



# QSA Notes

## Equality in society, aid and development

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For those of us whose motivation in aid and development stems from notions of social justice, the concept of equality is a central focus. Upon inspecting the root causes of the poverty or food insecurity that our projects aim to address, you will often find that many of the issues – access to water, markets, credit, household and community decision-making, opportunities for quality education, income generation, leadership – are the result of some form of unequal power dynamics or status quo in the first place, and that social and economic inequalities are often closely correlated.

The journey of achieving ideals of equality is a long one and a continual work in progress. It is encouraging that every step towards it is a success in its own right. A degree of equality is also integral for sustainable solutions to poverty and food security, let alone for peace and stability.

Gender is perhaps one of the most obvious and universal dimensions of inequality that we continue to chip away at within our own society and workplaces as well as in the world and work of our project partners. Themes

of women's rights and empowerment, access and participation, and protection and safety for women and children, are key considerations in project designs as well as being woven through activities and discussions as part of community meetings, planning, training days and informal counselling.

QSA partner Vasandham Society in Tamil Nadu, India, presents a good example. Having set up the Vaigai Women's Federation (VWF), a strong grassroots network for women and run by women, the two organisations now continue to support a number of initiatives aimed at improving gender equality and women's and girls' rights. In the past year, their work has enabled over 6,000 women to access appropriate and affordable financial services including credit, loans, and financial and animal insurance. The scheme stands out in that it boasts an incredible 98 per cent return rate, with an evaluation attributing a part of the success to the social support that comes with membership. Apart from informal peer support, women-led anti-violence committees run awareness campaigns and provide locally-accessible

mediation and counselling support for cases of domestic disputes. The most common cases dealt with by these committees relate to domestic violence, child marriage and girls' education.

Despite being banned by Indian law in 1948, negative discrimination on the basis of caste is another enormous challenge that Vasandham (and in fact all of QSA's project partners in India) continue to fight every day. The nuances of this region-specific power dynamic remain ever-so sensitive, and even with the incremental pace, whether spurred by society or within project contexts, the commitment pays off. Vasandham manager Guna Kunasekaran reflects that it took 10 long years of inter-caste group facilitation before VWF members would accept to enter the houses of members of different castes, let alone invite each other into their own homes. Back on our own turf, in Australia we are often viewed as one of the more successful stories of multiculturalism, but according to who, and whose version of history? Australia remains the only country colonised by the British that has not signed a treaty with its Indigenous people<sup>1</sup>, and we are

### Across all of QSA's projects in 2019-20:

- 308 women were supported with training and/or opportunities towards leadership roles
- 1,036 people (61 percent women) were actively engaged in discussions on gender equality and women's equal rights
- Over 541 girls received a better and culturally-sensitive, quality education



Vaigai Women's Federation group grading in process.  
Credit: Vasandham Society



What does it mean to be Australian,  
and do we all really get a fair go?

also the only 'first world' nation with a colonial history that has not recognised its first people in its constitution<sup>2</sup>. We have yet to reconcile with and embrace our factual history and identity: we know that geographically we are located in the Asia-Pacific, but the Australian psyche has not quite arrived there yet. We pride ourselves on supposedly giving everybody a 'fair go', but not everyone is equally treated or valued as such.

According to the Australian Human Rights Commission<sup>3</sup>, despite comprising 24 per cent of the population, non-European and Indigenous people are severely underrepresented at just 5 per cent of senior leadership in Australian business, politics, government and universities. Whether intentional or not, subconscious or not, this is a reflection of those whose power and privilege dominate the structures and systems of Australian society, and the bias of a certain set of assumptions, ways of thinking and working.

It is these minute dynamics that ultimately amount to social and structural inequality; some of it reflects disadvantage, and some of

it is discrimination. For those lucky enough not to be well-acquainted with issues of race and discrimination, perhaps it feels as men initially did before understanding that women had reason to feel angry about the status quo. Without the experience or understanding, it is either considered unimportant or uncomfortable enough not to discuss – as questions of power often are – and the privilege of being able to choose whether to engage with the issue or not often goes unrecognised. For the unlucky, it is an everyday matter around which there is little choice but to become overly familiar with, because it shapes one's life experiences so profoundly.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on some of the ingrained social and economic inequalities within various disadvantaged communities and across countries, and is expected to continue exacerbating these cracks in society. But COVID-19 has also brought us to a crux in that we are facing the need to rethink, reconstruct, and to 'build back better'. Perhaps it is time to bring these necessary conversations to the fore?

In internationally-focused sectors

such as aid and development, is it not important that representation, participation and access to decision-making should reflect the cultural and ethnic composition of Australian society and the overseas communities that our work seeks to serve? What impact might this be having in our work and our cross-cultural relationships? If our sector's work centres around addressing inequalities and disadvantage, is it not important that we seek to address and reflect this in our own practice? To reflect on our unconscious biases and internalised norms, we must understand and challenge ourselves, our well-established systems and society. This takes courage, it requires patience, and a willingness to reflect on our own place in the structures of power.

1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-40024622>

2. Linda Burney, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-10-10/fact-check3a-is-australia-the-only-first-world-nation-with-a-c/11583706>

3. <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/leading-change-blueprint-cultural-diversity-and-0>

QSA is a member of the Australian Council for International Development and is a signatory to the ACFID Code of Conduct. The purpose of QSA is to express in a practical way the concern of Australian Quakers for the building of a more peaceful, equitable, just and compassionate world. To this end QSA works with communities in need to improve their quality of life with projects which are culturally sensitive, as well as being economically and environmentally appropriate and sustainable.

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