

Understanding Paths to NGO Employment: The role of profession, community, and faith for NGO workers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lebanon, and Sri Lanka

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Research has shown that faith plays an important role in motivating the employees and volunteers of faith based nonprofit service providers. As Nichols (1988) noted in his examination of nonprofits providing humanitarian relief, “it was religious motivation that inspired relief workers to travel halfway around the world and serve their fellow human beings” (p.234). A great deal of research on volunteering has established a link between religiosity and involvement in volunteer work (Greeley, 1997; Hodgkinson, 1990; Hodgkinson, Weitzman, & Kirsch, 1990; Lam, 2002). In Ebaugh et al.’s (2003) study of nonprofits serving the homeless, evidence suggested that volunteers at such organizations are religiously committed people who are motivated to work at a faith based agency for religious reasons. Meanwhile, a number of studies have shown that religious bodies themselves find faith, mission and action in the community to be inextricably linked (Cairns, Harris, & Hutchison, 2005; Jeavons, 1994). Bartkowski (2001) found that church involvement in social service programs in Mississippi is justified in the values held by the church. In their study of the Anglican Church in England, Cairns, Harris & Hutchinson (2005) found that church leaders and volunteers felt that worship and social action are closely connected, and that serving the local community was an integral part of practicing their faith.

As we see from the studies referenced above, much of the research on the role of faith in drawing individuals to the nonprofit services profession is based in the United States and Western Europe, and largely focuses on the role faith plays for Christian NGO workers. Does faith offer the same motivations to NGO workers in the developing world, and is this influence the same for Buddhists, Druze, Sunni Muslims and Shiite Muslims as it is for Christians? What other factors play a role in drawing individuals to work in the NGO sector? This paper seeks to answer these questions using data gathered during field research in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lebanon, and Sri Lanka. More than 100 interviews were conducted with volunteers and staff at 70 NGOs in an effort to understand how religious and ethnic identity influence service provision. For the Lebanon case, a total of 30 staff members from 22 organizations were interviewed. For the Sri Lanka case, a total of 31 staff members from 22 organizations were interviewed. For the Bosnia and Herzegovina case, a total of 41 staff members from 30 organizations were interviewed. The organizations in the sample include Buddhist, Christian, Druze, Shiite Muslim, and Sunni Muslim faith based organizations, as well as secular nonprofit organizations. The results indicate that faith plays an important role in leading individuals to NGO work, but other factors play an important role as well. These include social networks within one’s faith community, professional background, and the characteristics of the labor market following war and other violent conflict.

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