

## Handing more public services such as schools and welfare to religious groups harms women's equality

*The government's push to open up the running of public services to a wider range of providers has a number of far reaching implications. One of these is examined by [Sheila Jeffreys](#), where she discusses the implications of the greater involvement of religious groups leading to rolling back of progress on equal rights for women and girls.*



The desecularisation that has taken place in the UK and Australia in the last decade, as religious organisations have been invited by governments to take a much greater part in public life, is harmful to women's equality. 'Desecularisation' describes the increasing prominence of religion in government policies and in the public sphere in states that had previously adopted some degree of secularisation. Religious groupings have received contracts to run [welfare services](#), received money to set up [interfaith organisations](#), and have been invited to take part in [consultations on policy](#). Deliberate government policy has directed the setting up of [more religious schools](#) or the handing of state schools to religious organisations to run with state funding.

The implications of desecularisation for equality are alarming because of the woman-hating attitudes and practices of religions. Despite attempts by some women believers to alleviate the woman-hating cultures and ideas of their chosen religions, the majority of religious organisations worldwide still practise deliberate and egregious discrimination against women. They may not allow women to preach or administer the sacraments, they may maintain allegiance to the negative attitudes to women that appear in their sacred texts, or maintain the separation of women in special balconies and behind curtains so that they cannot contaminate the mysteries taking place, or the thoughts of male worshippers. There is a [quantity of research](#) that suggests that people who adhere to religions are likely to hold views that are hostile to the interests of women's equality.

In both the UK and Australia the process of desecularisation owes its ideological origins to an enthusiasm for communitarianism and the ideas of theorists like [Robert Putnam](#) who see churches as the most important repositories of social capital. These ideas have been criticised for serving to justify the reduction of the role of the state and of public spending. But communitarian ideas also overlook the extent to which 'faith' communities are based upon sex discrimination. When governments consult religious communities they tend to do so through self-elected male authorities and women are overlooked or excluded. The idea that 'faith communities' can provide a solution to social problems, has led to the setting up by governments in the UK and Australia of groups dedicated to 'interfaith' dialogue, with the outlay of considerable public funds. These dialogues frequently exclude women, discriminate against women who are constrained by modesty requirements from attending, and are male dominated.

Religion has also been enlisted by government in the UK, as a partner in the project of 'urban regeneration'. Faith organisations have been funded to report on the 'economics' of faith. The upshot of this sudden valuing of the churches in economic terms is that local authorities are now adjured to fund them when handing out funds for development purposes. The resistance of local government officers to the idea of funding religions, it is proposed, can be reduced by education on faiths. This raises the interesting spectacle of determinedly secular public servants being engineered out of their ethical understandings of how to do their jobs in order to enforce a faith agenda. [Researchers in a UK study](#) give examples of the dilemmas local government funders face. These can include what to do when projects actively promote 'forced' marriage, or ban gay men and lesbians from voluntary work, or provide for boys only. Regeneration professionals are forced to either put aside their ethical and political commitments to equality or face complaints from religious organisations of discrimination and racism.

Equality concerns exist, also, in relation to an increase in the delivery of services through religious organisations. Government funding to religious organisations is considerable and has helped to make them very influential businesses. The churches in Australia receive grants to fund church schools, but also run public hospitals, residential aged-care and disability services, and employment services. They also get government contracts to run counselling for parents involved in custody disputes and to provide abortion counselling services, both areas in which women can be severely harmed by sexist religious precepts. The Catholic Church and the Salvation Army are now being handed contracts to run women's services such as refuges from domestic violence and for homeless teenage girls, [or for trafficked women](#), which were previously run by feminist-inspired women's agencies. These church-run facilities are at liberty to change the ideology and focus of the services, employ men to work with women who have been abused, prioritise

the homelessness of boys or make the facilities mixed.

In the UK and Australia government policies of promoting 'faith' have led to considerably increased funding to 'faith schools'. The enlistment of 'faiths' in the delivery of education has gone further in the UK than in Australia. The misogynist messages that can be delivered to girls in 'faith' schools are illustrated by the 2007 guidelines from the influential Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), [Meeting the needs of Muslim pupils in state schools](#). The guidelines include many relating to segregation and to modesty. Boys and girls should have single sex swimming lessons and changing facilities at primary and secondary schools. They should not be expected to be naked in front of other members of the same sex, so individual changing and showering rooms should be provided, and they should not have to use the communal changing rooms in the swimming baths because some members of the public, presumably of the same sex as the children, might be naked there. Dance is unIslamic and children should be allowed to excuse themselves from such classes, the problem being that dance is lascivious and includes sexual movements.

Sex education should include Islamic morality on issues such as 'sexual conduct and behaviour, abortion, contraception, sexual orientation, hygiene, forced marriages, drugs, child abuse and relationships between males and females'. In particular Islamic morality forbids boyfriends/girlfriends, homosexuality is not acceptable and sex should only take place in marriage. The Islamic view of marriage and relationships, which would be promoted under these guidelines, is evidenced on fatwa sites such as [Islamonline](#), and is quite unlikely to support sexual equality in the form of women's right to choose their own partners, of either sex, inside or outside marriage, their right to control their own bodies and say no to sex in marriage. It is against the rights of women and girls to equality and bodily integrity, and instils shame about the body and sex.

There is more information, e.g. in a 2007 report from [Stonewall on homophobic bullying](#), about the problems that lesbian and gay students experience in faith schools, than there is about the effect upon girls in general. Anti-homosexual sex education is a particular concern because it is likely to be implicated in the bullying and violence that lesbian and gay students suffer. Faith schools which are run by religious organisations that profess women's subordination, and preach that homosexuality is a sin, cannot, in good faith, be expected to promote a human rights agenda, as a non-faith school may be required to do.

Governments cannot promote women's equality if they partner with religious organisations for whom, in many cases, discrimination against women is an article of faith. The state should not be embroiled in the promotion of harmful ideas and practices that limit girls' opportunities, promote virginity, inveigh against contraception, abortion and homosexuality, or promote segregation and modesty. Desecularisation and government through faith communities are in direct collision with the considerable progress towards the equality of women and girls in the public realm that has been made in recent decades.