

# WHY FAITH? ENGAGING FAITH MECHANISMS TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

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## BACKGROUND

This is one brief in a series of two<sup>1</sup> concerning faith-based action to end violence against children. Its purpose is to inform faith actors, development practitioners, policymakers, and donors about the global contributions of faith communities to prevent and respond to violence against children. These briefs summarise key findings from a scoping study commissioned in 2018 by the Ending Violence against Children Hub of the Joint Learning Initiative for Local Faith Communities (JLI).

This three-stage process reviewed academic and grey literature, case studies, and carried out consultations with practice-based experts in the field of ending violence against children. Researchers reviewed 172 documents, collated six case studies, and interviewed 14 experts. The scoping study explored the contributions of faith communities in both ending and contributing to violence against children,<sup>2</sup> and their role in child protection systems more broadly.

The JLI published the compendium of three interdependent reports in June 2019.<sup>3</sup> The scoping study adopted a multi-faith lens and covered a range of geographic regions and faiths. Senior researchers from two collaborating academic institutions in the Global North and the South carried out the research. The research included interviews conducted with experts within Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim contexts. This brief focuses on engaging faith actors to end violence against children.

## KEY FINDINGS

1. Faith communities' unique contribution to the elimination of violence against children is their potential to promote, challenge, and re-interpret religious beliefs and practices that contribute to violence against children, particularly those with a spiritual foundation or basis in religious texts.
2. Faith traditions often mandate practical social action and service in relation to children, especially within the areas of education, care, and social support.
3. Protective religious beliefs around the care and protection of children in faith traditions can be harnessed to accelerate ending violence against children.
4. Faith leaders must deal explicitly and constructively with entrenched harmful faith beliefs still used to justify or indirectly underpin abusive adult/child hierarchies.
5. Faith leaders must break the culture of silence and secrecy on hidden practices of child abuse and maltreatment within religious institutions and families and take steps toward preventative action.
6. Faith actors should seek, where appropriate, to work with intra-faith, interfaith, and broader child protection systems to prioritise the best interests of the child.

# 1. THE UNIQUE ROLE OF FAITH

Faith plays a significant role in the lives of most of the world's population, especially in relation to family structures. Faith traditions also play cross-cutting roles across many levels within which violence against children is increasingly understood.<sup>4</sup> In light of the urgent shared task of ending violence against children, all stakeholders need to identify their *unique* contribution. Secular agencies acknowledge the role of faith leaders as community gatekeepers with access capital and social capital in bringing resources to the table. Less acknowledged is the importance of harnessing faith's spiritual capital for the shared task of ending violence against children.

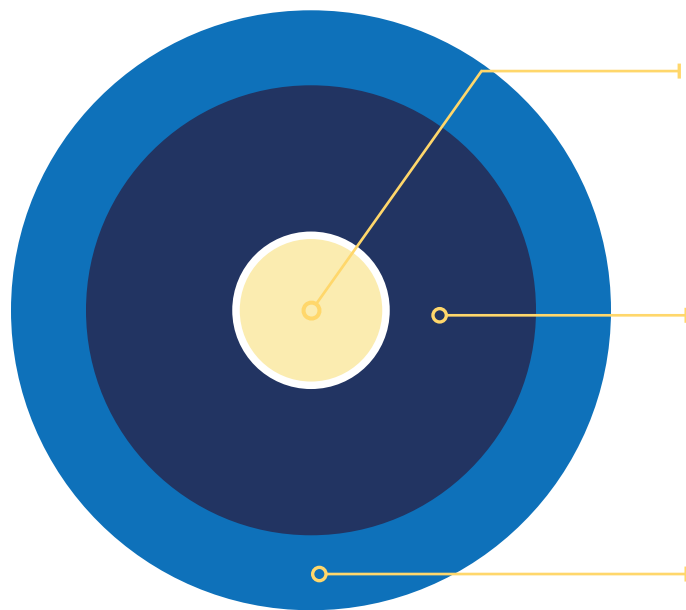


Diagram by Selina Palm based on study findings and the work of Gerrie Ter Haar<sup>5</sup>

**SPIRITUAL CAPITAL** - Faith traditions uniquely draw on and engage faith resources and authority through prayer, sermons, sacred texts, and religious rituals. This can transform beliefs and practices underpinning child maltreatment, reaffirm religious imperatives for protection and prevention, and stand against the moral normalisation or silencing of abuse.

**SOCIAL CAPITAL** - Faith actors bring social influence, organisations, funds, buildings, people and motivation to the task of ending violence against children. However, they are instrumentalised by secular. This involves limited or no engagement with their explicit spiritual dimensions.

**ACCESS CAPITAL** - Faith leaders are initial gatekeepers to the local community. They are employed in token ways by other child related services to 'open the gate'. They are not seen to play ongoing positive roles in ending violence against children and may even be viewed as a liability.

Many faith traditions currently hold an ambiguous role in efforts to end violence against children, operating as both an asset in protection and care but also as a liability in perpetuating underlying norms and practices that harm children.<sup>6</sup>

Religious leaders and faith communities speak about faith and ethics that impact people's behaviour. Religious beliefs, sacred texts, and images of the Divine have the potential to connect or disconnect faith and child protection. Engaging the mechanisms of faith in people's lives is a unique role faith leaders, faith-based organisations, and faith communities hold. Underpinning faith communities' practical contributions are a complex set of beliefs, rituals, and ethics that can offer a sustained protective commitment to end violence against children and for future generations. While social capital and service delivery are important, the faith community's spiritual role in shaping mindsets and beliefs of and about children is key.





## 2. PRACTICAL MANDATE FOR ACTION ACROSS THE CHILD CARE AND PROTECTION CONTINUUM

Multiple faith traditions offer spiritual mandates for practical action to protect and nurture children. For example, passages from the Bible state, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27). In Mauritania, the Imams and Religious Leaders Network issued an official contemporary fatwa (a ruling in Islamic law) prohibiting physical violence in homes and schools<sup>7</sup> with workshops delivered in over 2,000 schools. Many religious traditions also have a long history of direct positive engagement with children around care and education, including formal service provisions such as Buddhist, Islamic, and Catholic religious schools. Concurrently, informal roles provide a social protection net for vulnerable children, especially those orphaned, poor, sick, or homeless.

*Faith communities play many roles across the continuum of the child protection system. However, they need child protection experts to develop minimum standards of care in line with new knowledge. This is also key to avoiding contributions that run parallel or in isolation to the wider system of prevention to ensure a comprehensive response. Faith actors have a potential role to play in strengthening the formal and informal child prevention system. This is an area that needs further documentation:*

(T)hey [religious leaders] are doing great works in faith communities...but they need more capacity, as most of them are doing it from their experience...(t)hey will refer to the Bible... but they also need to know that there are cases they need to refer to other stakeholders...to know their countries' laws about child abuse and neglect. They can do their bit... Most of the victims can be willing to open up to the faith leaders because of trust and they cannot open up to others like the police” (Male, Christian, Tanzania)

This practical mandate for children must also take steps to engage the root drivers that underpin violence against children. This approach is more sustainable and effective because it avoids merely a ‘rescue’ response to tackle symptoms after violence has taken place. UNICEF child protection expert Hamner<sup>8</sup> notes that faith actors’ contribute to behaviour change on harmful practices, and with service delivery at the community level. Faith actors’ responses can be particularly effective in preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect when grounded in the protective aspects of religious beliefs and practices.



### 3. BUILD UP PROTECTIVE NORMS AND BELIEFS

Faith communities can offer spiritual capital from within their traditions in the formation of protective norms, beliefs, and attitudes about how children are seen and treated. Their strength lies not merely in their ability to run programs and implement projects, but in their spiritual capital, which is overlooked. Faith-based approaches serve to develop positive connections between child protection and faith. This is done by using a child rights lens that goes beyond the secular. In doing so, the issue of child protection is connected to religious themes and sacred text reflections on dignity and justice.

Some examples of key messages emerging from diverse sacred texts include the Islamic view of children as a blessing. There is a mandate to care for orphans. While discipline is needed, harm against body and soul is prohibited.<sup>9</sup> Core tenets of Buddhism reject causing pain to others and point to a code of discipline based on mutual respect, loving kindness, and compassion. This connects to the concept that children must not be ill-treated.<sup>10</sup> Sikh scriptures also note that, “God cherishes all children and reaches out with God’s hand.” In the Bahai faith, relationships are seen to be structured through loving fellowship, consultation, and mutual respect, including family relationships where “violence towards, vilification or humiliation of husband, wife or children is not an acceptable part of family life.”<sup>11</sup> In a Hindu context, Professor Rambachan highlights the principle of the sacredness of life and the foundational principle of non-injury:

**The abuse of children and our failure to protect them from exploitation is incompatible and at variance with the most basic Hindu teachings. The Hindu teaching about the unity of existence in God and in the sacredness of life that is an expression of God is the foundation of its cardinal ethical principle, non-injury (ahimsā). .... Eradication of child abuse and child exploitation is a measure of our commitment to the core values of the Hindu tradition.<sup>12</sup>**

*Expanding existing religious categories of justice, peace, and human dignity to include children explicitly offers a way for religious communities to build a movement for change and practical collaboration on ending violence against children across faiths based on shared values:*

**Religious leaders have unique opportunities to promote non-violence through their diverse roles as teachers, theologians, leaders of worship, chairs of organisations and as community activists (Female, Interfaith, United Kingdom).**

Religious leaders should be engaged from the start as key stakeholders in multi-sector approaches. Promising faith-based approaches, such as the Tamar campaign in Kenya on sexual violence,<sup>13</sup> are re-interpreting sacred texts in light of child abuse and developing alternative religious and cultural rituals that do not endorse harmful practices. Religious structures can disseminate alternative rituals to adherents.

Religious leaders can provide the necessary moral authority to end violence against children, bridging the gap between global declarations and grassroot practices. Faith communities can build children’s capacity to internalise protective norms and spirituality, as seen in the *Learning to Live Together* program in El Salvador.<sup>14</sup>





## CHANNELS OF HOPE CHILD PROTECTION

One example of a promising faith-based approach that uses positive protective beliefs is the Channels of Hope Child Protection collaboration between World Vision and Islamic Relief Worldwide. This engages faith leaders with a model that employs the mechanisms of their specific faith, using sacred texts, religious principles, and prayer and worship to transform caring for children from a faith perspective. The aim is to engage faith leaders and their spouses on key child protection issues and to encourage them to take action with the help of their faith communities. It has worked effectively in a number of regional and religious settings to date.<sup>15</sup>

## 4. ENGAGE AND TRANSFORM PROBLEMATIC MINDSETS AND NEGATIVE BELIEFS

Despite the many positive examples and protective beliefs that exist, faith communities also perpetuate problematic mindsets about children. Local level faith engagement is often at odds with global discourse, which has created a concerning gap between policy and practice. Faith actors have the purview and legitimacy to address beliefs and bridge this gap. If this does not take place, faith actors are likely to be seen as a liability by the wider child protection sector. As a result, their spiritual contributions become increasingly marginalised.

**We need to involve faith leaders not only because they are influential but first and foremost because of underlying beliefs...in many cases, there are underlying beliefs and social norms and values that are somehow highlighted in or by the religious sector that need to be changed (Female, Interfaith, Latin American region)**

Problematic religious beliefs, often entangled with cultural patterns, continue to shape violence against children indirectly. These include but are not limited to: beliefs about the evil spirit possession of children, disability or albinism as a curse, reinforcing repressive gendered patterns such as son preference, damaging gendered beliefs about sexual purity, physical punishment seen as essential for education or discipline in the home, or requirements of child silence or obedience as a form of hierarchical respect for adults.

These are particularly problematic in light of global abuse scandals across various faith groups. These patterns are found across multiple faith traditions and continue to affect children. When underlying drivers of harm against children are perceived to be spiritual or religious (perceiving children as witches, child marriage, and corporal punishment as mandated by sacred texts) spiritual engagement becomes part of challenging root causes effectively.

Faith-based models are finding ways to use spiritual tools to challenge this root causes and to offer alternatives to teachers and parents. One effective strategy is the re-interpretation of sacred texts by those within the faith tradition.

**If a faith leader speaks about disciplining the child and uses a reference from the faith perspective like if you want to discipline a child you have to beat them. You have to thrash them according to a (sacred text) verse. So, if a faith leader says, whatever is written in the [sacred text], it may be written that way but beating a child is physical abuse. If he explains that to his congregation or society in such a way so it is not misinterpreting what is in the religious text. If faith leaders come from the religious perspective that really counts, that is really good (Female, Interfaith, Nepal)**

## TRANSFORMING BELIEFS

Corporal punishment<sup>16</sup> is one key example of an ongoing struggle for many faith communities. Faith leaders around the world have played various roles in justifying and challenging its normalisation. In Latin America, faith leader support has contributed towards national legal bans, while in South Africa, polarised positions still exist between progressive faith voices that see it as a form of violence and other faith organisations who reassert the parental right to religious freedom, including hitting children as a Biblical mandate. Amplifying progressive faith-based approaches such as the Churches' Network for Non-Violence (who now work interfaith) can help. At the grassroots level, their work engages beliefs and sacred texts across multiple faith traditions that still seek to justify physically punishing children as a divinely ordained method of discipline and learning.<sup>17</sup> Corporal punishment underpins all other forms of violence. Still, it is often normalised as a parenting tool. Whether or not parents are legally or socially permitted to hit their child has wider implications for the legal and social status of the child. A number of faith-based organisations continue to argue explicitly for their rights to use corporal punishment as a mode of parenting.<sup>18</sup>

## 5. TACKLING FAITH-RELATED ABUSES AND VIOLENT PRACTICES

The perpetration of child abuse by both religious individuals and within religious institutions continues. Cover-ups, silence, and refusals to act on reports of violence against children by faith institutions across regions and traditions show a systemic failure to respond. This perpetuates abuse and destroys trust and credibility. Capacity sharing and building is urgently needed alongside developing alternative models.

**The church needs to take responsibility for its own complicity ...a long, terrible history of abusing children... To the extent that faith organisations do not stand up against violence against women and children, they are part of the problem. (Female, Christian, South Africa)**

While recent religious declarations by leaders at the global level are an essential first step, they still require urgent translation into grassroots practice. Concerning examples exist where religion remains implicated in practices that carry out or endorse violence against children.



These include child labour in religious schools, physical abuse in religious care institutions, the killing or mutilation of children due to beliefs about witchcraft, the use of sacred texts to support harmful practices such as child marriage and Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C), which is linked to maintaining the purity of the girl child, and cases of unaddressed sexual abuse within religious institutions (or families attending religious communities).

## TACKLING SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual abuse is one high profile example of a harmful practice to be urgently addressed. Faith organisations must not merely break the culture of silence and secrecy that exists, but the often unaccountable power of religious perpetrators who find a haven for abuse in faith communities.

Promising models within faith communities for change include the Mennonite Church Committee in Dove's Nest congregational support program in the United States, the program From Darkness to Light, which equips faith leaders and is now present in several countries, and the 2015 establishment of the Safer Sikh Partnership in the UK.<sup>19</sup> Faith representatives from countries in Latin America have identified working together on this as their most urgent issue, and not as something facing one faith or denomination alone...

(T)hey organised a conference on the faith-based organisations and the sexual abuse of children and the engagement and they called it “breaking the silence” with the intention of bringing a strong message that we need to end the silence around this topic...there was a feeling that in Peru it is still very much a taboo and that faith leaders don't want to talk about it (Female, Interfaith, Latin America region)

Building institutional capacity for change requires supporting all religious actors to see child protection in their congregations as a spiritual priority, and equipping them to speak out and act with moral authority.

Faith leaders do not have to be experts to play a critical role in protecting, recognising, and referring children at risk. Sunday schools and church youth work can directly engage children around the primary prevention of abuse and offer a safe space to report abuse. Children can experience feelings of guilt and shame when abused. Faith communities must acknowledge yet challenge the validity of these feelings, rather than reinforce them. This requires faith communities remain alert to new threats, such as digital media abuse. They must also tackle historic taboos by faith leaders and communities when discussing sex with children.

Religious leaders can also play a role in engaging perpetrators within religious frames of reference. They can employ a specific language that may resonate with perpetrators of violence against children through their spiritual authority, access, and tools, such as prayer and sacred texts. Religious rituals in many traditions include components of change and forgiveness, such as the Islamic concepts of Tawbah and Rahma, and Christian notions of repentance.

They know these people, they are church leaders and God has sent them to my house today about this issue. So if I am a Christian I need to change because God has seen what I am doing is wrong...People will stand up, they say, “I was doing this and this before ... but the pastor came to me, talked to me and I am now changed” ..., for most believers, it has been working very well. (Male, Christian, Tanzania)



## 6. LEARNING TO WORK TOGETHER ACROSS FAITHS

The faith sector is not homogenous. Its transnational diversity is a source of strength. Different actors within faith communities need to identify where they can add value to the task of ending violence against children. For example, religious scholars can spend time and dialogue interpreting sacred texts in ways that uphold religious principles of child protection. Faith-based organisations can develop capacity building through trainings using existing religious structures. Also, local faith structures offer sites of safety, often as a first response, and guidance to child and family members. Faith actors must think critically about the role they are best equipped to play and be willing to partner across the faith continuum. While the need to work in alliance with other child-related actors is critical, the need for interfaith and intra-faith engagement is also important.

Interfaith engagement is rarely simple or fast. It may require overcoming deep divisions within a local community. Lessons need to be documented and shared about what works and why. Some successful bi-lateral collaborations exist. Interfaith activities need to be driven by the local context and not imposed from above. In some contexts, intra-faith engagement will be needed between different denominations. Interfaith involvement should not negate the use of specific faith structures or the engagement of specific beliefs, but should foster collaborative efforts that recognise the common challenges many faiths encounter.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting, that is massive in Egypt and that is one campaign that they both, Muslim and Christian communities, have been working united on as a lot of that is cultural and not rooted in any scriptural reality but is thought to be rooted and that is where they can have a huge impact, in sort of combating a lot of those stereotypes and messaging that perhaps by often by religious leaders themselves because part of it is changing the awareness and part of the faith community (Female, Interfaith, Egypt).

## LESSONS LEARNED FOR PRACTICE, POLICY AND RESEARCH

### FOR FAITH COMMUNITIES:

- **Tackle beliefs and practices that perpetuate violence against children.** Faith communities' spiritual capital<sup>20</sup> can tackle some of the root causes of violence against children by transforming the beliefs and practices that perpetuate these forms of violence. This contribution should be emphasised as an essential component in the global effort to eliminate violence against children.
- **Build on the mandate of faith traditions to care for children.** Most faith traditions have a mandate for practical social action and care of children. This provides the opportunity for faith communities to be key stakeholders in efforts to prevent and respond to violence against children. Local religious leaders and faith actors can play an important 'triage' role in the recognition and referral of child abuse.
- **Take the lead in breaking the silence on violence against children.** Faith communities must take the lead in breaking the silence on violence perpetrated by faith leaders. They must work to build accountability mechanisms for children to feel safe to report this abuse.



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- **Nuanced responses can emphasise the strengths of faith communities.** Faith actors globally are not homogenous. Both bad examples of perpetration and silence and good examples of action and protective norms exist. Nuanced responses amplify the positive and engage critically with the negative without falling into polarised binaries. It is ironically often when seeking to help that faith communities can also become complicit in, or at risk of violence.

## FOR FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS AND INTERFAITH NETWORKS:

- **Strengthen prevention and response:** Faith communities play many roles across the continuum of the child protection system. However, they need to be assisted by child protection experts to develop minimum standards of care and to share and build capacity to prevent and respond to violence against children. Faith-based organisations can provide capacity building for faith communities to fill gaps in knowledge and practice.
- **Broaden collaboration:** Faith actors must work together as part of a wider system, including with secular actors, to tackle the shared challenges that exist across diverse faith settings to end violence against children. These include the complex entanglement of religion and culture, the danger of a rescue lens, a narrow focus blind to religion's role in root causes, or an unwillingness to engage the ambiguity in their own sacred texts. Interfaith collaboration and intra-faith cooperation are essential to a multi-stakeholder effort to eliminate violence against children.

## FOR ACADEMIC RESEARCHERS:

- **Pracademic collaboration.** Promising models of faith engagement and leadership exist. However, academic researchers should engage in more detailed documentation of causality and sustained impact, *working collaboratively alongside practitioners and not in isolation from them*. Robust documentation is needed to avoid the marginalisation of faith within the wider sector of ending violence against children.

## ABOUT THE JOINT LEARNING INITIATIVE ON FAITH AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities (JLI) is an international collaboration of academics, practitioners, and policy makers on research and evidence around faith groups' activities in humanitarian action and development: [www.jliflc.com](http://www.jliflc.com).

### JLI ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN HUB AND CO-CHAIRS

- Dr. Carola Eyber, Institute of Global Health & Development, Queen Margaret University
- Rebeca Rios-Kohn, Arigatou International
- Neelam Fida, Islamic Relief Worldwide
- Robyn Hagan, World Vision International



JOIN the Hub: Share your learnings on faith and violence against children and shape the policy discourse with a global community of academics and practitioners, [visit http://evac.jliflc.com/](http://evac.jliflc.com/).

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- <sup>1</sup> Palm, S. and Eyber, C. (2019) 'Why faith? Engaging faith mechanisms to end violence against children.' Briefing Paper. Washington DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities Ending Violence Against Children Hub. Available at: <https://jliflc.com/resources/why-faith-engaging-faith-mechanisms-to-end-violence-against-children/>
- <sup>2</sup> The UN defines violence against children, following the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse. 'Child protection' is directly linked to this, and refers to preventing and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse against children acknowledging that these violations occur in every country and inhibit child survival and development. Violence against children is widespread, often within home and community settings and by trusted adults. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>.
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- <sup>5</sup> Ter Haar, 2011. *Religion and Development: ways of transforming the world*. Columbia: Columbia University Press
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- <sup>8</sup> Hanmer, S. 2010. Child Rights Organizations and Religious Communities: Powerful Partnerships for Children. *Crosscurrents*. September, vol. 60, no. 3, pp. 451-461.
- <sup>9</sup> Al-Azhar University and UNICEF., 2005. *Children in Islam: Their care, development and protection*. Abu Kraishah, T. et al. ed., First ed. New York: UNICEF, 1.
- <sup>10</sup> Churches' Network for Non-Violence (CNNV) and Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, (2015). *Ending corporal punishment of children – a handbook for worship and religious gatherings*. Nottingham: Churches' Network for Non-violence and Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, <http://churchesfornon-violence.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Ending-corporal-punishment-of-children-A-handbook-for-worship-and-gatherings.pdf>.
- <sup>11</sup> Momen, Moojan. *The Family in Baha'i Faith*. Iran Chamber Society, Religion in Iran. [http://www.iranchamber.com/religions/articles/bahai\\_family.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/religions/articles/bahai_family.php)
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- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>14</sup> Barros, O., (2015). *Systematic Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation of the Learning to Live Together (LTLT) Programme in El Salvador: A review of six implementing schools in Apopa, Mejicanos, and Soyapango, San Salvador*. Geneva: Arigatou International, [https://jliflc.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/El-Salvador-country-report\\_FINAL-learning-to-live-together.pdf](https://jliflc.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/El-Salvador-country-report_FINAL-learning-to-live-together.pdf).
- <sup>15</sup> Almugahed, N., Pertek, I. And Fida, N. (2017). *An integrated approach to gender-based violence and child protection: Key findings from Mali, Niger and Pakistan, 2016-2017*. Islamic Relief Worldwide, <https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/integrating-protection-integrated-approach-gender-based-violence-and-child-protection>
- <sup>16</sup> The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child describes corporal punishment as "any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light." UNCRC Committee, General Comment no.8 on the right of the child to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment, CRC/C/GC/8, June 2, 2006, [www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/co/CRC.C.GC.8.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/co/CRC.C.GC.8.pdf)
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- <sup>18</sup> Huerta, D. (2018). *Is spanking biblical*, <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/parenting-roles/to-spank-or-not-to-spank/is-spanking-biblical>.
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- <sup>20</sup> Ter Haar (2010) describes spiritual capital as containing four aspects: organisations, ideas, practices and experiences. She suggests that spiritual ideas have often been overlooked in development work. See, Ter Haar. (2011). *Religion and development: ways of transforming the world*. Columbia: Columbia University Press)