and faith-based elements of the project. I have attempted to clarify wherever relevant what the strength of evidence is for any specific claims made around impact.

A.5 Sampling

In order to conduct a throughout analysis of the case study, I sought out as many different kinds of data sources as possible, however they were more limited that I had hoped. I had three documents to analyse:

The 56-page final project report on the project for the main funder ‘The United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women’, the 170-page GBV-prevention toolkit and an 8-page case study aimed at smaller donors. I was interested both in the content of these documents but also their function ie to report, to train, to inform and to act as a signal of status.

I also conducted two interviews with the Project Lead, based in the USA. These were semi-structured and recorded with the interviewee’s consent. This informant commented that she found the process of being interviewed helped her to reflect on her practice and the project as a whole. This resonates with the idea of interviews generating knowledge through dialogue: ‘Interviewing is a conversational practice where knowledge is produced through the interaction between an interviewer and an interviewee or a group of interviewees’ (SAGE, p.1).

These sources contained a range of data for analysis. The report provided quantitative and qualitative data related to the achievement of project objectives, including detailed descriptions of activities and their results, testimonials from faith leaders and an overview of challenges encountered. The toolkit gave detailed insight into the ‘ideal-type’ training which faith leaders received and in some cases used with others. It contained evidence of participatory approaches within the training setting and faith-based content. The case study showcased the narrative espoused by ERD, highlighting the added value of their faith-based approach. The interviews enabled me to clarify and deepen my understanding of the project within the broader work of ERD and gain insight into the organisational and personal logic for taking this approach, including the perceived value of experiential learning and working with faith leaders.
A.6 Data limitations

This data was not able to help me to make a firm evaluation of the relative merits of a faith-based and participatory approach versus a highly participatory approach without a faith element. I had access to a GBV toolkit written by a secular agency (Restless Development) but no documentation which evaluated or reported the effectiveness of their approach. I used this secondary toolkit to demonstrate where distinctly faith-related perspectives and tools had been used within the ERD toolkit and where analogous exercises about deeply-held beliefs were lacking in the secular toolkit examined.

B. Theoretical framework

I have found the work of Paolo Freire to be extremely helpful in shaping my analysis. His own approach, always drawing on experience to inform his ideas and ideas to inform his action, has encouraged me to allow the theoretical and the empirical elements of my DP to continuously inform each other. From reflecting on the case study, I identified that participation was a key concept which I wanted to analyse and to what extent engagement with contextual realities such as faith deepened participation. Freire’s work addresses both these issues, as I will outline below.

From a wide-ranging reading of Freire’s texts, beyond Pedagogy of the Oppressed, I have taken three concepts which I believe will help to examine the question of participation and faith within the case study and link it to wider questions within the Communication for Development field. I have chosen Conversion to the people, Context, and Dialogue because, as I will argue, in Freire’s thinking they all contribute to true participation which will lead to liberation, for the individual and for society.

B.1 Conversion to the people

In his 1985 book ‘The Politics of Education’ he writes of the apprenticeship which must ‘violently break down the elitist concept of existence’ and cause them to ‘experience their own Easter, that they die as elitists so as to be resurrected on the side of the oppressed’ (Freire, 1985, p.122).

‘Such a process implies a renunciation of myths that are dear to them: the myth of their superiority, of their purity of soul, of their virtues, their wisdom, the myth that they save the poor, the myth of the neutrality of the church, of theology, education, science, technology, the myth of their own impartiality.’ (Freire, 1985, p.123)
I begin with this concept because for Freire it is the first step for anyone wanting to work in emancipatory pedagogy and forms the basis of the possibility of truly ‘horizontal relationships’. Without a renouncing of status and power, true dialogue is not possible because it is not based on an acknowledgment of equality.

**B.2 Dialogue**

Dialogue is at the heart of Freire’s pedagogical approach. He sees the hierarchical power relations of the classical classroom as the root of much oppressive internalised thinking in those who have been students within this model. Freire (1970) calls this model ‘banking education’ which, ‘begins with a false understanding of men and women as objects’ (my emphasis), ‘it […] leads women and men to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power’ (p.58). Instead he calls for ‘problem-posing’ education which ‘rejects communiques and embodies communication’ (ibid, p.60) and placing them as subjects in their own emancipation. The seemingly axiomatic distinction between teacher and student needs to be replaced so that ‘through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student and students-teachers. […] They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.’ (ibid, p.61).

In some ways dialogue is the means by which horizontal relationships can be created and practised but Freire argues that in fact the ‘teacher-student contradiction’ must be resolved before true dialogue is possible (ibid, p.60). As people become conscious of their world and conceive of themselves as powerful actors within it, they develop a ‘deepened consciousness of their situation [which] leads people to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation’ (p.66). Drawing on Marxist concepts of alienation, Freire argues that this process will lead to a ‘humanization’ by which people are able to realise their potential and thus be liberated from the oppressive structures (both material and intellectual) which have held them in suffering.

Dialogue, we see, is more than conversation. It is a means of communication by which people are exchanging ideas on the basis of equality (ibid, p.69). Freire does not believe that dialogue is possible ‘in the absence of profound love for the world and for people […], nor without humility, it requires ‘faith in humankind’, together these create a ‘climate of mutual trust between dialoguers’. Additionally it requires hope (ie a belief that positive change is possible) and critical thinking.
B.3 Context

Thirdly, for Freire, participation is not possible unless those designing interventions (in his case mostly literacy programmes) seek to understand the context in which people live:

‘I insist once more on the imperative need of the progressive educator to familiarize herself or himself with the syntax and semantics of the popular groups- to understand how those persons do their reading of their world. [...] Educators need an understanding of the meaning their festivals have as an integral part of the culture of resistance [...] their piety, their religiousness, must be respected as their right, regardless of whether we reject it personally.’ (Friere and Macedo, 2001, p.239)

In his 1989 book entitled Learning to question: a pedagogy of liberation, Freire recounts a meeting between a fellow academic, Otavio Ianni, and a young Leftist activist who was in prison in Recife. Ianni asked him what he needed, and received the answer that the man wanted a Bible. Surprised, he asked why he didn't want a Leninist text instead. ‘I don’t need Lenin just now. I need the Bible. I need a better understanding of the peasant’s mystical universe. Without that understanding, how can I communicate with them?’ he replied. Freire (1989) uses this to illustrate his point that ‘unless educators expose themselves to the popular culture across the board, their discourse will hardly be heard by anyone but themselves’ (p.239).

In a written interview with Donald Macedo, Freire discusses his work in Guinea-Bissau on literacy (Freire and Macedo, 2001, p172-3). There is an ongoing disagreement between him and the new post-colonial President of the country, Mario Cabral; the former believing that literacy work must be carried out in a person’s native language to be emancipatory, the latter believing that the Portuguese language can unite the people if the ‘masses’ can read and write it. His passionate views on the importance of national and creole languages (as opposed to colonially-imposed languages), further highlight his belief that knowledge generated locally has an intrinsic value to those who are living in that context. By reflecting on their own world, in their own language, they will be able to address the real problems which keep them oppressed: ‘Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it’ (Freire and Macedo, 2001, p.60).

B.4 Conclusion

Although Freire does not use the word participation explicitly, he has had a deep influence on the development of participatory approaches within Communication for Development (Manyozo, 2012, p.20). His focus on power relations within the development context and his condemnation of top-down, one-way interventions, undergirds the participatory
communications approach (Manyozo, 2012, p.18). ‘In this approach, participatory dialogue and communication become the glue that mediates deliberative development by providing an avenue for consultative, collaborative, and collegial decision-making (ibid). Freire, would, I believe, see much contemporary practice which is labelled ‘participatory’ as mere co-option, as attuned as he was to revolutionary thinking and action. However, many contemporary Communication for Development projects do still bear the marks of his influence and go some way to adhering to the three underlying principles of participation which I have identified above.
Chapter 3: Analysis of findings

The project I am analysing as my case study is called ‘Engaging Faith-Based Organizations to Prevent Violence Against Women & Girls and Increase Survivors’ Access to Services’ as project outlined in my background chapter. As elaborated in the methodology chapter, my analysis is based on three data sources: a 170-page GBV prevention toolkit developed in collaboration with faith leaders themselves as part of the project; the final project report submitted to the main funder and interviews I conducted with the project lead. My research question is ‘Does Episcopal Relief and Development’s faith-based approach enhance the participatory elements of their 2015-2017 project tackling gender-based violence in Liberia and thereby contribute to the project meeting its objectives?’ My sub-questions are ‘how does participation and faith manifest in the project? And ‘what effect do these elements have on the project impact?’ Over the course of the project, a number of different tactics or instruments were used to meet the objectives including some social and behaviour-change techniques, alongside the more participatory methods which are the focus of this analysis.

I will begin by identifying the participatory elements and the faith-based aspects of the project, including where they overlap. As a control case, I will examine a GBV-prevention toolkit developed in neighbouring Sierra Leone by a secular NGO, Restless Development. In the previous chapter, I outlined three markers of participation according to the Freirean framework, namely conversion to the people, dialogue and context. I will end with an analysis of whether faith-elements of the project enable it to more closely respond to Freire’s challenges of true participation.

A. Evidence of participation within the project

The project focussed on engaging faith leaders in preventing GBV and to increase access to after-care and justice by signposting survivors to relevant services. The approach was designed ‘in contrast to programs that seek to partner with faith leaders as a means of delivering pre-set messages often designed without their input or full buy-in, [we] anticipated that interventions focused on changing long-held beliefs about gender and power would need to be designed, contextualized and piloted with strong leadership and theological guidance from senior faith leaders.’ (ERD, 2017, p.3). This conscious separation from approaches which seek to use faith leaders as useful but passive conduits of behaviour-change messaging is worth noting as a clear intention towards participation as an underlying principle of the project.
A.1 Scriptural reflection and toolkit development

Drawing on their experience as a faith-based NGO, ERD saw the importance of using scriptural reflection to engage faith leaders and challenge previous interpretations of holy texts which have reinforced unequal gender relations. The project began with informal meetings with faith leaders from which an interfaith thematic working group was formed (TWG). The TWG’s aim was ‘to meaningfully contribute and more importantly provide context and meaning of biblical and koranic [sic] scripture as well as testing and adopting changes and improvements to the toolkit at various stages’ and played a key role in shaping the toolkit. It comprised both Muslims and Christians, who were often interacting around the other religion’s scriptures for the first time. (ERD, 2017, p.2). The project team believed that ‘to counter the long-standing use of religious texts for justifying or excusing the mistreatment of women and girls, training materials would need to provide participants with the opportunity to re-examine and re-purpose sacred texts from the Bible and Qur’an to reflect more equitable messaging that emphasized respect, responsibility and dignity.’ (ERD, 2017, p.3). The emphasis on engaging with texts meaningful within local culture and through a process of dialogue around interpretation appears to have strengthened the participatory element of the project.

Dialogue was a key feature of this first consultative phase of the project ‘These passages were discussed, debated, defended and ultimately re-interpreted to reflect values and principles that promoted dignity, mutual respect and honor. Faith leaders were able to experiment with different activities, theological opinions, and holy texts from a variety of sources before selecting the most effective faith-based arguments promoting gender equality.’ (ERD, 2017, p.3) According to the project report this integration of participatory approaches to the toolkit’s development led to ‘a toolkit that was their own, gain skills in tackling views that opposed gender equality, and grow to be passionate trainers’ (ERD, 2017, p.4). No specific data is given to support this claim within the report, however my informant echoed this during an interview. She also reported that this project phase focussing on dialoguing around scriptures, engaged faith leaders at a level which led to longer-term engagement over the course of the 3-year project: ‘The dynamic process of shaping the Toolkit also continued as the program was implemented, as faith leaders met regularly in County Coalitions to share achievements and problem solve on the effectiveness of the training (ibid).
Within the early development of the toolkit, specifically the scriptural reflection meetings organised with faith leaders, we can see evidence of both dialogue and context being attended to.

A.2 GBV-prevention training for faith leaders

For this section, I will rely on the Toolkit documentation itself rather than empirical observations to draw out participatory elements within the training setting. As noted in the methodology, the lack fieldwork means that I am not able to comment on how specific training sessions reflected the written inputs and guidance given on paper. However, I will draw on observation of analogous training settings from other local facilitator-led training which I have been able to engage with and on interviews where possible. All references are from the ERD GBV prevention toolkit unless otherwise stated.

A.2.1 Facilitation approach

The toolkit places a strong emphasis on the facilitator’s role in creating an environment where discussion and interaction are preferred over more didactic teaching methods. The ‘Facilitator’s Challenge to Lead Adult Learning’ section (p.141-2) clearly states the need ‘to shift from familiar behaviors of teaching children and youth (pedagogy), and preaching to congregations, to less familiar behaviors that are required for adult learning (andragogy)’ (p.141). Facilitators are encouraged to draw on the experience in the room as the ‘richest resource for adult learning’ (p.143) by facilitating ‘interactive discussion’ (p.147). Inequalities of power which might arise in a ‘classroom setting’ are supposed to be mitigated by the attitude of the facilitator: ‘an effective facilitator is a good communicator who works at the same level as the participants and respects their ideas and experiences.’ (p.8)

A.2.2 Experiential approach: reflection and self-awareness

What the authors of the toolkit call the ‘Experiential Learning model’ (see annex 2) underlies many of the suggested activities (Laursen Muth, 2018). The DO, LOOK, THINK, PLAN cycle, takes the learner through a concrete experience (for example a role play), they are asked to reflect on the experience, then to apply this learning to a ‘real-life situation’ and finally to plan to apply this learning within their own context.

In this model, learning, solutions and action are all grounded in community contexts rather than relying on facilitators suggesting particular courses of action be taken by participants.
The model ‘values the innate knowledge and skills of learners’ (p.2). It also engages in discussion of real-life scenarios (reminiscent of Freire’s problem-posing method) throughout the exercises, based on a stated assumption that ‘adult learners are interested in and motivated to work on real problems for which they are seeking solutions’ (p.8). My informant was keen to emphasise that the experiential model goes beyond participatory as she has observed it in other projects. It focusses on creating ‘personal identification’ with the activities and therefore create a deeper learning environment. For example, rather than participating in a role-play and then being asked what they learnt, the participant will be asked how they felt about the experience of playing x,y or z. (Laursen Muth, 2018).

A.2.3 Communication model

In a section entitled ‘Complete and Effective Communication: A Model for Facilitators’ a underlying understanding of communication is stated: ‘The ultimate purpose of any communication is seeing the results we desire from others.’ (p.151) The pyramid (in annex) suggests a journey which starts with valuing difference and ultimately leads to results (namely change in behaviour and action the target community). This is a very instrumental understanding of communication as a one-way process with a singular objective; an understanding more closely aligned with a diffusionist model of communication for development. However, this does not tally with the understanding of communication as a two-way process which is evident in both the activity design and other statements relating to facilitation which have been analysed above.

The toolkit is designed for facilitators to conduct workshops for faith leaders who in turn will take action in their communities. They will use more directive communications approaches when preaching from the pulpit or counselling couples in their congregation but also ‘facilitate training and group discussion’ (p.1). However, faith leaders were also introduced to learning methodologies which they could use with their congregations, diversifying their approach to move away from exclusively one-way teaching/preaching (p.4).

There is evidence of a facilitation approach within the training setting which is seeking to encourage dialogue and respect people as adult learners who can act as subjects in their own learning. Facilitators are encouraged to level power dynamics but there are still ‘right answers’ which they, on occasion, should guide participants towards. Whether this kind of dialogue fulfils Freire’s vision of dialogue is a question which cannot be answered without empirical observation of conversations within the training setting and interviews with both facilitators and participants.
B. Evidence of Faith elements within the project

As explored in detail above, the project was designed with the idea of faith leader engagement at the centre. The key role that faith leaders could play was acknowledged from the outset. They were included in initial discussions and in extensive dialogue around the scriptural texts which would form the basis of the training outlined in the Toolkit. The decision to make the project interfaith departed from previous single faith projects of a similar nature (Laursen Muth, 2018) and required a greater understanding of interfaith sensitivities. Many participants had not discussed their scriptures with a leader from another faith, prior to this project (Laursen Muth, 2018).

Within the toolkit, there is an underlying assumption that those engaged in the toolkit training have a Christian or an Islamic faith, as they have been selected on this basis. This affects the content in a number of ways. Firstly scriptural reflection exercises occur throughout the training. These draw on similar passages from both the Qur’an and the Bible which support the notion of gender equality and condemn violence. Secondly, each day starts and ends with prayer. Thirdly, the post-training work in the community is assumed to be within a specifically religious context e.g. the opportunities for sharing anti-GBV messages will most likely be within religious services, at retreats, feast-day gatherings or as part of individual counselling given by a faith leader to congregants. In one exercise, faith leaders are asked to write a short talk which could be delivered in one of these contexts.

This section of the project is worth quoting at length:

Providing the space and structure to reflect on not only their role preventing and responding to GBV in their communities, but also their own preconceived notions about gender roles and power, has proven to be eye-opening and motivating for them. Teaching people concepts about gender, gender roles and GBV is not enough to incite meaningful attitudes and behavior change. Deep-seated perceptions and practices around gender roles required a step-by-step process of self-examination and thoughtful analysis of key elements such as power and empathy. By using role play, personal testimony, contextual Bible and Quran study and the FAMA method were found to be effective tools and methods to incite a real rethinking of deep-rooted social norms. (ERD Toolkit, 2017, p.34)

The organisations involved, ERD and Islamic Relief, both identify as faith-based NGOs. My informant felt that this built trust with faith groups within the target regions and enabled a
more open dialogue of participants with the project team because of shared faith and shared values (Laursen Muth, 2018).

C. Secular NGO control case study

I will briefly examine another Gender-based violence toolkit developed for a West African context. Restless Development (RD), a UK-based youth-focussed NGO, developed this toolkit as part of a UNDP-funded programme in Sierra Leone. The toolkit was written in English in 2013 by an American consultant. The project’s focus was ‘access to justice, ‘with the goal of improving knowledge, awareness and practices of you people and their communities in regards to rights, laws and access to services related to GBV’ toolkit (page i). Although the toolkit aims to encourage engagement with the justice system, it is still addresses wider issues of GBV in a similar context. I will now look at the participatory and faith elements manifested in this second toolkit.

C.1 Evidence of participation

The RD toolkit does not appear to have been written in consultation with potential participants or volunteer trainers. However, without access to the project documents, I cannot speculate on how it was field-tested or how local facilitators adapted it in the training setting.

There are fewer notes on facilitation, however the facilitation approach is similar to the ERD toolkit i.e. encouraging dialogue with and within the participant group:

‘Many of these activities are design to help participants come to their own understanding and not about you providing all the answers. You will help participants along by asking the right questions, letting there be silence and helping people when they get stuck. You are here to facilitate participants not to lecture to them.’ (Restless Development, p.4)

Examples of this approach include Activity 2.2 which enables participants to engage in active listening and Activity 3.1 uses the ‘role-play’ technique to help participants to understand root causes.
Finally, the language of the toolkit is standard American English but with some specific words relevant to the context i.e. mammy-queen (a female village elder), an Okada driver (a motorbike-taxi) being used.

C.2 Evidence of Faith elements

From analysis of the toolkit, I would qualify the RD toolkit as religion-neutral or in other terms ‘faith-blind’. There are no mentions of ‘faith’, ‘spirituality’, ‘churches’, ‘mosques’, ‘scriptures’ (such as the Bible or the Qu’ran) or ‘faith leaders’. There is one mention of ‘religion’ under the definition of belief within the glossary i.e.

‘Beliefs are firmly held attitudes that are often regarding things like, religion, cultural practices and other major facets of a person’s life.’ p.vii (my emphasis)

There appears to be a disconnect between an acknowledgement that beliefs may often be connected to religion as a major facet of a person’s life, and a lack of reference to religion or associated concepts in the substantive part of the toolkit. The RD toolkit does not attempt to address underlying beliefs within the context of deeply-held spiritual or religious belief. This is despite their acknowledgment that, for many, this will play a part in unhelpful beliefs about gender.

D. Impact of the participatory and faith-based elements of the ERD project

My informant was inspired to initiate this project based on observations made on visits to Liberia. She saw that although GBV-prevention messaging was frequently displayed in public fora and as slogans on clothing, people questioned had only superficial understanding of GBV. She had previously worked within Social and Behaviour Change communication (SBCC) and was keen to find a methodology which would provide a deeper level of impact and resulting behavioural change, particularly in the challenging area of GBV, a topic where beliefs about gender strongly affect behavioural outcomes. The project was designed to go ‘as deep as possible’ and to take ‘time and space’ to discuss scripture at length, building relationships within the faith leader group and testing and refining in an iterative manner to ensure that the toolkit was meeting its objectives (Laursen Muth, 2018).
D.1 Quantitative data

The ERD project reported significant impact through its intervention. The percentage of people in Rivercess county who had heard their faith leaders speak out against GBV increased to nearly 100%, from a baseline of 53% of women and 22% for men. The toolkit under analysis was a centrepiece of the project’s strategy to equip faith leaders to roll-out the awareness-raising and training in their own contexts. At endline, 98% of faith leaders reported speaking out publicly about GBV three or four times in the previous year (ERD, 2017, p.24). With specific reference to the toolkit, the project report stated that the faith leaders were ‘very interested in and greatly challenged by the experiential exercises and facilitation strategies in the GBV Toolkit’ (p.33). Participants in training reported high levels of satisfaction with the toolkit and training workshops.

A key indicator of success was measurement of the ‘percentage of congregants (Christian and Muslim) who report changes in their VAW/G-related attitudes, perceptions and practices as a result of participating in faith-based activities (e.g. religious services, marriage preparation, retreats, counseling, group workshops)’ (p. 25) (my emphasis). At baseline the figure was 13%, increasing to 34% of endline, with 8300 congregation members reached, whilst the number who reported they now knew how to access services increased from 27% to 75%. Overall, rates of gender-based violence fell in both Rivercess and GCM countries (average of 24% at baseline and 4% at endline). Montserrado county, where the intervention had not occurred, was also surveyed and results showed less of a decrease, although the figure was not available at the time of writing.

D.2 Qualitative data

The ‘Voices from the Field’ section of the project report, contains eight testimonials from faith leaders who participated in the project, all of which are positive. The below quotes give a representative flavour of the types of reflections contained in the feedback.

A Muslim Faith leader:

‘Before this project came to Sinje, I preached to people about violence but I wasn’t reaching out to many women as an Imam and never knew anything about GBV. [...] I never preached on any GBV topic. I always felt that men were responsible to make all the decisions in the home. The community members were involved in lots of violence and people had little interest in what their faith leaders had to say about it. I am blessed to live and see pastors and Imams
working together on a GBV project to transform our community. Most of the Muslim men here in Sinje are now getting married to one woman. This is a big change [...] I read the Quran as it relates to violence against women and girls every other Friday during prayer time, for example Quran Ayat 32:21. The community trusts me and GBV issues are gradually reducing.’ Sheik Musa A. Sheriff - Sinje, Grand Cape Mount (ERD, 2017, p.54)

A Christian Faith leader:

‘When the ECLRD project came to Rivercess County a few years ago, I lived in a violent marriage with my young wife. I was very naive at first and really didn’t know what I was doing wasn’t right or was against my wife’s rights. I could kick, slap, push, trip her over, throw things at her, yell, and call her names like “crazy”. [...] I refused to accept that I was wrong for fighting my partner. Life was hell, and I always blamed my wife for the violence. The project helped me change and move away from fighting and beating my partner. As for my community, the community youth and men were involved in different kinds of violence, wife beating, men fighting men, and young girls were not going to school. More girls are now going to school, wife beating has decreased, and fighting among men has also decreased.’ Power Osseun - Christian Youth Leader in Cestos, Rivercess County (ERD, 2017, p.54)

These first-hand accounts point to both personal transformation of faith leaders and of the communities they are influencing. The importance of engagement the sacred texts is highlighted by the Sheik Musa A. Sheriff, suggesting that this specific approach was a factor in a successful the outcomes of the project, noted in the quantitative section above.

E. Conclusion of analysis

I have identified several elements of the project which I believe to contribute to the participatory nature of this project i.e. the interfaith scriptural reflection approach, and the experiential learning and facilitation techniques within the training setting. I have also identified how faith is explicitly referenced within the project and how this manifests within the tools and techniques used i.e. engagement with faith leaders as the target group and use of faith-based practices such as engagement with sacred texts (both personal and in dialogue with others), sermon preparation and times of prayer. I compared this with a secular toolkit which showed evidence of participatory techniques within the training setting but did not engage with the religious context in which its participants were likely (based on very high religious observance in the country) to have developed their views on gender.
Evidence from the project report suggest that over the 3-year cycle, there was significant effect on gender-based violence prevention and access to services for survivors. From the analysis of the both the GBV toolkit and the wider project, we observe high levels of participatory practice and faith-based engagement with the participants. I cannot, within the constraints of a DP and without a secular control project, infer as to whether the participatory or faith-based approach (or some other factor) is responsible for the high impact of this project. However, the reported results do appear to support Freire’s supposition that greater participation will make a positive difference to the quality and depth of impact.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

To conclude, I will evaluate the project against the three hallmarks of participation which I have taken from Freire before ending with some overall observations.

A.1 Conversion to the people

The project responds to this first hallmark of participation in two ways. Firstly, ERD’s leadership and project staff have come to understand and appreciate the strong imperative of viewing the issue of GBV from the perspective of the people ‘on the ground’ and of engaging them in the development of their own materials to work deliver the project’s aims (Laursen Muth, 2018). It is not possible to speculate on the extent to which staff intentionally emptied themselves of power and ‘experienced Easter’ as Freire advocates. However, Freire’s concept of conversion is not about pragmatic acknowledgement of the need for contextual understanding in order to see project success. Instead it is a profound emptying of power and a break with previously tightly-held class values and practices. In Freire’s more revolutionary thinking, close ties to international structures and funding which continue to be imbued with capitalistic values are not conducive to NGOs like ERD undergoing the full conversion he advocates. They are unlikely to be ‘resurrected on the side of the oppressed’ without letting go of the power which enables them to channel funding into the project.

The second area of conversion relates to faith leaders themselves: from ambivalence to a new place of understanding the need for change in the area of GBV. Freire most frequently using the term ‘oppressed’ rather than ‘poor’, emphasising the position of powerlessness rather than economic deprivation. With this lens, women who are experiencing GBV are indeed ‘oppressed’. In order to work to change women’s state of powerlessness, those seeking to undertake this work must first go through a process of conversion. The toolkit’s experiential learning model emphasises self-examination, reflection and commitment to changed behaviour. Changed attitudes and recognition of current inequalities is central to the training and reflected in many of the exercises. Freire (1985)’s attention to the relationship between inner attitudes and outer behaviour is being reflected in the project’s attention to inner change in faith leaders, prior to engagement with action in their communities.
A.2 Dialogue

Without a true conversion to the cause of the oppressed, Freire (1970) would say that it is not possible to have genuinely horizontal relationships which are necessary for true dialogue between people who previously lived with unequal power relations between them. Although partial, there do appear to be aspects of the project which enable a dialogue which tends towards Freire’s ideal type. Conditions for meaningful dialogue between faith leaders from different religious traditions have been created through the TWG and the initial scriptural reflection meetings. Attention is paid to building relationships of trust and mutual respect between participants before discussing challenging topics within GBV (Laursen Muth, 2018). Top-down teacher-student dynamics are counselled against throughout the Toolkit.

The project is not aimed at women who are victims of GBV, however survivors were present at some of the initial scriptural reflection times, particularly in a discussion on trauma counselling. Approximately 20% of the faith leaders were women and the toolkit acknowledges that some of them may be survivors of GBV themselves. However, there was still a gender imbalance overall within this dialogue which my informant reported she was seeking to address in the next stage of the programme (Laursen Muth, 2018).

A.3 Context

Engagement with the context of Rivercess and Grand Mount Cape counties is a strength of the project. High religious observance, including attendance at religious services and groups, has been leveraged by the project team to enable GBV messages to be shared with a majority of people in the target counties. Reading the power dynamics within communities, the project team identified that faith leaders hold significant influence over beliefs associated with gender, and are often the first port of call for support when issues relating to SGBV occur. Most victims and survivors belong to a faith community, be that Muslim or Christian. This contextual understanding shows a willingness to engage ‘in the peasant’s mystical universe’ as the young prisoner quoted by Freire describes it. ‘Without that understanding’, he continues, ‘how will I communicate with them?’ Sacred texts, in this case the Bible and the Qur’an, have a deep resonance in the lives of people of faith, unrivalled by secular texts. The SDGs, human rights declarations and Liberian laws regarding SGBV are important ways of encouraging people to promote gender equality and act against SGBV, as demonstrated by the Restless Development toolkit. But they do not have the deep resonance that religious texts, imbued with authority do for adherents to that faith.
As noted in the literature review, the presence of African traditional religious practice should not be ignored. Traditional religion leaders were included in the initial discussions but faith leaders were concerned that engaging with them was dangerous because of patterns of corruption and harmful religious practices associated with initiation ceremonies (Laursen Muth, 2018). However, in the next iteration of the project, traditional African religious leaders will be included as trust has been built with the initial group (Laursen Muth, 2018).

A.4 Faith, participation and Communication for Development

Through my degree project, I have sought to examine the question of whether engagement with faith can enhance the participatory elements of Communication for Development projects. Specifically, I have examined a project which addresses the issue of GBV in Liberia through working with faith leaders using several participatory tools and approaches. I hoped to be able to show that the impact of the participatory elements of the project were deepened by the faith elements (e.g. the discussion of sacred texts) and thereby contributed to the overall impact of the project. Whilst the data I was able to access did not include a control study or provide enough external evaluation to lead me to definitive results, the evidence presented by ERD does point to this link being present (at least in part) and suggests that further studies should be commissioned to confirm the correlation. As Antonio Faundez said in conversation with Freire in ‘Learning to Question: a Pedagogy of Liberation’:

‘I believe the value of a thesis lies in discovering and formulating basic questions which will arouse the curiosity of other research workers. The value lies not so much in the answers, because the answers are definitely provisional […]’ (Friere and Macedo, 2001, p. 226)

I hope to have ‘aroused the curiosity of others’ to explore questions of faith and Communication for Development and presented my provisional answers for others to take further. As I have shown in my literature review, academic interest in questions of faith has been growing over the past decade, in parallel with limited but new funding streams aimed at engaging faith actors within development interventions. Engagement of Communication for Development practitioners and academics in rigorous observation, reflection and critical analysis of faith actors, their approaches and their potential as partners in development, is important in order to respond to the challenges facing the most economically-deprived communities, particularly as these communities are more likely than not to have a religious faith.

Freire’s thinking provides an underlying logic for the link between engagement with faith realities and higher levels of impact in development work. His belief in people leading their
own development, engaging in their own analysis of their problems, all within a framework of horizontal relationships, points to the importance of solidarity (conversion to the people), dialogue and context as true markers of participation. Freire’s work has been highly influential in Communication for Development theory and practice, and his nuanced understanding of the role of the Church (and by extension other faith communities) in community-level change can help those working in the field to explore the key issues at the intersection of faith and development.

Faith is likely to continue to play a part in the lives of people across the globe and so without engaging with the faith realities of communities, it is difficult to claim that context is being given sufficient attention. This lack of attention to context will in turn make meaningful participation challenging to realise in all its fullness. Drawing on examples from contemporary Communication for Development practice and grounding them within a theoretical framework, I believe there is much potential for deeper study of this field, particularly for those interested in true dialogue and deep participation. In quarters where the development sector currently views faith with suspicion or misunderstanding, or is simply ‘blind to faith’, it may need to look again with new eyes.
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Figure 1: Location of Grand Cape Mount and Rivercess counties
Figure 2: Experiential learning model