

LEARNING FROM PRACTICE:

# ENGAGING FAITH-BASED AND TRADITIONAL ACTORS IN PREVENTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Lessons from civil society organisations funded by the  
UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women on prevention



© 2021 UN Women. All rights reserved.

Produced by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women

Primary authors: Dr. Elisabet Le Roux and Dr. Selina Palm

Recommended Citation:

Le Roux, E. and Palm, S. (2021), *Learning from Practice: Engaging Faith-based and Traditional Actors in Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls* (New York, United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women).

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of UN Women, the United Nations or any of its affiliated organizations.

For more information or feedback on this product please contact the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women at [untf-evaw@unwomen.org](mailto:untf-evaw@unwomen.org).

Cover Photo: Launch of project activities in Narok, Kenya.  
Credit: CREAM, Kenya



## About the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women

The United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund) is the only global grant-making mechanism dedicated to eradicating all forms of violence against women and girls. Managed by UN Women on behalf of the United Nations system since its establishment in 1996 by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 50/166, the UN Trust Fund has awarded almost \$183 million to 572 initiatives in 140 countries and territories. In 2020, the UN Trust Fund managed a grants portfolio of 150 projects aimed at preventing and addressing violence against women and girls in 71 countries and territories across five regions, with grants totalling \$72.8 million. Grant recipients are primarily civil society organizations (CSOs). Since 2018 (cycle 20), the UN Trust Fund has been funding only CSO projects. In 2020, the majority (58 per cent) of these CSOs are women's rights organizations.

## About the learning from practice series on prevention

In this series the UN Trust Fund has prioritised engagement with what has - to date - been a fairly neglected area within research on prevention of violence against women and girls, practice based insights from civil society organisations. In 2020 it commissioned a synthesis of this knowledge emerging from 89 UN Trust Fund civil society organisation grants, implemented or closed during the period covered by its 2015-2020 Strategic Plan. Findings were captured from two types of source documents from grantees: final progress reports (written by grantees) and final evaluation reports (written by external evaluators commissioned by grantees). The first step in the series was a synthesis review and identification of common approaches or thematic areas in prevention across the 89 projects, to determine the focus of knowledge to be extracted (Le Roux and Palm, 2020). Ten key thematic areas or “**Pathways towards Prevention**” (Box 1) were identified through an inductive process including a desk review of reports and a series of consultations with grantees/practitioners in English, French and Spanish. The UN Trust Fund aims to analyse and co-create knowledge under each pathway. Each pathway has been analysed and the corresponding synthesis co-created by a researcher/s and ten grantees per pathway whose

work generated significant practice-based insights on the particular theme and who could offer contextual and embedded best practices, challenges and useful tools on the topic that emerged from iterative learning from practice. The intended audience for this brief is threefold: (i) practitioners (ii) donors and grant makers and (iii) researchers, all working in the area of EVAWG. The learning from practice series is intended to elevate practice-based insights from CSOs as highly valuable and important to planning, designing and funding interventions and research in EVAWG. Each longer synthesis review will be accompanied by a shorter, summary brief available on the UN Trust Fund website.

### BOX 1: PATHWAYS TO PREVENTION IDENTIFIED

1. Community Mobilization
2. **Engaging faith based and traditional actors**
3. Exploring intersectional approaches
4. Mobilizing Women
5. Training for behaviour change
6. Adolescent-focused approaches
7. Resistance and backlash
8. Adaptive programming
9. Working together for a survivor-centered, multisectoral response
10. Working together for law and policy implementation and reform

The intended audience for this brief is threefold: (i) practitioners (ii) donors and grant makers and (iii) researchers, all working in the area of EVAWG. The learning from practice series is intended to elevate practice-based insights from CSOs as highly valuable and important to planning, designing and funding interventions and research in EVAWG. Each longer synthesis review will be accompanied by a shorter, summary brief available on the UN Trust Fund website.

## Acknowledgements

This synthesis review was authored by Dr. Elisabet Le Roux and Dr. Selina Palm and developed by the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women, invaluable advice from civil society organisations, UN Women staff and our external advisory group members.

In particular, we would like to thank the staff from the 10 UN Trust Fund projects whose practice-based insights, reports and experience are at the heart of this synthesis review. These projects include: Alafia from Togo, Amref Health Africa from Tanzania, Children Living in Rural Areas or CLiRA from Côte d'Ivoire, Episcopal Relief and Development from Liberia, Fundación Mundubat from Colombia, Psycho-social Counseling Center for Women from the State of Palestine, Restless Development from Nepal, Sindh Community Foundation from Pakistan, Trócaire from Kenya, and Women's Support Center from Armenia. This project would not have been possible without their support and participation.

We would also like to thank our peer reviewers Lori Michau from Raising Voices, Lori Heise from Prevention Collaborative and Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of

Public Health, Elizabeth Dartnall from the Sexual Violence Research Initiative, Sandra Hollinger from the UN Trust Fund, Khamsavath Chanthavysouk and Gabrielle Henderson from UN Women EAW Section, and Gabriela Alvarez Mente from UNFPA for taking the time to review multiple drafts and provide invaluable feedback on the document. And to Andrea Badillo Perez and Danya Marx, for excellent assistance and support in the translation and synthesis of French and Spanish project documentation.

Special thanks to the project's Advisory Group – Kalliopi Mingeirou from UN Women EAW Section, Tesmerelna Atsbeha, Senior Program Officer, Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, Natsnet Ghebrebrhan from Raising Voices, Lori Heise from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Elizabeth Dartnall from Sexual Violence Research Initiative, Alice Kerr-Wilson, senior associate at Social Development Direct and mentor at The Prevention Collaborative and Monica Biradavolu from Qualanalytics. Gemma Wood, Shruti Majumdar, Daniele Elizaire and Amélie Gontharet, from the UN Trust Fund, coordinated and managed the production of the document with support from whole team.



Photo: AMREF. Girls during an activity against FGM in Tanzania.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

Engaging with faith-based and traditional actors can help or hinder the prevention of violence against women and/or girls (VAWG). On the one hand, these actors can promote beliefs, norms and practices that support and enable VAWG prevention, but, on the other hand, they can also encourage ones that hinder prevention or even encourage forms of VAWG. However, empirical evidence shows that the reach and influence of faith-based and traditional actors cannot be ignored.

This synthesis review centres the voices of key practitioners in the field and their practice-based knowledge (PBK), focusing on 10 diverse projects funded by the UN Trust Fund – their evaluations, monitoring reports and focus group discussions with project staff. The projects engaged with faith-based and traditional actors for VAWG prevention across different countries, with a wide range of actors, using multiple approaches and with differing aims. Placing this unique, diverse collection of 10 projects in conversation with each other allows rich reflections on lessons learned from practice, especially regarding **why** and **how** to engage faith-based and traditional actors in prevention.

## Key emerging themes from practice

An inductive approach explored the projects' reflections on their work with faith-based and/or traditional actors and brought to light concrete lessons on six key themes:

- The roles of faith-based and cultural belief systems in VAWG and VAWG prevention: most of the projects demonstrate that faith and culture form extremely complex long-term belief systems which shape values underpinning VAWG and are transmitted across generations.
- The roles of faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG and VAWG prevention: practitioners found these actors to hold sway over community attitudes on VAWG in at least four different ways, which makes it critical to engage with them for prevention programming: a) as

custodians of customary laws, especially in remote, or fragile, or conflict-affected contexts, where they may be the only access to justice available for women and girls; b) as influencers on social norms that underpin VAWG; c) as sacred ritual holders; and finally d) as informal or formal culture keepers.

- The importance of faith-based and traditional actors engaging with social norms for VAWG prevention: practitioners have highlighted the critical role of equipping faith-based and traditional actors to first change their own mindsets and then to be a part of challenging harmful social norms. Some projects addressed the roots of harmful practices and beliefs, by working with faith-based and traditional actors to adapt rituals surrounding underlying belief systems so that they no longer do harm to women and girls.
- Working with faith-based actors for VAWG prevention: practitioners have leveraged their unique spiritual capital in numerous ways by highlighting the value of dialogue that use existing mechanisms such as mosques, churches, sermons, prayers and engage them in the initial diagnosis of issues and in the development of tailored materials for the intervention. They have also had success in sustaining projects by engaging early with top-level religious actors in some contexts, and by engaging those who might be more supporting of gender-equal norms in some others. Also denouncing of rituals that sacralise harm to women and girls, as well as development of new rituals has had a powerful impact.
- Working with traditional actors for VAWG prevention: compared to faith leaders, traditional leaders often form less clearly-defined groups and may vary significantly from context to context. Inter-community power struggles can further complicate this reality. An initial time investment to get to know traditional actors, build trust and create ownership of the goals can go a long way: practitioners find that presence of chiefs during some activities reassured communities. Practitioners also found that traditional rituals can be

flipped around and leveraged in a positive way for enforcing VAWG prevention.

- Engaging faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention during the COVID-19 pandemic: Programming engaging these actors typically involves congregation in big groups, e.g. at the mosque or church for community meetings. While this was rendered difficult in the initial days of lockdowns, projects nonetheless leveraged the community connections of these actors to reach out to women and girls to distribute food, Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), etc. Gradually several programmes adapted to the lack of in-person meetings, some by engaging church-owned radio stations to communicate VAWG prevention messages, and some by staying in touch with faith-based and traditional actors, to continue mentoring and providing sustained support to them through phones and online platforms.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The ten UN Trust Fund projects demonstrate overall that civil society organisations (CSOs) are uniquely placed to engage faith based and traditional actors as key actors within diverse contexts and offer them opportunities to become potential allies for VAWG prevention. Part of the unique value of engaging CSOs is that they can develop tailored, coordinated and flexible responses that can be adaptive and centralise the most vulnerable in society. Different types of CSOs are diversely positioned in terms of how they can engage, having different abilities and ways of mobilising faith based and traditional actors. A set of recommendations are offered that focus on three specific groups.

**Recommendations for practitioners include,** a) understanding first how faith based systems work in practice as well as their core values in relation to VAWG as a prerequisite for effective engagement, b) recognizing that VAWG prevention requires a multi-sectoral approach with faith based and traditional actors treated as just one stakeholder amongst other actors in a wider system c) ensuring that women religious and traditional actors are meaningfully represented and involved in programme design and senior decision making (noting that women can also support patriarchy and attention is needed to which women's groups are chosen in the context and whether their

hierarchical structures may exclude more vulnerable women), d) engaging these actors around entrenched harmful social norms, and not merely with condemning practices only, and e) a positive framing (such as reclaiming core spiritual values like justice) is seen to encourage uptake and support by these groups in some contexts. Identifying and agreeing shared principles early on between the various actors can facilitate a common understanding in this respect to 'do no harm'.

**Recommendations for donors include:** a) Supporting projects that recognise and mobilise a diverse range of faith-based and traditional actors for VAWG prevention, b) ensure that the policies they enact and the funding they distribute ensures accountability of faith-based and religious actors at community-level, ideally including women's organisations; the exact nature of this accountability should to be determined at local level, not imposed, c) advocate for grant-making policies and funding for adaptive long-term VAWG prevention programmes. Funders must enable programming that builds in the time needed to work effectively with these actors, allowing for capacity building of project staff, with flexibility to ensure that programming is context-appropriate from the start.

This synthesis review has contributed to, and revealed, **a number of important areas that require more research:** a) on the specific role of traditional actors on VAWG prevention, b) on the powerful role of rituals, practices and ceremonies in VAWG prevention, c) on how to engage with oral traditions, especially in low literacy settings, d) on how different kinds of civil society organisations can most effectively engage with faith based and traditional actors for VAWG prevention. While this synthesis review has showcased the approaches of faith-based organisations, women's organisations, INGOs and youth organisations, there remains a dearth in literature on this, especially on how partnerships can be formed by CSOs seeking to position this type of engagement as part of multi-sector VAWG prevention.

# CONTENTS

---

Lessons from civil society organisations funded by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women on prevention	1
About the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women	3
About the learning from practice series on prevention	3
Acknowledgements	3
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>5</b>
Introduction	5
Key emerging themes from practice	5
Conclusions and recommendations	6
<b>ABBREVIATIONS</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>9</b>
1.1 Engaging faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention	9
1.2 Case study selection	11
1.3 Inductive methodology	12
<b>2. KEY THEMATIC LESSONS EMERGING FROM PRACTICE</b>	<b>13</b>
2.1 The roles of faith-based and cultural belief systems in VAWG and VAWG preventions	13
2.2 The roles of faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG and VAWG prevention	17
2.3 The importance of faith-based and traditional actors engaging with social norms for VAWG prevention	20
2.4 Working with faith-based actors for VAWG prevention	24
2.5 Working with traditional actors for VAWG prevention	28
2.6 Engaging faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention during the COVID-19 pandemic	31
<b>3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>34</b>
3.1 Recommendations for practitioners	35
3.2 Recommendations for policymakers and donors	37
3.3 Recommendations for the broader EAWG research field	38
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>40</b>

# ABBREVIATIONS

---

<b>AIDS</b>	acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
<b>CLiRA</b>	Children's Life in Rural Area
<b>COVID-19</b>	coronavirus disease 2019
<b>CSO</b>	civil society organization
<b>EVAWG</b>	ending violence against women and/or girls
<b>FBO</b>	faith-based organization
<b>FGD</b>	focus group discussion
<b>FGM/C</b>	female genital mutilation/cutting
<b>GBV</b>	gender-based violence
<b>HIV</b>	human immunodeficiency virus
<b>LGBTIQ</b>	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organization
<b>PBK</b>	practice-based knowledge
<b>PSCCW</b>	Psycho-social Counseling Center for Women
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>SRHR</b>	sexual and reproductive health and rights
<b>VAWG</b>	violence against women and/or girls



# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Engaging faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention

**Faith-based and traditional actors are increasingly recognized as key actors in the prevention of violence against women and/or girls (VAWG)** and crucial to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 by 2030 (Ba et al., 2020). Their ability to engage and facilitate dialogue at community, local government and state levels means that mobilization of these actors can have far-reaching impact (Soremekun, 2020). Global, regional, national and local agencies and organizations increasingly choose to engage and/or partner with faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention interventions (African Union, 2019; Soremekun, 2020). However, research on the roles of faith-based and, especially, traditional actors in VAWG prevention is limited. This synthesis review assists in addressing this gap in VAWG prevention evidence.

**Distinguishing between spiritual capital, social capital and access capital is one way of understanding the various contributions of faith-based and traditional actors to**

**VAWG prevention.** **Access capital** highlights the role of faith-based and traditional actors as gatekeepers, such that they have the ability to provide access to a particular community to those initiating VAWG interventions in the community (Palm and Eyber, 2019). **Social capital** refers to the “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19), and involves faith-based and traditional actors leveraging their community connections to support (or resist) VAWG prevention. Finally, working with faith-based and traditional actors’ **spiritual capital** involves drawing on unique forms of faith-based resources and authority (Ter Haar, 2011; Palm and Eyber, 2019). The actors can use these spiritual assets and their authority for VAWG prevention. This threefold typology of the various ways in which the role of faith-based and traditional actors can be leveraged for VAWG interventions, illustrated in Figure 1, provides a useful framework within which practitioner insights can be understood (Palm and Eyber, 2019). Owing to the inductive approach followed in this synthesis review (see section 1.3), this typology was not applied when analysing the data; rather, it serves as a useful tool for understanding what emerged from practitioner learning.

FIGURE 1

Levels of capital associated with contribution of faith-based and traditional actors to VAWG prevention



Source: adapted from Palm and Eyber, 2019

Some of the projects explored in this synthesis review engaged with faith-based and traditional actors across all three levels of capital, while others limited their engagement to one or two. There is no one “right” level, and practitioners must consider carefully where their organizations are best equipped to engage and what is needed in their context.

**The roles, impact and authority of faith-based and traditional actors draw on two key, often interrelated, areas – religion and culture –** that underpin many interconnected factors that drive VAWG (Heise, 2011). Faith-based and traditional actors frequently shape and influence community norms, sanctions and practices, meaning that they can help, but may also hinder, VAWG prevention. On the one hand, they can support heteropatriarchal norms, beliefs and practices that drive VAWG (Le Roux et al., 2020). Cultural and faith-based beliefs can be interpreted as perpetuating patriarchy, justifying violence at family and community levels, and reinforcing gendered social norms (Teffo-Menziwa et al., 2010; Petersen, 2016; Le Roux, 2019). On the other hand, faith-based and traditional actors can play a powerful social role in mobilizing communities, promote beliefs and norms that ensure women’s and girls’ safety, and mobilize customary legal frameworks for women’s protection (Teffo-Menziwa et al., 2010; Vaughan et al., 2020). Therefore, they can be key actors in promoting the beliefs, norms and practices that contribute to VAWG prevention.

**Engaging with faith-based and traditional actors is a component of comprehensive VAWG prevention.** However, such engagement can be extremely challenging for practitioners, partly because of the wide range of faith-based and cultural beliefs, as well as the different kinds of faith-based and traditional actors in any community. Faith-based and cultural systems are often enmeshed in complex ways (Le Roux and Palm, 2018), and some settings have multiple religions and/or multiple cultures that may be in tension with one another.

**This synthesis review aims to increase our understanding of why and how to engage faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention.** By drawing on the experiences of 10 VAWG prevention projects that have undertaken this engagement in 10 different countries and contexts, and by documenting the tacit knowledge from project front lines, the synthesis review showcases some of the unique contributions that CSOs can make to VAWG prevention by

engaging with faith-based and/or traditional actors (and the systems they represent). By drawing on the practice-based knowledge (PBK) of these practitioners, the review also contributes to the decolonization of VAWG knowledge and research, and highlights the importance of bringing diverse and historically marginalized voices into the conversation for better integration of research and programming worldwide (Faris and Jayasekara, 2019).

Furthermore, **existing evidence on engaging faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention is limited and has a number of critical gaps**, for example a geographical bias, with the majority of research on this topic being conducted in Africa; a lack of global research on engaging traditional actors in their own right in VAWG prevention; and limited research on promising approaches around mobilizing spiritual capital for VAWG prevention. This review helps to bridge these gaps by offering a data set with regional diversity and contributes to an increased, enriched understanding of engaging faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention. It also aims to provide some practical tips and recommendations for donors and practitioners engaging such actors in their VAWG interventions.

#### KEY DEFINITIONS

**Faith-based actors** for the purpose of this synthesis review includes any individual or organisation that organizes and acts based on religious identification and motivation. This includes formal and informal religious leaders (and their diverse institutional and ritualized components), faith-based organizations (FBOs) working in a community and also influential members of a faith-based community.

**Traditional actors** are those who are active and take leadership roles in a community based on traditional authority structures. Such actors can be formal, including chiefs and traditional healers, or informal, such as elders, mothers-in-law and aunts. They all have the power and authority to make decisions in extended families and/or the community (Mojapele et al., 2011).

A **belief system** is a set of principles that forms the basis of a religion or culture.

**African traditional religion** encompasses all African beliefs and practices that are considered faith-based, excluding Christianity and Islam (MacGaffey, 2012).

## 1.2 Case study selection

**At the heart of this synthesis review are practitioner insights from 10 CSO projects working on VAW prevention, funded by the UN Trust Fund.** The projects offer a diverse cross section of examples that seek to be generally representative of the breadth of work in the field that engages with faith-based and traditional actors. They were also selected because the annual project reports and final evaluation reports (submitted to the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund) over the 2015–2020 strategic plan period) contained specific insights from their practical experiences of engaging faith-based and/or traditional actors in VAWG prevention. Placing this unique, diverse collection of 10 projects in conversation with each other allows rich reflections on lessons learned from practice, especially regarding why and how to engage faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention.

**The 10 projects were conducted in 10 countries, offering wide geographical diversity, with projects from Africa, South-East and Central Asia, Latin America and the Middle East included.** Five of the projects were rolled out in different parts of Africa – reflecting the tendency (already seen in the global literature) for engaging with faith-based and traditional actors to be a strategy deployed more frequently to date in African contexts. However, there is also significant diversity in these African projects. The development organization Children’s Life in Rural Area (CLiRA) in Côte d’Ivoire and the women’s rights organization Alafia in Togo offer important francophone insights that help to address the bias towards anglophone research. Both also focus on traditional actors, indirectly showcasing the underlying roles of African traditional religion as an influential belief system that, to date, has often been inadequately explored in the literature. Projects were also intentionally selected from parts of the world where research is rarely done on engaging faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention. For example, the Women’s Support Center in Armenia and the Psycho-social Counseling Center for Women (PSCCW) in the State of Palestine offer insights into geographical contexts that rarely feature in the current global literature on engaging faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention.

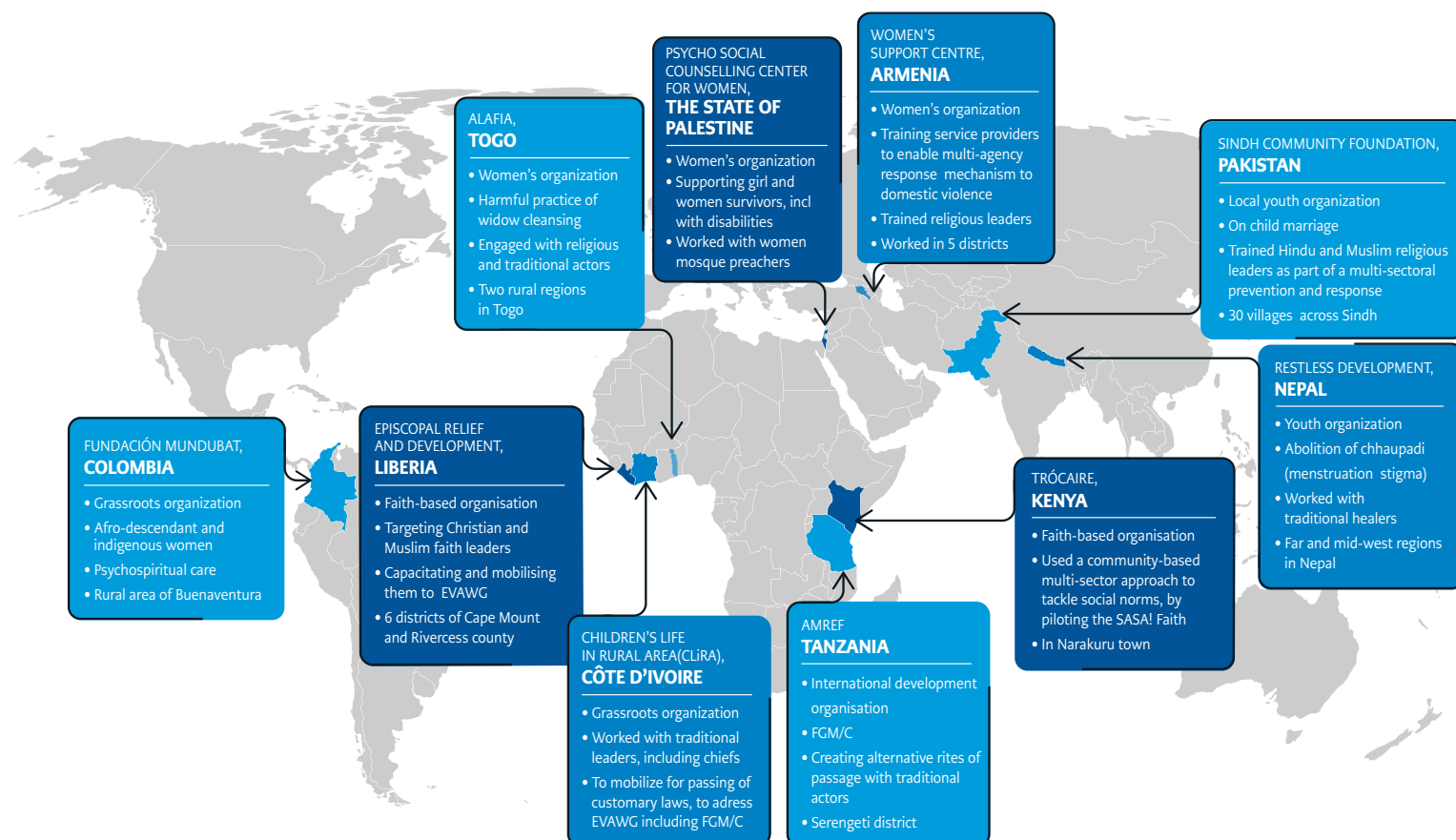
**The selected projects also reflect a range of CSO types.** Three CSOs self-identify as women’s organizations, two as FBOs, two as youth organizations and three as development organizations. These different identities allowed for unique modes of and opportunities for engagement. For example,

both Episcopal Relief and Development in Liberia and Catholic organization Trócaire in Kenya were able to build on their existing credibility as long-term FBOs that hold a specific religious identity (Anglican and Catholic, respectively) with local faith institutions. However, having the same faith-based or cultural identity is not a requirement for engagement with faith-based and traditional actors. Youth organizations Restless Development in Nepal and Sindh Community Foundation in Pakistan also adopted strategies to work directly with a range of faith-based and traditional actors in their wider projects because of the impact of spiritual beliefs on the harmful practices they were seeking to address – *chhaupadi* (menstruation stigma) and early and forced marriage, respectively. This typological diversity is an important contribution, as it shows that it is not only FBOs that adopt strategies around working with faith-based and traditional actors for VAWG prevention. It also shows the diversity of CSOs in particular, and the unique roles that actors in this specific sector can play in engaging faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention when situated on a comprehensive prevention/response continuum. For example, Fundación Mundubat in Colombia worked closely with local partner Red Mariposas to target indigenous women and women of African descent who were VAWG survivors and whose spirituality played a positive role in their healing, resilience and ability to walk away from entrenched, ongoing cycles of violence.

**Finally, the 10 organizations varied significantly in terms of grant size, project length and the levels at which their VAWG programming worked** in terms of individual, relational, social and institutional levels. For example, Alafia, a women’s organization in Togo, received a small grant (defined by the UN Trust Fund as a grant under \$150,000) focused entirely on ending one harmful practice, related to widowhood inheritance issues, by engaging primarily with African traditional leaders, while Amref Health Africa – Tanzania (Amref) received a much larger grant to work comprehensively with many stakeholders on ending female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) in Serengeti. However, both had a similar goal, which was to sustainably eliminate a specific harmful practice in their context and to develop alternative spiritual community rituals to replace current harmful ones. Details on the goals, the forms of violence they aimed to eliminate, the approaches and the results of the 10 projects can be found in the Appendix to the synthesis review on the UN Trust Fund website.

**FIGURE 2:**

**The ten UN Trust Fund projects included in this synthesis review that engaged faith-based and traditional actors**



## 1.3 Inductive methodology

**This synthesis review focuses on surfacing (mining, analysing and synthesizing) practice-based insights relevant for engaging faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention.** An inductive approach was taken to explore the why and how of engaging with faith-based and traditional actors, using selected documentation (monitoring and evaluation reports) from these 10 projects. While an overarching question (“What can we learn from projects that have engaged faith-based or traditional actors or leaders and their institutions in VAWG prevention?”) guided the whole process, the synthesis review does not aim to answer pre-decided research questions in a deductive way; rather, it opens up space for diverse practitioner priorities and reflections to take centre stage. Therefore, while further guiding questions were developed as the process evolved, the themes explored and insights emerging in this synthesis review were strongly determined by the Practice-

Based Knowledge (PBK) in project reports. This does mean, however, that information is lacking where historical project documentation did not discuss certain issues or gaps were left in their reflections. The main process (document review) was complemented by a brief review of other literature, as well as three focus group discussions (FGDs) with representatives of the 10 projects. The first two FGDs collected data, with new insights emerging from the representatives of the 10 projects. The third validated the preliminary lessons learned that had been synthesized. For more on this methodological approach and the FGD guides, see the Appendix to the synthesis review on the UN Trust Fund website. The themes (directly shaped by practitioner insights) that emerged were used to structure the synthesis review. The conclusions include a set of tailored recommendations for practitioners, policymakers and funders, and researchers working in the field of ending violence against women and/or girls (EVAWG).



## 2. KEY THEMATIC LESSONS EMERGING FROM PRACTICE

Six key themes, discussed in the following subsections, emerged inductively from the insights of practitioners as they implemented UN Trust Fund-funded intervention activities with faith-based and traditional actors: the roles of faith-based and cultural belief systems in VAWG and VAWG prevention (section 2.1); the roles of faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG and VAWG prevention (section 2.2); the importance of faith-based and traditional actors engaging with social norms (section 2.3); practical strategies for working with faith-based actors for VAWG prevention (section 2.4); practical strategies for working with traditional actors for VAWG prevention (section 2.5); and engaging these actors in VAWG prevention during the COVID-19 pandemic (section 2.6).

At the start of each of the six thematic sections, there is a box featuring a short discussion of literature findings related to the theme. These are not comprehensive overviews but are meant to introduce and accompany the practitioner-led insights and examples, and also to show how current literature can be complemented, extended and, at times, challenged by insights from practitioners.

### 2.1 The roles of faith-based and cultural belief systems in VAWG and VAWG prevention

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

An emerging focus on faith-based and traditional actors has been seen in both VAWG research and VAWG practice in recent decades (Petersen, 2016; Ba et al., 2020). However, belief systems have not often received the same attention (Ter Haar, 2011). A systems approach meets two critical gaps in knowledge: (1) understanding why faith-based and traditional actors are viewed as important to the VAWG research field, which requires a deeper understanding of

the underlying belief systems of which they are just one component and from which they often get their influence (Ter Haar, 2011), and (2) understanding the unique spiritual capital that these systems hold and the practical roles that this can play in both the perpetuation of, or the challenging of, violence (Palm and Eyber, 2019). Research suggests faith-based and traditional systems can add value to VAWG prevention efforts at many levels, but may have the strongest impact when ways to harness their unique spiritual capital in collaboration with their existing belief systems are found (Palm and Eyber 2019). Underlying belief and value systems are also identified as a root cause of VAWG when they support the patriarchal beliefs and systems that promote and sustain men's power over women (Le Roux and Palm, 2018; Palm, 2020).

**Religions and cultures form comprehensive, long-term belief systems that shape individual and communal values underpinning VAWG and are frequently transmitted across generations.** These beliefs play a cross-cutting influencing role in many aspects of social life, as shown by insights from practitioners. For example, in Pakistan, insights from youth organization Sindh Community Foundation showed that marriage is viewed as both a faith-based ritual and a family matter rooted in tradition and is not seen primarily as a legal contract. Partly as a result of this framing, child marriage remains endemic despite the existence of laws to criminalize it. Such beliefs, for example, that sacred texts allow or require marriage once a girl enters puberty can be used to justify this form of child abuse by making it sacred (sacralizing it) in entrenched existing belief systems.

**The underpinning roles that belief systems can play in perpetuating VAWG emerged as especially prominent in projects working on various harmful practices embedded at community level.** For example, in Nepal a harmful practice





Photo: Restless Development Nepal. Community group members together working to end the harmful traditional practice of Chhaupadi in Nepal.

called *chhaupadi* (menstruation stigma) remains deeply embedded in both cultural and faith-based beliefs. Spiritual beliefs and social fears are connected to its perpetuation; for example, beliefs that a menstruating woman touching a tap will pollute water, or a menstruating girl drinking milk will offend the goddess and negatively affect household livestock, show the direct connections made between spiritual beliefs and harmful practices. This places a burden on women and girls in practice, who become “spiritual scapegoats” in the community in ways that a health campaign alone cannot adequately speak to. Changing the monthly forced removal of women and girls from the safety of their homes to sleep out in the cold and the risks that accompany this requires direct engagement with the purity aspects of belief systems.

It may be impossible to fully address the roots of many harmful practices **until the connection to the sacred is spoken about, disconnected or remapped (desacralized) and the underlying beliefs are adapted** so that they no longer do harm to women and girls. Without this systems-level step, practitioner insights suggest that there is a danger that practices will merely go underground, and faith-based and cultural resistance may reverse any progress made. The youth organization Restless Development in Nepal has shown that the desacralization of menstruation stigma must involve those who are viewed as authoritative to tackle these beliefs about purity. It engaged local faith-based experts fully

in these discussions and framed the need for change in the light of already accepted idea that faith beliefs should be life-giving. This illustrates how faith-based systems possess unique spiritual capital that can be used to justify harm or to support VAWG prevention.

**Traditional actors sometimes ground their cultural authority in spiritual beliefs, which can give an impression that culture is immutable** (see section 2.5). These two systems – cultural systems and faith-based systems – can play interconnected roles in maintaining harmful beliefs about tradition and passing practices on to new generations in fixed ways, rather than recognizing the changing nature of cultural and faith-based traditions. This can lend an aura of spiritual morality to harmful practices across contexts, as was seen around menstruation stigma in Nepal, FGM/C in Tanzania and harmful widowhood practices in Togo, which were all, in some way, framed as “cleansing” ceremonies by communities. It is precisely because of this positioning of these harmful forms of VAWG that spiritually authoritative systems need to be engaged with.

**Some organizations may refuse to engage with faith-based and traditional actors (where relevant to the project context) because of their entanglement in perpetration of VAWG;** however, this may have negative implications for their other VAWG prevention strategies, as

insights from practitioners across different regions noted in FGDs. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, CSO partner CLIRA noted that earlier government attempts to eliminate FGM/C by bypassing faith-based and traditional systems and taking a law enforcement approach only had failed to be supported by local people, including women themselves, who all feared negative repercussions from the ancestors. In the light of this failure, CLIRA's innovative approach instead placed grassroots engagement with faith-based and traditional actors at the centre of their EVAWG approach to FGM/C.

**The potential of spiritual capital was seen in the projects through critical engagement with sacred texts as well as with sacred rituals, especially around harmful practices.**

In areas with low literacy, where most people are unable to read the sacred texts themselves, sacred rituals often form a cornerstone of popular beliefs. In some traditions such as African traditional religion, rituals and ceremonies may also be more authoritative than sacred texts. Widows who refuse to undergo traditional sexual cleansing ceremonies considered to be offending the gods and disrespecting the ancestors, meaning that many internalize fears of spiritual reprisals and therefore do not resist the practice. This was recognized by Alafia in Togo, where practitioners noted “*we consider that the customs are established by the ancestors and guarded by gods ... even if modern law allows widows the right to refuse widowhood ceremonies, this right becomes void before women who fear reprisals from ancestral divinities*” (Alafia, final report (translated).

**Understanding and unlearning internalization of harmful beliefs and values is a crucial area that needs more investment** by all stakeholders involved in VAWG prevention, especially because it calls into question the victim–perpetrator binary. Potentially harmful interpretations of beliefs were internalized by many male and female stakeholders, such as menstruating girls, widows, female FGM/C practitioners and traditional healers, in a number of the projects. These internalized interpretations underpin the continuation of harmful social norms, which complicates VAWG prevention interventions. If harmful beliefs are internalized, everyone in the system can become complicit or entangled. In Nepal, for example, practitioner insights from Restless Development showed that mothers, mothers-in-law, grandmothers, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) teachers often played active roles in maintaining harmful social norms and practices because of their underlying beliefs rooted in the fear of sin and being punished, and a belief that these

practices had supernatural implications. The internalization of harmful beliefs by women and girls themselves must also be taken seriously. For example, in Tanzania, some girls whose parents refused FGM/C resorted to dangerous methods of performing FGM/C on themselves with razor blades (self-cutting) because of their internalized beliefs, or a desire to conform to social norms (addressed in section 2.3).

**This highlights the need to desacralize beliefs about female health, purity and value that can underpin and justify certain harmful practices.**

In Nepal, a 16-year-old girl from Kanchanpur shared how her internalized belief that she “deserved” to be punished when menstruating for being religiously “impure” was able to shift only when she listened directly to faith-based experts who engaged with Restless Development in the training sessions that it ran. It was only when her religious fears were taken into consideration that she felt confident in challenging her family’s justification for isolating her in an unsafe hut every month as an accepted practice:

---

*“I used to think that bearing all this discrimination is normal and natural for a female, but after joining sessions...I know that menstruation is part of sexual reproductive health and its normal process. It’s not (a) crime so there is no need to punish ourselves. Then I started to convince my mother to allow me to live inside (the) home during menstruation” (Restless Development, final evaluation report).*

---

The purity/punishment aspect of the belief system in Nepal also shapes the behaviour and attitudes of faith-based and traditional actors, especially when traditional healers are seen as local doctors. While Restless Development reported success in its work with traditional healers on understanding the health implications of *chhaupadi*, it recognized that underlying beliefs that shape entrenched social norms needed more work, and time to deconstruct what it called “purity myths” about menstruation. It noted that

---

*“the perception of ‘menstruation as a symbol of impurity’ remains deeply embedded in the cultural psyche of the community and requires innovative approaches to directly challenge these social norms” (Restless Development, final evaluation report).*

---

These beliefs were reproduced in each home and community during festivities and worship.

The refusal of faith-based and traditional actors **to carry out rituals that sacralize harming women and girls has had a powerful impact, as well as their development of new sacred rituals** to detangle the harmful ideological nexus between culture, politics and religion on issues such as FGM/C and child marriage. A number of practitioners noted in FGDs that these rituals often carry unique weight with parents, families, girls and community leaders. For example, in Tanzania, a public declaration was made by traditional leaders to “desanctify” FGM/C rituals and show that FGM/C is not required by religious tradition. Female circumcisers ceremoniously downed their tools and developed alternative rites of passage ceremonies, which enabled girls to receive affirmation in ways that aligned with health and human rights concerns and prevented additional forms of VAWG.

**Faith-based systems are not only entangled with cultural systems in changing ways, but can also collide with politics, often forming a harmful ideological nexus that discriminates against women.** For example, in the State of Palestine, the PSSCW notes that religion can be misused as an “umbrella” for patriarchal culture or to support political interests in keeping women away from public life or from resisting abuse or forced marriage. Detangling religious mandates from cultural traditions is important to ensure that faith-based justifications are not misused by other institutions to keep people fearful and compliant. But there is not only one way in which religions interact with socio-political contexts. Practitioner insights also emphasize the danger of making over-simplistic binary divides between religion and culture, which was often imposed as part of a Western missionary colonization. For example, in Colombia, indigenous and Afro-Colombian practices have psychological and spiritual links with each other, where something that is described as cultural is also a spiritual practice.

**Faith-based and cultural belief systems can influence group cohesion and become resources for VAWG prevention.** These systems can play a positive role even without leadership engagement. For example, religious calendars can contain communal spiritual rituals that can provide opportunities for VAWG prevention. Belief systems can also provide healing and support directly to women. For example, in designing their support strategy for VAWG survivors in Colombia, Fundación Mundubat drew on

indigenous and Afro-Colombian rituals, by recalling and reclaiming ancestral practices. Women were encouraged to recall what their mothers and grandmothers taught them about ways of healing the body and spirit. Water, rivers and medicinal plants were all integrated into psychospiritual, culturally relevant accompaniment for VAWG survivors. Drawing on these ancient, indigenous practices not only allowed the women to heal from the trauma of violence but also strengthened their cultural identity and sense of self. The communal practice of *el comadreo* resulted from this recovery of ancestral practices. *Comadreo* is a meeting of women in the community, where a safe space is created in which women can share experiences, support each other and reinforce the bonds and trust between them, and it was a key element in generating and strengthening the VAWG protection networks among the women in the villages. This bottom-up approach encouraged “ordinary” women to use traditional practices as empowering, healing rituals. They did not need traditional leaders present to do so. The psychospiritual work by Fundación Mundubat also highlights how religion and culture should not necessarily be understood as separate belief systems. While these women drew on ancient cultural rituals, these rituals also have spiritual meaning. Remembering and reclaiming ancestral cultural-religious practices as a positive way of strengthening existing survivor support pathways is rarely discussed in existing VAWG evidence. The work in Colombia illustrates the power of cultural rituals with spiritual undertones in bringing healing and change to VAWG survivors.



### KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Faith-based and cultural systems include sacred texts and rituals that are transmitted across generations. These require attention in themselves as underlying value systems that impact VAWG norms and practices, and should not be reduced to individual actors.
- Harmful faith-based and cultural beliefs can be internalized by all, including women and girls, complicating the notion of a simple victim–perpetrator binary in relation to VAWG. It may be impossible to fully address the roots of many harmful practices until connections to the sacred are spoken about, disconnected or remapped so that they no longer do harm to women and girls.
- Some belief systems and their rituals can play positive roles in the lives of women by helping them to develop resilience and heal as VAWG survivors in ways that can empower them.

## 2.2 The roles of faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG and VAWG prevention

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Faith-based actors can play a wide range of roles in a community: as important service delivery agents for communities in need, especially in the general areas of health and education; by providing emotional, spiritual and physical resources to people in the community; and through socializing community members and creating group cohesion through common beliefs and ethical values (Leonard, 2004; Murray-Swank and Pargament, 2005; Gifford, 2008). Many people turn to faith leaders for support during challenging times (Bradley, 2010) and faith leaders have been proven to influence not only their followers, but the community and its social norms more broadly (Le Roux et al., 2020). As such, faith-based actors can be a strategic entry point into a community for VAWG interventions, and the link between social norms change and faith-based engagement can be mobilized for VAWG prevention (Le Roux et al., 2020).

Traditional actors are often influential at community level too, although in some communities their influence has diminished (e.g. because of emigration and immigration)

(Valerio and Butt, 2020). In settings where the authority and reach of government structures are limited, traditional actors can become a crucial part of organizing people at a local level (Mojapele et al., 2011). These actors emphasize the importance of culture and heritage, creating social cohesion and harmony in the process, and through customary legal systems and community dialogues they may seek to dispense justice and give guidance on acceptable social norms and practices (Teffo-Menziwa et al., 2010; Chimatiro et al., 2020). This can be leveraged for VAWG prevention (Valerio and Butt, 2020).

However, faith-based and traditional actors do not necessarily promote VAWG prevention. On the contrary, they often inherit heteropatriarchal assumptions and structures and can promote gendered leadership hierarchies, taboos around sex-related matters that can fuel silence on VAWG. They can also promote the teaching and interpretation of sacred texts that justify gender inequality religiously, and resist attempts to address gender inequality and VAWG (Le Roux and Palm, 2018; Le Roux, 2019; Vaughan et al., 2020). Many traditional actors also promote patriarchal cultural beliefs and practices that put women and girls at risk of violence (Chikombero, 2011). While engaging with faith-based and traditional actors is a component of comprehensive VAWG prevention, there is currently limited research and evidence on how VAWG prevention projects have navigated this complexity.

### **Practitioner learning from the 10 projects highlighted that religion and culture both have significant social capital that can be leveraged for VAWG prevention interventions.**

Episcopal Relief and Development experienced this first-hand in Liberia. It worked with the Inter-Faith-based Council of Liberia, and the Muslim and Christian leaders from this council in turn used their position and influence to train and mobilize other faith leaders and actors at district and local level. These local-level faith-based actors had various existing faith platforms and infrastructures (sermons, Sunday schools, scripture sessions, church camps, couples' counselling, savings and loans groups, religious youth groups, etc.) at their disposal, which were used to disseminate VAWG prevention messages. CLiRA in Côte d'Ivoire organized a regional workshop on FGM/C with a range of stakeholders, including key traditional leaders such as the President of the National Chamber of Traditional Kings and Chiefs. This workshop prompted him to become personally involved in awareness-raising activities among traditional leaders,

and traditional leaders' support for eradicating FGM/C was instrumental in getting communities to accept that this illegal practice has to end.

While a wide range of faith-based and traditional actors can play roles in VAWG prevention, **faith-based and traditional leaders often have a particular gatekeeping and formally influential role** that can be authoritative for communities. Echoing existing evidence as discussed above, practitioner learning from the 10 projects included in this synthesis review repeatedly referenced faith-based and traditional leaders' authority, wide reach and existing platforms and how these make them particularly suited to mobilizing communities for change. It is worth noting that this gatekeeper influence can reach further than what is often considered the official domain of a traditional or faith leader. In Liberia, work with (predominantly male) faith leaders was an entry point into working with other groups such as women and young people, including male and female young people in schools. Faith leaders trained and raised awareness around the need to end VAWG, which not only legitimized, but also further educated and mobilized women and young people to advocate around the issue. This led, for example, to faith leaders and Episcopal Relief and Development engaging the Ministry of Education in the implementation of a gender-based violence (GBV) code of conduct in schools.

Practitioners found, however, that **while faith-based and traditional actors have important platforms, they do not necessarily use their reach and influence for VAWG prevention**. In Kenya, for example, Trócaire found that the patriarchal beliefs of some faith leaders made it hard for these leaders to unequivocally promote VAWG prevention. Some faith leaders believe that they have a neutral role and that they are picking sides if they expose men as perpetrators of violence; other faith leaders do not want to single women out as especially deserving of support, and prefer to talk about violence in general, rather than VAWG specifically. Organizations have found different ways of dealing with this (explored in section 2.4).

**Some faith-based and traditional actors may actively oppose the VAWG prevention agenda, even when approached to partner for VAWG prevention.** For example, the Women's Support Center in Armenia was unable to train priests in the seminary on domestic violence, after being denied access by senior leaders in the church. The organization ascribes this refusal to the anti-gender

agenda prevalent across Armenia and ultra-conservative developments in the church itself. This resistance and backlash is not limited to Armenia, but it can have different drivers depending on the context. In Tanzania, for example, Amref found that cutters (women performing FGM/C) often resist efforts to end FGM/C, as it would deny them income and status. Furthermore, VAWG prevention is often associated with issues or terms that are seen as controversial or taboo in communities, such as women's rights; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) issues; and SRHR issues, which can drive faith-based and traditional actors' refusal to engage with certain organizations for VAWG prevention. VAWG prevention must therefore be handled sensitively to avoid putting women at risk. As one FGD participant explained:

---

*"Gender has been associated with homosexuality and so the word gender was a huge problem for us. And people and religious groups still cringe at the word ... We have to avoid that word altogether. "Feminism" is another word that we have to avoid. The whole issue of LGBTIQ is also not to be touched upon ... When I met with the head of the [religious group], he wanted to know [immediately] if we were a feminist group ... If we promote LGBTIQ rights. And you know, it was sort of like a censorship" (FGD, 1 December 2020).*

---

**Practitioners argue strongly for the importance of engaging faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention**, even when this poses significant challenges. Insights from diverse practitioners across different regions highly suggest that organizations' refusal to engage with faith-based and traditional actors because of their involvement in VAWG perpetration may have negative implications for other VAWG prevention strategies. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, CLiRA noted that earlier government attempts to eliminate FGM/C by bypassing faith-based and traditional systems and taking a law enforcement approach only were not supported by community members. Engagement with faith-based and traditional actors was needed to overcome community members' opposition.

**When working with faith-based and traditional actors, time and sustained engagement are required for VAWG prevention to be successful.** Practitioners from Nepal, Liberia



and Kenya emphasized the need for long-term programming to address and transform the beliefs and norms that drive VAWG. Both individual-level and community-level change require ongoing discussions, meetings, training, mentoring and guidance over an extended period of time – otherwise change is rarely sustainable.

#### KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- The unique authority and platforms of faith-based and traditional actors can, in different ways, be leveraged for VAWG prevention.
- Faith-based and traditional actors can be widely influential beyond their perceived sphere of influence, but they do not necessarily use their influence for VAWG prevention and can actively promote harmful beliefs, norms and practices. Even though it is challenging to work with faith-based and traditional actors, refusing to do so may jeopardize VAWG prevention strategies.
- Working with faith-based and traditional actors for VAWG prevention requires strategic planning, time and sustained engagement if entrenched underlying beliefs are to be discussed sensitively.



Photo: Sindh Community Foundation.  
Sindh Community Foundation advocacy and skills training to curb early marriages in Pakistan.

## 2.3 The importance of faith-based and traditional actors engaging with social norms for VAWG prevention

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Global research shows that social norms impact women's and girls' vulnerability to violence (Valerio and Butt, 2020). Social norms are "behavioural rules shared by people in a given society or group; they define what is considered 'normal' and appropriate behaviour for that group" (Cislaghi and Heise, 2016, p. 4). Transforming harmful social norms is recognized as critical in tackling patriarchy as a root cause of VAWG. Shifting social norms requires that interventions "create new beliefs in an individual's reference group ... to allow new behaviours to emerge" (Heise and Manji, 2016, p. 2).

Faith-based and traditional actors have been identified as important influencers of social norms that lead to VAWG prevention (Valerio and Butt 2020). But, they are also important because in many settings faith-based and traditional beliefs underpin the formation and following of wider social norms (Le Roux and Palm, 2018; Palm, 2020). In recent years, VAWG researchers have used the image of a tree to demonstrate how faith-based and/or traditional beliefs, social norms, and practices of VAWG, such as child marriage, are connected (Le Roux and Palm, 2018). Faith-based and traditional beliefs and values form the roots, shaping accepted social norms which form the trunk; and leading to a range of harmful practices of VAWG, which can be thought of as poisonous fruit (Le Roux and Palm, 2018; Palm, 2020). This draws attention to the connections between gendered beliefs, norms and practices of VAWG and the need to tackle patriarchy, a fundamental social root cause of VAWG, for sustainable change (Karam, 2015). To prevent VAWG by shifting harmful social norms that normalize certain forms of violence, engagement with faith-based and traditional beliefs that help form, justify or transform these norms is required. If this engagement takes place, evidence suggests that faith-based approaches can play important roles in building momentum through increasing the capacity of positive spiritual "champions" for change on various VAWG issues, without suggesting they are perfect role models (Le Roux and Bartelink, 2017; Le Roux and Palm, 2018). One area that needs more work

is how to connect the language of social norms (common in VAWG prevention literature) with the language used by those working with faith-based and traditional actors, which tends to focus more on shared beliefs and values. Furthermore, more work is needed to make synergies between human rights and faith-based and cultural discourses to forge a common platform for action (Collins et al., 2010; Palm, 2014).

**Harmful social norms frequently drive VAWG in diverse contexts and these can undermine efforts for VAWG prevention.** FGDs with practitioners highlighted how changing laws, or working to change individuals' knowledge, beliefs and attitudes, is not enough when strong harmful social norms persist at community level. In this situation there is a risk of backlash against change, or internalization of the harmful beliefs. For example, in Nepal, girls feared being blamed by the community for bad events if they did not adhere to *chhaupadi*. In Tanzania, girls faced being spurned as marriage partners if they did not undergo FGM/C, and in Côte d'Ivoire, women who challenged harmful gender norms risked being cast out by their spouses or in-laws. These concrete dilemmas are faced by many women and girls.

Over-simplistic "just empower women to say no" narratives, which, without care, may do further harm or place the sole responsibility of stopping VAWG on women (as individuals or together) were refuted by practitioner insights. Working at community level to change underlying harmful social norms – and not simply condemning harmful practices – is a critical aspect that faith-based and traditional actors engaged in VAWG prevention are starting to recognize:

---

*"Social norms remain a big part of root causes of violence, because society is built on how people think. So (we must be) challenging those social norms in our communities, so it brings about transformation ... How do we challenge ... those norms that are negative, which fuel VAWG and understand better ways to balance power and prevent violence" (FGD, 30 November 2020).*

---

**All projects identified harmful social norms as a barrier to their VAWG prevention efforts, but only some projects identified working on social norms as an implemented strategy in their work.** Social norms can change, and community members can evolve social norms through community mobilization, with faith-based and traditional actors as important influencers. Results from projects that worked on social norms suggest that faith-based and traditional actors can, if well-equipped to do so, play an influential role in developing new norms that support VAWG prevention, but the projects that did so insisted that this was a long-term approach. Partners reliant on 2- to 3-year donor cycles identified that this is too short a time to show sustained social norms change in the communities they are working in. This means some partners may avoid working directly on social norms unless donor cycles change. Capacity-building was identified as key for faith-based and traditional actors, especially to go beyond seeing VAWG as just physical violence and understand its different forms and their underlying reinforcement by patriarchal social norms.

**Equipping faith-based and traditional actors to first change their own mindsets and then be a part of challenging harmful social norms**, while assisting their communities to develop alternative social norms underpinned and supported by core faith-based and cultural values such as peace, justice and compassion, emerged as an important insight from a number of practitioners. For example, in the State of Palestine, a focus on women mosque preachers by the PSCCW enabled interactive discussions of various social norms that had been shaped negatively by their religion, including male superiority. Commitments to equality were then reclaimed within Islam, enabling a gender-positive framing of its core religious ethos to be internalized and then preached confidently by the women:

---

*“So, we discuss issues related to the concept of violence and how it is linked with religious concepts, (also) about equality and justice and avoiding discrimination and violence in dealing with each other. Here in Palestine, we go to the mosque and we choose some examples from Al Qur’an and discuss it with (the women preachers). And it was a very useful way to create this kind of change in their mentality and how they understand the relation between men and women and how to use these*

*concepts in their discussions with other women coming to the mosque” (FGD, 30 November 2020).*

---

**This leveraged the diversity of actors in religious spaces to identify and engage with those who might be more supportive of gender-equal norms.** It enabled existing gendered social norms to be identified as patriarchal culture and not as religious commands. As a result, it led to a more supportive community between different religious women to help VAWG survivors access counselling or seek justice in court. Only by using a non-aggressive approach to both religion and women’s rights, did the PSCCW get permission to enter the mosques. By working strategically with women preachers to change their mindsets, the organization was also tactically subversive of a male-dominated religious hierarchy.

**Dialogue methodologies that used existing mechanisms of faith such as mosques, temples, churches, sermons, prayers and rituals were seen as valuable in social norms change.** Practitioners note that these helped to engage faith-based and traditional actors in the initial diagnosis of issues, in the ongoing processes of change and in the development of the tailored materials to address these social norms. Many harmful practices are embedded in multiple layers of social norms, hidden from outsiders, which have to be carefully explored over time to understand what roles they play in community life. For example, projects in Côte d’Ivoire, Togo and Nepal all immersed themselves in their local communities in advance to understand its social norms and their meaning and identified this as an essential strategy to be taken before any form of intervention.

**Gaps between laws and social norms remain on VAWG.** In almost all projects reviewed, the specific practices under focus (e.g. child marriage in Pakistan, chhaupadi in Nepal, or FGM/C in Tanzania) have been illegal for many years, but that has not been enough to eradicate the practice. This shows the power of accepted social norms to mobilize active, passive or silent forms of resistance to change. Therefore, while changing laws is important, it is not enough. It would be unwise to adopt sustainable change strategies that target the law and policy field without also engaging with social norms, especially on harmful practices such as *chhaupadi*:

---

*“Phenomena like chhaupadi are so intricately linked with (the) culture of a community that people become very defensive if only legal arguments are presented. There are multiple layers of issues which inhibit free and open discussion. These layers should be understood before attempting to change issues” (Restless Development, final report).*

---

**Identifying the right approach to engaging faith-based and traditional actors in social norms change to prevent VAWG in their context was critical to tackle resistance and backlash.**

Practitioners highlighted that this always varied depending on the issue and the type of organization. Some of the projects, such as in those in Pakistan and Nepal, emphasized a public health lens to social norms change underpinning VAWG that focused on the health risks of child marriage and *chhaupadi* respectively, while those in Togo and Côte d'Ivoire adopted a cultural approach to patterns of harmful widowhood practices and FGM/C to reshape the role these practices played in creating meaning in local cultures. In Liberia, a faith-based approach to social norms change for EVAWG involved faith leaders as key stakeholders from the start, which proved crucial to engaging with sacred texts and led to helpful feedback from Muslim and Christian faith leaders in the local context:

---

*“Some feedback we received was “we want more religion”, to be entangled more deeply in theology. “We need another chapter specifically addressing that issue.” It’s not a bad thing, but it highlighted a resistance to a human rights, feminist, anti-patriarchy frame, or a children’s rights or SDG framing. They were not resistant. They found it interesting, but in the end they want to speak in the language of faith and scripture. And that’s why we “moved the mountain” (enabled significant positive change on VAWG) (FGD, 1 December 2020).*

---

Practitioners from some contexts, like Nepal, highlighted that a human rights approach to social norms change that was too narrowly legal often created faith-based or cultural defensiveness or led to family conflict. Other practitioners emphasized the potential value of a broader human rights approach to social norms change by successfully connecting

it to similar concepts already present in people’s lived realities in their context, as Alafia found in Togo:

---

*“In rural areas ... where the State is poorly represented, it is difficult to make people understand what is meant by human rights. On the other hand, there are concepts and practices very close to human rights in traditional standards ... These allow a better internalization by the populations because they come from their histories, beliefs and daily life” (Alafia, final evaluation report (translated)).*

---

It is clear from practitioner insights that there is no one “right” approach to take in all contexts. For example, a human rights approach worked in one context but not in another, and success often depends on how contextualized the approach has been made by practitioners. The example of Alafia sheds light on how a women’s rights organization took what could be interpreted as an outsider discourse to decolonize it and make it relevant to lived realities of the communities.

**Some projects combined multiple approaches to social norms change for VAWG prevention through faith-based and traditional actors.**

In Pakistan, for example, they sensitized faith leaders on child marriage using a public health approach combined with legal accountability of the police. Both the State of Palestine and Togo showed how to contextualize human rights in non-western contexts that avoid either/or polarities between culture, religion and human rights. This reinforces an important finding that human rights approaches can find overlap between religions, cultures and human rights that show the social dimensions of human rights and not merely its legal aspects.

It was repeatedly emphasized that the chosen approach must fit with the specific context, stakeholders and issue. Furthermore, when the approach is seen as coming from outsiders, it is more likely to meet resistance. Insider approaches are essential. This is where faith-based and traditional actors can hold important social capital, trust and influence, as they are viewed as trusted custodians of traditional values and social norms. Approaches led by them may therefore hold greater potential for sustainable community ownership. CLiFA in Côte d'Ivoire found that leveraging traditional actors was the right approach to reverse negative norms and help prevent VAWG in their rural context:



---

*“It only takes a healthy dose of the right approach to reverse negative norms. In remote communities, traditional authority still carries weight and the ability to strongly influence values ... We believe that the rehabilitation and strengthening of traditional authority and their capacities on the topic can still constitute levers on which we can act, to allow traditional actors as decision-makers to better play their role of prevention of violence against women and girls” (written reflection, FGD invitee, (translated), 3 December 2020).*

---

**The different approaches taken by partners to change social norms through faith-based and traditional actors all have strengths and weaknesses.** There is no one best way for all contexts and changing mindsets takes time if attitudes are deeply rooted. The partners also identify risks of working with religious hierarchies that are entrenched in patriarchy. This is why engagement with social norms must, at times, work to reshape many individual faith-based and traditional actors’ mindsets as a critical first step. Not all will get on board and practitioners suggest selecting faith-based and traditional actors who are more progressive and willing to journey towards change on social norms and to disrupt and challenge dominant discourses on gender in their own faith institutions. At the same time, practitioners insisted that, in their experience, “faith leaders may hold more progressive attitudes about gender equality than their congregations and wider communities, because of their deep engagement with theology and practice” (written reflection, 1 February 2021). Blanket assumptions that faith-based or traditional actors will invariably hold negative mindsets towards women’s rights, or institutional biases against them by women’s rights organizations must be avoided.

Insights from practice show that **a human rights approach to social norms change must journey alongside and not “over and against” other approaches.** Human rights are based on an overlapping consensus, including religion and culture, and need to be locally contextualized. A narrow framing may elicit resistance and backlash. This solidifies the essential role of faith-based and traditional actors in challenging harmful social norms. If we accept that human-rights-based approaches will not always work alone and that the reversal of negative social norms requires engagement with existing patterns of faith and culture, then it is impossible to tackle these issues without engaging with faith-based and traditional actors.

---

#### KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Faith-based and traditional actors are not a homogeneous group. Innovative leverage points can mobilize certain groups to work for social norms change and to support gender-equal approaches from within (e.g. grandmothers, female cutters and women preachers).
- Faith-based and traditional actors are often insiders in communities and are credible influencers on patriarchal social norms. Their active engagement counters perceptions that gender and human rights ideas are imposed from outside, and it can result in credible synergies with core values in existing traditions for VAWG prevention.
- Risks exist with regard to engaging with faith-based and traditional actors who may be enmeshed in patriarchal systems. They may need accompaniment to transform their own inherited gendered beliefs before they can become part of social norms change for VAWG prevention. However, programmes should not assume their complicity.



## 2.4 Working with faith-based actors for VAWG prevention

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Faith leaders are identified as a critical dimension of engaging with and transforming faith-based communities and in some settings it is impossible to engage with a faith-based community without the approval and facilitation of its faith leaders or leaders (Le Roux and Bartelink, 2017; Bridger and Sadgrove, 2019). In most faith-based communities, a structural hierarchy exists, with the “everyday” members at the bottom, lay leaders in the middle (sometimes at different levels), and official leaders at the top. Engaging with multiple levels of this structural hierarchy is recommended as a strategy for preventing VAWG, especially in faith-based communities with many levels in its leadership structures (Bridger and Sadgrove, 2019). However, engagement with different kinds of faith-based actors is also important. Formal faith leadership remains predominantly male across all traditions and risks excluding women and young people unless definitions of faith leadership are expanded (Dhaliwal and Patel, 2017). Engaging with faith-based actors (and not faith leaders exclusively) is one way of avoiding the male bias in faith leadership.

At the same time, working with religion and faith-based actors is only one component of holistic, comprehensive, multisectoral VAWG prevention. An exclusive focus on faith-based actors only can counter attempts at inclusivity and even create divisions in a community, limiting community-wide uptake. Faith-based actors need to be seen as a part of a wider multisectoral response to VAWG prevention (Le Roux and Bartelink, 2017).

In transforming existing beliefs and practices that harm women and girls, faith-based actors are often expected to counter dominant faith-based and traditional norms in their settings. Promising interventions have shown that it is important to package their opposition to dominant faith-based and traditional norms as a positive “champion” identity, rather than a negative “aberrant” identity (Le Roux and Palm, 2018). Faith-based actors who commit to being such champions need to be continuously guided and supported, to ensure their personal adherence to “new” beliefs and practices and to support their community engagement (Le Roux and Palm, 2018).

Certain forms of VAWG continue to be encouraged or unopposed by faith-based actors as they are simply uninformed about the public health implications of the practices. Providing insight for faith-based actors into the health consequences of a particular practice is sometimes enough for the faith-based actor to start opposing the practice (Le Roux and Bartelink, 2017; Le Roux and Palm, 2018). Combining a public health approach with a scriptural/theological approach has been identified as particularly effective, because of the authority that sacred texts hold for many faith-based actors and communities. These texts can be a powerful asset in challenging and transforming norms and beliefs conducive to VAWG, but such engagement is not without its challenges, since developing a theological grounding for interventions demands theological expertise and intensive effort (Le Roux and Bartelink, 2017). Furthermore, both these approaches often require engagement with sex and sexuality. Research on faith leader resistance to ending child marriage (Le Roux and Palm, 2018) has identified the “sex taboo” as one major reason why faith leaders and communities refuse to discuss and address many forms of VAWG. When sex is something that should not be talked about in faith-based circles, many key drivers and forms of VAWG, as well as its consequences, cannot be discussed (Kaviti, 2015). Taboos around female sexuality can shape underlying beliefs about sexual shame, impurity and family honour that lead to entrenched purity norms seen to play a significant role in social norms that underpin certain harmful practices (Karam, 2015). In terms of gaps in existing evidence, there is little research on and evaluation of VAWG prevention programming that focuses on faith-based actors.

In line with existing recent evidence, **all the projects working with faith-based actors found it important that such engagement was part of wider, multisectoral engagement for survivor-centred prevention.** This enables faith leaders to be more effective in their prevention work, as they network with a range of other referral points, which in turn ensures better survivor support and assists with the sustainability of the impact, as these networks can continue to function even after specific project-based interventions come to an end. This was true in Pakistan, where Sindh Community Foundation engaged with faith leaders as part of a collective, multi-stakeholder effort that included health practitioners, the police, lawyers, the media and CSOs. In

doing so, faith leaders were recognized as professional service providers (as they perform weddings) and their accountability as service providers could be emphasized. In the State of Palestine, the PSCCW's work to help survivors included engaging with government service providers and policymakers. Even in Liberia, where faith leaders and communities were the primary target group, Episcopal Relief and Development consistently promoted multisectoral collaboration; for example, faith leaders (including youth leaders) became part of the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection's monthly county-level GBV Task Force meetings with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government agencies.

Most faith-based belief systems have a strong organizational hierarchy of authority and, as a result, **engaging early with top-level faith-based actors can be a valuable strategic approach that allows for system-wide uptake, formal institutional backing and support for later intervention activities.** For example, the PSCCW needed the permission of the Ministry of Religious Affairs before it was able to start training women mosque leaders in the State of Palestine, while in Liberia senior faith leaders were instrumental in identifying harmful social norms and developing training materials to address these norms. Based on the experience in Liberia, Episcopal Relief and Development argues that the success of any faith leader programming on VAWG prevention requires early engagement with senior faith leaders and formal institutional backing. This experience was echoed in Armenia, where the lack of such senior faith-based institutional backing prohibited the Women's Support Center from being able to train any faith leaders.

In both the State of Palestine and Armenia, experiences of engaging with faith-based actors emphasize the need for adaptive programming that pays close attention to the dynamics in the specific context. In the State of Palestine, for example, the PSCCW did not originally plan to work with faith-based actors, yet when women mosque preachers attended its workshops, the PSCCW realized that these women had unique reach and influence. The PSCCW now sees its work with women mosque preachers as one of the most impactful components of its programming. In Armenia, on the other hand, the plan was to train a large cohort of faith-based actors. When access was denied, the Women's Support Center was forced to rapidly adjust its programming and shift to training teachers instead.

However, **it is not advisable to engage with only top-level faith leaders.** There are many different kinds of faith-based actors; while formal leadership includes priests, imams, pastors, rabbis and muftis, there are often a host of informal religious leadership positions, such as *ustadh* and *ustadha*, youth group leaders, women mosque preachers and choir leaders. Working with informal faith leaders is also a key way to engage with women leaders, since formal faith leaders are usually still predominantly male. Trócaire in Kenya found it useful to clearly identify what is required from a faith leader (e.g. must they sensitize community members, or must they sensitize women), before deciding which level and type of faith leaders to engage with. This also allowed the organization to engage with faith leaders who had more availability, rather than top-level faith leaders, who have very full schedules. Furthermore, the top-level leaders are not necessarily the most willing and effective in doing VAWG prevention work. In the State of Palestine, the PSCCW found it important to identify faith leaders who already supported gender equality and non-violence in some way, because choosing progressive faith leaders who want to promote VAWG prevention meant that the PSCCW had participants who actively supported its overall programmatic aims. Such leaders are often in informal leadership positions, so it is important to actively seek them out and build their capacity further. At the same time, this does not mean that more conservative faith leaders should be avoided, but, rather – depending on setting and programming aims – that it could be helpful to pilot activities and build momentum by engaging with faith leaders who are already supportive. The challenge remains, however, that, in highly hierarchical, centralized faith-based structures, it can be impossible to engage local-level faith leaders without the go-ahead from top-level leaders. This was the experience in Armenia. However, where leadership is decentralized and less hierarchical, a bottom-up approach might be effective. Overall, decisions around which faith-based actors to engage with agree with existing evidence: the advisability of a top-down or a bottom-up approach (or a combination) depends on the specific situation and faith-based system that is being engaged with, as well as the project activities and goals.

While choosing who to engage with is one strategic decision to be made, **an equally important decision is the starting point for engagement.** The point of engagement could be seen as being situated on a continuum: one end is hard-hitting and demands that faith-based actors

agree to all human rights conventions and laws before they can be included in programming; on the other end is highly sensitive engagement that insists that faith-based actors should engage on their own terms and not be held accountable to EVAWG global standards. Decisions around the point of engagement are strategic, practical decisions, as they impact faith-based actors' willingness to engage with programming. The FGDs with practitioners revealed that organizations situate themselves somewhere along the continuum in contextually appropriate and project-appropriate ways. Navigating this continuum is important but challenging. The reality is that to work with faith-based actors, organizations first have to form a relationship with them by working with them as individuals, which inevitably requires responsiveness to individual and local sensitivities. They have to start at where these actors are, not where they want them to be. Yet how much can a VAWG organization compromise without betraying its core values? These are difficult issues to navigate and depend both on the context and what faith leaders are being asked to do:

---

*"We are promoting the work of our [faith-based] partner in [name of country], and they worked not only with people living with HIV/AIDS [and other stigmatized groups such as] transgender sex workers, people who are in prison ... LGBTIQ populations ... In the UNTF programme in [different country] it is different [and our partner does not work with any of these groups]. We note people's limitations and try to find different ways to expand their understanding of who the ministry ought to be directed to" (FGD, 1 December 2020).*

---

One important way that practitioners have motivated faith-based actors to mobilize for VAWG prevention is to **position taking this stance on VAWG as adopting a positive "champion" identity, sometimes combining this with sanctions for lack of action against VAWG**. When faith leaders are expected to oppose long-established practices, it helps if this opposition is understood by them as being a struggle for a good and just cause. In Pakistan, Sindh Community Foundation was able to mobilize *nikahkhawan* and *pundits* (faith leaders) to oppose child marriage by convincing them that doing so would make them protectors and defenders of girls. Yet such a "champion" identity might not always be enough to ensure faith leaders' opposition to

harmful practices and VAWG prevention and might need to be combined with other measures by peers to ensure faith leaders' accountability. Sindh Community Foundation also trained police officers on the laws prohibiting child marriage. The organization developed a whistleblowing system, so that people could report faith leaders who solemnised child marriages. It had the district's Senior Superintendent of Police meet with *nikahkuwan*, informing them of the possibility of arrest should they solemnise a child marriage. Even though the judicial system is not always reliable, awareness of the risk of being arrested served as a deterrent to performing child marriages and enabled improved peer accountability. Such a combination of a positive "carrot" (champion identity) and a negative "stick" (risk of arrest) with faith-based actors is less discussed in literature, and can be a fruitful avenue to explore where relevant laws are in place and police and judicial actors can be mobilized to enforce them. This shows how faith-based actors can be part of accountable multisectoral collaboration for law and policy reform and implementation.

It may therefore be advisable not only to trust in faith leaders' goodwill and support for VAWG prevention, but also to create systems and structures that ensure they do no harm – and organizations need not necessarily rely on laws. For example, when Trócaire found that some male faith leaders in Kenya were willing to speak out against violence, but not specifically on VAWG, it realized that it needed to do further in-depth training and longer-term mentoring work with these leaders. In the meantime, it designed a system of accompaniment, where a team member would accompany a faith leader when they spoke publicly on violence. The team member would then offer additional information, depending on what the leader had said. Faith leader accountability is rarely discussed in existing evidence on faith-based actors' engagement in VAWG prevention. The 10 projects in this synthesis review reflect on how faith-based actors involved in VAWG prevention programming can be held accountable for what they say and do in ways that further their skills and commitment to VAWG prevention. During FGDs, participants proposed that partnering, funding and grant-making strategies should all be carefully designed, to ensure that what faith-based actors do and produce is not counterproductive or dangerous to women, and this is an important role that women's organizations can play.

When working with faith-based actors from religions that have a central sacred text, **engaging with that sacred text**

**critically yet respectfully was identified as important to mobilize faith-based actors for VAWG prevention.**

For example, the PSCCW in the State of Palestine worked with women mosque preachers to link issues of violence to harmful social norms often underpinned by religion and instead offered alternative faith-based concepts (e.g. equality and justice) from the Qur'an. In Liberia, engagement with sacred texts was a key component of the work. Early on, however, Episcopal Relief and Development realized that its VAWG toolkit needed to be designed in Liberia, with Liberian faith leaders identifying specific problematic scriptures (e.g. the Adam and Eve creation story) and designing how the toolkit should directly engage with such scriptures from a gender justice point of view. While programming had to be adapted to accommodate this slower in-country process, this is now seen as one of the strengths of the toolkit, as well as key to the success of its roll-out.

The centrality of written sacred texts in many religions does not mean that VAWG prevention work should only be book-based, as various projects found illiteracy an unforeseen obstacle to working with grassroots faith-based actors. In Liberia, for example, programming had to be significantly adapted to account for this. Programming ended up using various experiential learning methods, drawing on participatory methods such as role-playing and storytelling, rather than reading and writing. FAMA (Facts, Association, Meaning, Action) picture cards developed with faith leaders' input to stimulate learning dialogues proved to be particularly effective in facilitating community reflection.

**Programming in Kenya, Pakistan and the State of Palestine had an interfaith component,** although with some this was only developed after the UN Trust Fund funding had come to an end. In Liberia, interfaith engagement was a central tenet of programming from the start. Their VAWG toolkit and methodology, unlike many other faith-based VAWG tools and methodologies, engaged with Christian and Muslim leaders at the same time, in the same place, using the same tools, interpreting the Bible and Qur'an's teachings together. While this process was, at times, uncomfortable for the participants (e.g. as it brought to light different interpretations of sacred stories) it was felt to be worthwhile. It led to a recognition

that VAWG – and responding to it – can go beyond faith-based divides. This interfaith approach led to strengthened relationships between Christian and Muslim leaders in this context:

---

*“During the Task Force meetings, several local leaders reported that the growing relationships between Christian and Muslim faith leaders and groups are very obvious in the districts and communities. The formation of the CFLCs (Community Faith Leader Committees) and Youth Coalitions and the various activities they have led have strengthened these different faith groups’ ties in the community by building trust and comfort with one another as individuals, as well as a better understanding of each other’s faith” (Episcopal Relief and Development, final report, p. 55).*

---

---

**KEY TAKE-AWAYS**

- Engaging with faith-based actors should not be an exclusive focus, but, rather, part of wider, multisectoral engagement in VAWG prevention. This does not mean that each organization should work with everyone, but that faith-based actors should be connected with other role-players and be made aware of their roles in VAWG prevention.
- Engaging with top-level faith-based actors can be a valuable strategic approach that allows for system-wide uptake and support for later intervention activities. At the same time, lower-tier or informal faith-based actors can offer unique access and activism. Intentional efforts should be made to identify and engage with female faith-based actors.
- Religious actors should be engaged with in contextually appropriate ways that challenge their own attitudes and prejudices but do not scare them off and that allow a relationship of trust to develop. Leveraging faith-based actors' reach and influence requires working with them as individuals first and then identifying the best strategy for mobilizing them for VAWG prevention.



## 2.5 Working with traditional actors for VAWG prevention

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional actors are beginning to receive more attention, often by African researchers and in African contexts. They are those who take active leadership roles in the community based on traditional authority structures. They can be formal leaders such as chiefs, traditional healers, or informal leaders such as elders, mothers-in-law and aunts. They share common power and authority to make decisions within and for extended families and/or the community (Mojapele et al., 2011). Traditional leadership is often also built on beliefs in indigenous sacred traditions and the legitimacy of those who govern based on these traditions (Mojapele et al., 2011). Historically in many communities, traditional leaders governed all aspects of community life (Tshehla, 2005). The connectedness that traditional actors have with the communities they serve can position them as important gatekeepers with “access capital” allowing or prohibiting entry into communities, especially in rural areas (Chikombero, 2011). This has led governments such as the South African Government to officially recognize and incorporate traditional leadership into their structures (Khandhela, 2011).

Traditional actors can also drive gender injustice and violence in a number of ways. First, traditional authority relies heavily on the unchallenged and unquestioned continuation of cultural beliefs and traditions (Chikombero, 2011). Even if these beliefs and traditions promote gender injustice and facilitate VAWG, traditional actors often continue promoting them and see attempts to end or change gender unjust cultural practices as a challenge to their authority (Chikombero, 2011). Second, traditional leadership structures tend to be very patriarchal. The majority of traditional leaders are men and in their rulings they tend to prioritize men and overrule women, justifying VAWG based on harmful patriarchal cultural beliefs (Teffo-Menziwa et al., 2010). Third, customary law rarely recognizes the equality of women and in terms of VAWG it rarely prioritizes justice for and the safety of the victim (Takana, 2014). Fourth, a number of practices condoned and implemented by some traditional actors, are forms of VAWG (e.g. child marriage, FGM/C, widowhood practices related

to inheritance issues and sexual cleansing). At the same time, traditional actors have been identified in a number of contexts as key influencers that can change the collective beliefs and expectations of a community with potential positive roles in VAWG prevention and social norms change. This was noted in research from the Philippines (Valerio and Butt, 2020) but more concrete examples are needed to determine how this takes place.

**Faith leaders generally form relatively demarcated groups, but traditional leaders often form less clear-cut groups that may vary significantly from context to context.** Intercommunity power struggles can further complicate this reality, as CLiRA found in Côte d'Ivoire, where it had to be careful to avoid certain chiefs who were seen as illegitimate by the wider community. A range of traditional actors also play roles in the traditional system and engagement should not be reduced only to top-level leaders (or “chiefs” as they are often termed in the West African contexts that many project insights emerged from). Insights from practitioners showed how women can also play powerful roles in these traditional structures as custodians of culture. For example, in Tanzania, female cutters were a key group carrying out FGM/C, and in Nepal, mothers-in-law were central in perpetuating *chhaupadi* practices.

**Traditional actors can be leveraged for VAWG prevention in a number of ways.** Three important roles for traditional actors emerged from synthesizing practitioner insights: as customary law and culture custodians; as shaping social norms change; and as sacred ritual holders. First, traditional leaders are often custodians of customary legal systems and frequently hold authority in these processes which, especially in fragile states or conflict-affected contexts, may be the main or sole access to justice that is available for many women and girls. Insights from practitioners give concrete examples that show that, once convinced of the need for change, often by other local CSOs, many traditional leaders used their customary roles and community laws to sanction perpetrators of harmful practices. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, traditional leaders enforced a community embargo, where perpetrators of FGM/C were formally socially isolated.

**Women also play important roles as traditional actors, often as informal or formal culture keepers, receiving a level of power in these roles and taking responsibility for passing the traditions onto the next generation,**



**especially to their daughters.** In Nepal, grandmothers and mothers-in-law played a significant role in perpetuating *chhaupadi*, but were initially overlooked in the project intervention activities. In Tanzania, female cutters were identified and targeted from the start as primary perpetrators of FGM/C that derive some economic and social power through this role, which can be critical for their own survival. In some settings, women also play roles in formal traditional structures. For example, Togo has a number of female chiefs and Liberia has a history of traditional women leaders in the Sande secret society in particular:

---

*“Those elderly women who are cutters, they use FGM as part of income-generating activities. So, during the time of FGM ceremonies, for them it is like in harvest time to earn income. If you tell them to stop or abandon it, sometimes you would wonder to see the women, aunts, grandmas and those who are involved in the cutting, they’re against anti-FGM ... because they are also benefiting out of it” (FGD, 1 December 2020).*

---

**Second, practitioner insights highlighted the roles of specific traditional actors in either reinforcing or changing harmful social norms.** For example, in Nepal, Restless Development focused on engaging with locally trusted traditional healers who were influential around the social norms and beliefs that underpin *chhaupadi*. It also involved experts on Hinduism around the entanglement of culture and religion. Methods that were respected in traditional culture, such as folk songs, were used to get across new messages for VAWG prevention and made it possible for initially conservative actors who wanted to protect traditions to become key public messengers for reform and change.

**Third, enabling traditional institutions to use existing community rituals to authoritatively reshape social norms, harmful practices and underlying beliefs in rural communities was effective.** For instance, in Togo, by working with male and female traditional leaders to improve understanding of women’s rights, Alafia worked with already established spiritual and cultural mechanisms that dictated certain gender-based issues, for example the ancestral laws that required widows to undergo a sexual cleansing ceremony to be admitted back into the community. If they did not undergo the ceremony, women were blamed

for community disasters, putting them at increased risk of harm. By working with traditional spiritual leaders, Alafia was able to make these old ways “taboo”, leading to immediate cessation in many communities. At the same time, the leaders circulated new norms that were promoted as “new” ancestral laws and drew on the ingrained fears of the anger of ancestral deities to support VAWG prevention:

---

*“The fear of breaking the old custom is erased and the fear of breaking the new custom is established ... The population believe that anyone who will go against the rights of women will be struck by the ancestral gods with madness and death” (Alafia, final report (translated)).*

---

**Traditional cultures are not static or homogeneous, but are hybrid and fluid.** People may draw from different traditions and adapt these over their lifetime. Practitioners noted in FGDs that a traditional identity could also be embraced as a way to secure respect especially in rural areas where other opportunities to develop respect may be limited. Traditional rituals can be identity-forming for both men and women and therefore change is typically feared or resisted. Understanding the rationale that underpins harmful rituals is required if communities are to be willing to shift their patterns and develop new traditions that do not harm women and girls:

---

*“At first glance, do not condemn or denounce populations for their practice, but rather draw them into an exercise of deep introspection to bring out all the benefits of their practice for their community. Then get them to identify the facets of this practice that are no longer suitable. People are sometimes aware of certain limits of their culture due to the evolution of society, however, they cannot stand being told what is good and what is not for them. By leading them to identify for themselves the shortcomings of certain cultural practices while encouraging them to value the positive aspects, they feel considered, respected and readily adhere to” (change) (written reflection, FGD invitee, (translated), 3 December 2020).*

---

**An initial time investment to build trust, get to know traditional actors and create ownership of the shared goals can go a long way.** For instance, in working to end

FGM/C in Côte d'Ivoire, CLiRA focused on VAWG prevention advocacy to traditional leaders (chiefs) in rural areas. It ran regional reflection workshops and then helped the chiefs develop integrated community action plans that drew on their already-respected role as bearers of tradition by inviting them to lend their personal clout to the positive movement to end FGM/C. CLiRA staff took the time to get to know the rural communities first, becoming immersed in their lived realities. They used what the community called “customary diplomacy”, which included allowing traditional chiefs to host them as guests, sharing food together and accompanying chiefs in traditional activities as an important trust-building phase. This process also served as an unofficial recognisance of the importance of the project areas by the chiefs. This preliminary stage and the presence of chiefs reassured communities and enabled appropriation and ownership of the goals. CLiRA offered rural communities a way to deliberate together for change without losing face or disrespecting the past. They equipped traditional actors to become positive champions while using their customary legal power to hold those perpetrating FGM/C accountable.

**Traditional actors have significant sway over community attitudes and, if not included, may reverse the gains of other VAWG prevention strategies,** as earlier failed strategies that excluded them showed in Côte d'Ivoire. However, traditional authority is not a dictatorship. Processes of communal decision-making involve checks and balances as well as community rituals and local accountability. Traditional actors seek to maintain their power in a modernizing world. Positioning VAWG prevention as a way for them to adapt, rather than lose, this social power can be effective but it is important to remain aware of the risks of reinforcing the power of patriarchal structures under the guise of “protecting women”. Traditional structures of power also vary. For example, in one tribe in Togo, men held final decision-making power, but in another tribe, it was the women and young people. To ignore these gatekeepers increases resistance to change, which has a community-wide impact on VAWG prevention. Furthermore, rural and urban settings often differ, but they can have a porous relationship that can be used to create synergies. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, CLiRA worked with wealthy sons in urban areas to use their ongoing influence on parents in rural areas.

**However, a number of ambiguities, risks and tensions emerge in working with traditional actors.** First, if outsiders outrightly condemn specific VAWG practices such as child

marriage or FGM/C, it can lead to practices merely going underground. Practitioners showed how some traditional actors may appear to agree in public, but then still support harmful norms or practices in private, especially when their livelihoods or social statuses are at stake. For example, in Tanzania, despite public ceremonies of downing tools and alternative income-generation opportunities, some female cutters returned to the practice in secret, partly because of economic needs. Second, even if traditional actors do support change, if the wider community remains unconvinced people may move elsewhere to carry out harmful rites. Traditional actors are part of complex systems (see section 2.2) and need sustained support and collaborative networks to bring change in ways that avoid resistance and backlash from their communities. Finally, relationships between faith-based and traditional actors are often complicated by historical power dynamics and colonial structures involving missionary religions and indigenous beliefs. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, traditional leaders were accused of complicity with Western civilization to the detriment of local ancestral values. These complex realities should in no way prevent work with traditional actors for VAWG, but they do need careful consideration and an understanding of how the relationships between these diverse actors may play out in practice in different contexts.

#### KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- While traditional systems may often be patriarchal, traditional actors involve a diverse range of male and female “cultural custodians” who convene community rituals that hold spiritual, social and economic power. With support, these rituals can be adapted to prevent VAWG.
- Traditional leaders often play authoritative roles in customary legal systems that can reinforce patriarchy but can also be harnessed to prevent VAWG, hold perpetrators accountable and help to connect VAWG survivors to formal legal systems, if they exist.
- Traditional actors are influential gatekeepers and can work together to open up communal spaces for communities to engage in internal dialogues with regard to changing entrenched social norms and VAWG practices. While this process may be slow, once communities decide, they are held accountable and can change patterns for many generations to come.



Photo: Fundación Mundubat.  
Fundación Mundubat working with indigenous communities and men to end harmful masculinities in Colombia

## 2.6 Engaging faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention during the COVID-19 pandemic

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite rapidly emerging literature on the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on VAWG (Majumdar and Wood 2020; Peterman and O'Donnell, 2020), there remains a lack of published research on how the pandemic is impacting VAWG prevention work with faith-based and traditional actors. What is known is that the pandemic is making women and girls increasingly vulnerable to various forms of violence, especially in the household (Majumdar and Wood, 2020; Peterman and O'Donnell, 2020; UN Women, 2020). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing VAWG, some experts have pointed out the underlying faith-based justification of social norms that can underpin violence in the home (Palm, 2020) as well as the potential that faith-based and traditional actors may have to respond to VAWG, as many are accepted and authorized to engage in “private” household matters (Gennrich, 2020). Some experts have drawn attention to how the COVID-19 pandemic is opening people’s eyes to the possibility of changing how things are “typically” done in society and at household level, and that faith-based and traditional actors can play a key role in this moment by addressing and transforming

the social norms that drive VAWG (Le Roux, 2020; Palm, forthcoming). Lessons have been documented about the role that faith-based and traditional leaders have played in responding to other pandemics, such as HIV/AIDS and Ebola (Balibuno et al., 2020; Campbell, 2020), and this body of knowledge may have specific application to COVID-19 realities at this time. Nevertheless, overall there remains a lack of research and evidence on how VAWG prevention with faith-based and traditional actors is being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The majority of the 10 projects included in this synthesis review had concluded their UN Trust Fund-funded programming prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, but some continued their programming with different funding. The FGDs conducted with practitioners from the 10 projects explored any experiences they had of engaging faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention during the COVID-19 pandemic, or any insights from their earlier programming that they felt could be adapted to suit COVID-19 contexts.

Most projects were forced to pause where governments declared lockdowns, as so many project activities with faith-based and traditional actors require people to gather in groups (e.g. at the mosque or in bible study groups) or for project staff to travel. **Although project activities could not continue, this did not mean that all engagement with faith-based and traditional actors stopped.** In both Liberia



and Kenya, for example, the projects redirected some of their funding to assist programme beneficiaries who lost employment or income as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was mostly in the form of food, but also included sanitation and hygiene materials, which were distributed through the faith-based and traditional actor networks that the projects had developed. While much originally planned programming had to stop, redirecting funding to COVID-19 response contributed to programming outcomes. Supporting faith-based and traditional actors and their communities during such challenging times built deeper relationships and trust. This ensured that relationships established with faith-based and traditional actors prior to the COVID-19 pandemic did not fade (and in some cases were even strengthened), which in turn helped in the roll-out of VAWG prevention programming with faith-based and traditional actors once it could be resumed. One practitioner mentioned their emergency response as follows:

---

*“Due to COVID-19, our beneficiaries lost their jobs/sources of income ... We responded to emergency needs e.g. food, sanitary pads for women and girls and WASH basics. We implemented this through religious leaders, and these went a long way in strengthening and maintaining the relationship we had established with the Church” (FGD, 1 December 2020).*

---

With existing evidence highlighting how the COVID-19 pandemic has made women and girls even more vulnerable to violence in household spaces, and given the evidence-based link between food insecurity and violence at household level, **providing food and emergency materials is in itself a VAWG prevention activity.** The pandemic has also highlighted the need for work with faith-based and traditional actors to be flexible and adaptable, to respond to immediate emergencies. For example, in adapting their work with faith-based and traditional actors during the COVID-19 pandemic, Trócaire engaged with church-owned radio stations, using these platforms to communicate various VAWG prevention messages that, in the original programme planning, would have been disseminated through in-person meetings. Now that COVID-19 restrictions are starting to be lifted in Kenya, in-person meetings are resuming. The pandemic has highlighted the ongoing need for adaptable programming

that can change at short notice in response to unexpected external circumstances.

**Some projects were able to adapt some of their programming so that some training, awareness-raising and mentoring could continue during lockdowns.** This was possible where faith-based and traditional actors had smartphones or some access to online platforms. In Kenya, Trócaire used Zoom, Skype and WhatsApp to stay in contact with faith-based and traditional actors, checking in on how they were doing and mentoring them via these virtual platforms. Some faith-based and traditional actors used WhatsApp to continue to raise awareness of VAWG. In Liberia, this shift to online platforms was unexpectedly effective in getting women faith leaders to participate more actively in sessions. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, when (in-person) training sessions and meetings were held with faith leaders, women leaders were always a significant minority. They were also very quiet in the meetings, rarely actively participating. However, when these training sessions and meetings started to be hosted on online platforms, these women found their voices:

---

*“One thing we notice of COVID-19 is that (by) using technology and Zoom, the woman faith leaders seem to have a better knack for that and they suddenly became very vocal. Now that they are in a meeting, but not in the same room in the same space” (FGD, 1 December 2020).*

---

**Online platforms may offer possibilities for overcoming gendered power dynamics, enabling women leaders to overcome some of the constraints of the patriarchal systems that prioritize men and their opinions.** This may resonate in other situations where women faith-based and traditional actors find it difficult to offer their honest opinions when physically present in a room dominated by men. Of course, where women have limited access to online platforms, the positive potential of such engagement cannot be leveraged.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, Episcopal Relief and Development was able to draw on lessons learned at the start of their project roll-out, when Liberia was still in the process of recovering from a serious Ebola outbreak. From that epidemic, it learned **the importance of positive, and not fear-based, messaging from faith leaders.** With Ebola,



there was a lot of fearful, fatalistic messaging from faith leaders, which had negative consequences. For example, people started gathering for all-night prayers, which contributed to the spread of Ebola, and people started fearing and even attacking hospital workers. Learning from this, Episcopal Relief and Development encouraged faith leaders to disseminate message of hope and agency during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing that this was something that could be overcome by working together.

#### KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Engaging with faith-based and traditional actors in crisis contexts, such as a pandemic, can be beneficial to VAWG prevention and public health interventions in general. Redirecting project funding to address emergency needs due to the COVID-19 pandemic can contribute to programme outcomes, as it builds relationships and trust with faith-based and traditional actors, especially if emergency responses are delivered in partnership with them.
- Provision of online engagement, training and mentoring on VAWG prevention to faith-based and traditional actors is possible, depending on their access to online platforms. This can also support them to reach congregants in new ways, which may be necessary given the closure of faith and community spaces during lockdowns.
- Online platforms may offer possibilities for reshaping gendered power dynamics. When women are not physically in the same room as men, they may be able to overcome some of the constraints of patriarchal systems that prioritize men and their opinions.



Photo: AMREF  
AMREF working with girls to prevent FGM through working with community and spiritual leaders in Tanzania.

# 3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section offers five concluding insights that emerged from putting these 10 projects into conversation. It focuses on key unique lessons that surfaced across the 10 diverse CSOs (which individual project teams were less able to reflect on directly). These lessons point to their unique contributions as CSOs (funded by the UN Trust Fund) in engaging faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention.

First, synthesizing lessons learned from multiple projects highlights that **different types of CSOs have different abilities and ways of mobilizing faith-based and traditional actors, with accompanying advantages and risks**. Situating their approaches in the framework of access, social and/or spiritual capital may also help organizations to see what their context requires and how their type of organization can best contribute. Thinking more critically about the types of organizations, and how to help them fulfil their roles, is important. For example, FBOs (e.g. Episcopal Relief and Development or Trócaire) may be best equipped to take a spiritual capital approach, drawing on insider credibility with local faith-based and traditional actors. Youth organizations, such as Restless Development and Sindh Community Foundation, may be better positioned to question and hold accountable older generations for any harmful beliefs and values being passed on intergenerationally, often through spiritual rituals. Local women's rights organizations (e.g. Alafia and the PSCCW) played a key role in awareness-raising and capacity-building among faith-based and traditional actors, yet could, at times, be treated with suspicion by them. These organizations therefore needed to think carefully about how to engage in ways that avoid resistance (as experienced by the Women's Support Center in Armenia).

Second, **religion and culture form complex, heterogeneous, intergenerational systems with multiple interacting parts**. While faith-based and traditional actors clearly play influential roles in these systems, more attention needs to be paid to the cross-cutting power of spiritual belief and value systems over all their adherents, including women and girls, across many spheres of life.

A nuanced understanding of these systems that avoids bundling all faith-based and traditional actors together, or treating either group as if it were homogeneous, is essential to identify promising entry points for VAWG prevention. This means recognizing, for example, figures such as female cutters, traditional healers and women preachers, and taking into consideration their different strengths, weaknesses, availability, roles and power relations. CLiRA and Amref found that the roles and range activities of both male and female traditional actors are more complex than expected, and they needed to be engaged with in different ways. They also found that community-level spiritual rituals played important roles in the lives of women and girls.

Third, **there is no “one size fits all” way of engaging faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention and these 10 projects, which were able to do so, highlight the need for diverse approaches**. Different actors were engaged with, and different lenses adopted, to work on different issues and to achieve different outcomes, with varying degrees of success. Being open to this diversity meant that uniquely impactful results were seen by the organizations involved. For example, Fundación Mundubat engaged with indigenous beliefs and was able to leverage this as an untapped positive resource for VAWG survivors, enabling them to break free from entrenched cycles of violence. All projects demonstrated the absolute importance of finding the most appropriate way to engage with either faith-based or traditional actors in their specific context.

Fourth, **CSOs are ideally placed to engage with faith-based and traditional actors as key players in a diverse and multivocal civil society** and offer them opportunities to become potential allies for VAWG prevention. Part of the unique value of CSOs is the flexibility that they have to open up space for the concerns of ordinary people as well as to convene multiple stakeholders in civil society. They can develop tailored, coordinated and flexible responses that can be adaptive and centralize the most vulnerable in society. Governments, while essential to comprehensive VAWG

prevention, have less ability to be collaborative and flexible. This flexible, convening role has enabled this sector to play important adaptive roles as first responders to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on VAWG.

Finally, this synthesis review reinforces the value of a **two-way knowledge creation process that is not just about turning theory into practice but also about enabling practice-based insights to be synthesized** in robust ways to drive new theory. In this disruption of conventional knowledge hierarchies, those at the top also become a primary audience, if PBK is to be elevated, analysed, shared and applied by its producers in the field. Situating insights from practitioners on the existing knowledge creation continuum can make it possible to develop an integrated conceptual framework for PBK that enables diverse case studies from practice (that sit outside the costly and rarefied environment of a randomized control trial) to amplify and even challenge existing knowledge canons.

The recommendations that follow can be considered signposts for the practical tasks of engaging faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention. These are informed by practitioner insights from the 10 projects, but also by the process of synthesizing these insights. The recommendations target three specific groups: (1) practitioners, (2) donors and policymakers, and (3) the wider EVAWG research community.

### 3.1 Recommendations for practitioners

**Understand spiritual belief systems and their impact on VAWG.** Faith-based and cultural systems often interlink around VAWG. Analysing these systems and mapping the multiple actors in them is an important step for practitioners prior to deciding who to engage in VAWG prevention in their specific context. Understanding how these systems work in practice as well as their core values is a prerequisite for effective engagement. Respectful understanding of these systems is needed by project staff for normative change at this level if backlash and resistance are not to result when aspects of the existing system are questioned. Internalization of belief systems by all (at individual, community and government levels) is a reality that should not be ignored. Sustainable systems change is slow but possible, enabling deeply rooted beliefs about gender relations to be

reinterpreted in collaboration with influential voices in those systems.

**Take a holistic approach to VAWG prevention.** Engaging faith-based and traditional actors in VAWG prevention should not be done in an exclusive way. VAWG prevention requires a multisectoral approach, with faith-based and traditional actors treated as just one stakeholder among other actors in a wider system. This does not mean that one organization must do everything but that partnering with other organizations and government services is necessary to avoid faith-based and traditional actors seeking to carry out activities for which they may not have the appropriate skills. This integrates rather than isolates faith-based and traditional actors from the wider VAWG prevention task and creates accountability to their peers in other sectors (as both individuals and institutions). This also decentralizes the authority of faith-based and traditional leaders in the eyes of their followers by placing it alongside (not above) other types of social power. A holistic approach to VAWG is also essential to prevent the reduction of VAWG to “hitting” only and ensure that it is defined more broadly.

**Select faith-based and traditional actor partners carefully.** Practitioners must think about which faith-based and traditional actors to engage with in their context and at which levels of faith-based and cultural systems (which have many different kinds of actors). Decisions about whether to place faith-based and traditional actors together or take an interfaith approach are deeply contextual and require careful consideration. Local CSO partners need deciding power on which faith-based and traditional actors to select, rather than having this imposed from the outside. Each organization must decide if it is best placed to engage directly with faith-based and traditional actors, or if it needs partners to facilitate this. Both initial buy-in and constant check-in are essential and enable continued accountability mechanisms. Top-level leaders are almost always an essential part of early engagement, and will require regular check-ins or information sharing with the organization, as they hold such authority. However, it is important to think broadly about those at other, more informal levels of leadership or membership, who may have more time and be more committed. Engaging with faith-based and traditional leaders at a number of different levels has proven effective in many contexts and is also a way to ensure more women are involved. Practitioners noted this as essential across VAWG prevention, that women religious





Photo: UN Trust Fund/Vesna Jaric  
The UN Trust Fund visited ALAFIA's project which works to end harmful widowhood practices.

and traditional actors are meaningfully represented and involved in programme design and senior decision making. However, women can also support patriarchal structures and attention must be paid to which women's groups are chosen in the context and if their hierarchical structures may exclude more vulnerable women.

**Find ways to engage with social norms.** Engaging with faith-based and traditional actors around entrenched harmful social norms, and not merely condemning practices, emerges as a critical component for long-term VAWG prevention. A gradual process of accompaniment is often needed, with a willingness to adapt to changing circumstances. Social norms change should not depend on the goodwill of individual actors; negative consequences for non-compliance should be built in. Activities not directly related to VAWG prevention can build important relationships and trust between project teams and faith-based and traditional actors (as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic). Human rights approaches to VAWG prevention must also be carefully contextualized and decolonized. Reframing customary laws can play a role here. Practitioners also insisted that, when working with faith-based and traditional actors, the connections between VAWG and the underlying patriarchal structures must be

identified and discussed. Using interactive educational methodologies with faith-based and traditional actors stimulates conversations and can enable synergies to emerge around human rights in practice. These methods shape who drives and owns the process of change, avoiding the feeling that change is controlled by an “outsider”. Being adaptable enables new social norm possibilities to emerge, as was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, when online platforms helped to reshape gendered power dynamics in Liberia.

**Frame religion and culture as a positive resource for prevention.** There are many different ways to engage with faith-based and traditional actors, but it is important to pick ways that fit the specific context. A positive framing (e.g. referring to faith leaders as positive “champions” for VAWG prevention, or reclaiming core spiritual values such as justice) has been shown to encourage uptake by and support from these groups. Avoiding strong binary judgements (e.g. good versus bad religion or good religion versus bad culture) can help practitioners look instead for promising synergies and interconnections in their diverse traditions. Spiritual capital offers a wide range of modalities for engagement and should not be reduced only to engaging with sacred texts. Although sacred texts are a key entry point for certain religions, the



recognition of other possibilities (e.g. engaging with sacred ceremonies and rituals) can also enable a human rights lens to be incorporated within these spaces.

**Create accountability on VAWG for faith-based and traditional leaders.** The power and authority held by faith-based and traditional leaders does not mean that they should remain unquestioned. It does mean, however, that direct confrontations are rarely effective. Religion, culture and their actors can have a negative impact on VAWG prevention, and faith-based and cultural resistance is a real threat to this work, as many women's rights organizations have found. At the same time, institutional biases against religion as a whole on the part of other VAWG prevention actors can be equally unhelpful. To address this, the logic of this resistance needs to be better understood. Identifying and agreeing on shared principles between the various actors early on can help to facilitate a common understanding of the importance of "doing no harm". Faith-based and traditional actors can be better held accountable in practice by their peers, such as other faith leaders, chiefs or local police, than by those seen as outsiders. On the positive side, they have authority and internal legitimacy that enable them to hold others accountable, which can be leveraged to sanction those perpetrating or complicit with VAWG. Many types of practitioners can work with the power of faith-based and traditional actors (and not just against it) by recognizing that power is fluid and can be found and leveraged in many places, not just at the top level of leadership.

### 3.2 Recommendations for policymakers and donors

Many of the recommendations to practitioners clearly also apply to policymakers and donors. However, the following recommendations emerged as particularly important for VAWG prevention donors and policymakers.

**Support projects that recognize and mobilize a range of faith-based and traditional actors for VAWG prevention.**

In rural communities in particular, faith-based and traditional actors can be authoritative actors who are not only influential but may control rituals, practices and customary law that dictate women's and girls' lives. Ignoring them or demonizing their cross-cutting role does not help to prevent VAWG. Yet their unique roles and authority do not mean that policymakers and donors cannot engage critically with them. If faith-based and traditional actors are to work as partners

in VAWG prevention, they should be held accountable for what they say and do. In this regard, donors and policymakers have a responsibility to ensure that the policies they enact and the funding they distribute ensure such accountability at community level, ideally including to women's organizations. However, the exact nature of this accountability should be determined at local level and not merely imposed by policymakers and donors.

**Recognize that cultures and religions influence broader social systems that impact VAWG.**

Religion and culture, and how they function in many communities, have been misrepresented in many international policy spaces. Donors and policymakers in the VAWG prevention field can play an important role in correcting this tendency to silence these voices and decolonize development practice. First, religion and culture form enmeshed systems. Playing into "good religion, bad culture" binaries common in development work fails to do justice to people's lived realities. Second, in VAWG prevention indigenous forms of religion need to be afforded the same recognition and respect as world religions such as Christianity or Islam. Currently, indigenous religious beliefs and practices are often dismissed as cultural only. Third, there is a tendency to focus on engaging with faith-based actors from mainstream religions. This may be tied to the powerful transnational role of these specific religions in development work, but it can result in underestimation of the influence and potential of traditional actors, as well as failure to understand the reality that faith-based actors and traditional actors may have complex power relations and may need to be engaged with in different ways. Fourth, religion and culture are not always about personal belief. In many settings, individual beliefs are less important than communal beliefs. Individuals may be personally convinced about the harm caused by a practice, yet continue doing it because entrenched communal belief systems have not been transformed. At the same time, many harmful faith-based and cultural beliefs have been internalized by their victims. It is therefore not enough to convince only leaders about the need to end certain beliefs and practices. Ordinary people will need to be convinced, too, if systems are to change.

**Support and advocate for grant-making policies and funding suitable for adaptive, long-term VAWG prevention programming.** Funders must enable programming that builds in the actual time that is needed to work effectively with faith-based and traditional actors, allows for capacity-building of project staff, and has the flexibility and adaptability

to ensure that programming is context-appropriate from the start. Working with faith-based and traditional actors on VAWG prevention is a long-term endeavour that requires constant and sensitive engagement, mentoring and support – deeply rooted faith-based and cultural beliefs and practices do not transform overnight. Policymakers and funders should keep in mind that programmes that allow the time for practitioners to fully understand the context in which they are working with faith-based and traditional actors are most effective at designing appropriate interventions and adapting these interventions where needed.

### 3.3 Recommendations for the broader EVAWG research field

Many of the recommendations to practitioners and donors may also apply to researchers, who often play an indirect role in policymakers' decisions. However, the following recommendations emerged as particularly important to ensure that VAWG research itself is challenged to take an

approach to VAWG prevention that facilitates engagement with faith-based and traditional actors.

**Avoid binaries and explore synergies.** Researchers need to avoid perpetuating static, binary understandings (e.g. religion versus culture; modern versus traditional), which are often unhelpful and inaccurate, when engaging with religion or culture around VAWG prevention. Instead, synergies and interconnections can be identified through a recognition of interlinked continuums. Embracing approaches that think in terms of mobile continuums and not fixed binaries avoids either/or standoffs, especially with custodians of traditions, which allows the reality of how these belief systems are situated, produced and interconnected to be recognized. This avoids contrasting faith-based or cultural beliefs with an abstract canon of human rights, which can appear to be unrelated to or a threat to current ways. Such an approach prohibits meaningful engagement with religion and culture around VAWG prevention and can lead to resistance, which might ultimately harm women and girls.

**Acknowledge and engage with the ambivalent realities of religion and culture.** The diverse roles of religion and



Photo: Anwar Mahar  
Theater practice in Pakistan against  
early and forced marriage from Sindh  
Community Foundation .

culture in VAWG are often challenging to engage with initially, especially given the reality that aspects of both can be a key driver of VAWG. However, they are also crucial to prevention efforts, and these ambivalences need to be brought to the surface and engaged with, and not hidden, in research. Creative methodological innovations are needed to deal with the complexity in a way that does not merely instrumentalize religion or culture, or fall back into faith advocacy or static forms of cultural relativism. VAWG research on engagement with religion and culture must deploy a critical lens, but it must do so from within, based on faith-based and/or cultural literacy and partnering with research experts in these areas.

**Areas that need more research.** This synthesis review has contributed to, and revealed, a number of important areas around VAWG prevention and faith-based and traditional actors that require more research:

- First, **centralizing practitioner insights** is very important when trying to understand work with faith-based and traditional actors on VAWG prevention, because such work is inherently complex. Sourcing and synthesizing PBK in collaboration with faith-based and traditional actors and those working with them allows for shared learning from those enmeshed in doing the work of engagement, and lessons learned on why it matters and how it can be done. As this synthesis review has highlighted, this is currently a gap in the evidence base, where a hierarchy of knowledge exists. This synthesis review has also contributed to addressing that gap.
- Second, **more research is needed on the specific role of traditional actors in VAWG prevention.** They should not be indiscriminately bundled in with faith-based actors, or given the broad label of “community leaders”, with no recognition of the particular role of these indigenous actors. As this synthesis review has shown, this goes beyond leaders only, to include a range of male and female informal traditional actors who feature as custodians of culture, such as traditional healers, mothers-in-law and FGM/C cutters. Research in this area can complement existing research on faith-based actors, avoiding the assumption that that traditional actors are the same as faith-based actors.
- Third, **more research is needed on the powerful role of faith-based and cultural rituals, practices and**

**ceremonies and their role in VAWG prevention.** This aspect of spiritual capital has received little attention in existing VAWG research. This includes, in particular, studying instances where the ritual, ceremony or practice is not harmful but one that contributes to prevention. This synthesis review has highlighted that this spiritual capital is a crucial component of engaging faith-based and traditional actors in and mobilizing them for VAWG prevention. In this way, the synthesis review complements the calls in the literature for more comprehensive engagement in this area.

- Fourth, **much research on engaging faith-based actors in VAWG prevention uses methods and involves topics that assume literacy in communities** (e.g. engaging with sacred texts). Yet oral traditions are often primary on the ground, especially in settings with low literacy or in religions without a sacred text. More research is needed to engage with these traditions. This synthesis review has revealed that some partners grappled in practice with ways to engage with faith-based and traditional actors with limited literacy in the contexts in which they worked.
- Fifth, **more research is needed on how different kinds of CSOs can most effectively engage with faith-based and traditional actors for VAWG prevention.** While this synthesis review has showcased the different approaches and strengths of, for example, FBOs, women’s organizations and youth organizations, there remains a decided dearth of literature on this topic. This includes further research on how partnerships can and should be formed by CSOs seeking to position faith-based and traditional actor engagement as part of multisectoral VAWG prevention, especially when these organizations are small.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

- African Union (2019), “Traditional and religious leaders reaffirmed their commitments to girls’ and young women’s right to education”. Available at <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20190620/traditional-and-religious-leaders-reaffirmed-their-commitment-girls-and-young> (accessed on 22 January 2021).
- Ba, A.M., Yimbessalu, J., and Thomas, M. (2020), “Engaging religious and traditional leaders is crucial if we are to achieve SDG 5 by 2030”, WEI FORWARD. Available at <https://www.margothomasphd.com/portfolio-items/engaging-religious-traditional-leaders-crucial-achieve-sdg5-2030/> (accessed on 22 January 2021).
- Balibuno, B., Badjonga, E.M, and Mollett, H. (2020), “Lessons not learnt? Faith leaders and faith-based organisations in the DRC Ebola response”, *Humanitarian Exchange Special Feature: Responding to Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo*, vol. 77, pp. 14–18.
- Bradley, T. (2010), “Religion as a bridge between theory and practice in work on violence against women in Rajasthan”, *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 19, No. 4, pp. 361–75.
- Bridger, E., and Sadgrove, J. (2019), *Keeping Faith in Faith Leaders*, United Society Partners in the Gospel. Available at <https://jiflc.com/resources/keeping-faith-in-faith-leaders/> (accessed on 14 May 2019).
- Campbell, C. (2020), “Political will, traditional leaders and the fight against HIV/AIDS: a South African case study”, *AIDS Care*, vol. 22, Suppl. 2, pp. 1637–43.
- Chikombero, M. (2011), “The context of HIV and interventions to tackle the epidemic in southern Africa”, in *Traditional Leaders on the Frontline: Addressing Harmful Cultural Practices to Reduce Gender-based Violence and HIV in Southern Africa*, E.F. Wangulu, ed. (Pretoria, SAfAIDS, pp. 10–15).
- Chimatiro, C.S., Hajison, P., and Muula, A.S. (2020), “The role of community leaders on adolescents’ HIV and sexual reproductive health and rights in Mulanje, Malawi”, *Reproductive Health*, vol. 17, No. 66, pp 1–11.
- Cislaghi, B., and Heise, L. (2016), *Measuring Gender-related Social Norms, Learning Report 1*, Learning Group on Social Norms and Gender-related Harmful Practices (London, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine).
- Collins, D., Falcón, S., Lodhia, S., and Talcott, M. (2010), “New directions in feminism and human rights: an introduction”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 12, Nos 3–4, pp. 298–318.
- Dhaliwal, S., and Patel, P. (2017), “Desecularisation and the ‘faith agenda’ in an era of austerity: their impact on women’s and girls’ rights in the UK”, *Gender and Development*, vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 85–102.
- Faris, D., and Jayaserkara, P. (2019), “Elevating practice-based knowledge to improve prevention programming”, The Prevention Collaborative. Available at <https://prevention-collaborative.org/resource/elevating-practice-based-knowledge/> (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Fountain, P., and Petersen, M.J. (2018), “NGOs and religion: instrumentalisation and its discontents”, in *Handbook of Research on NGOs*, A. Kellow and H. Murphy-Gregory, eds. (Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing Inc., pp. 404–432).
- Gennrich, D. (2020), “The gender dimensions of the pandemic, particularly GBV” (webinar). Available at <http://blogs.sun.ac.za/urdr/newsandevents/> (accessed on 1 December 2020).
- Gifford P. (2008), “Trajectories in African Christianity”, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, vol. 8, No. 4, pp.275–89.
- Heise, L. (2011), “What works to prevent partner violence? An evidence overview”, working paper, STRIVE Research Consortium (London, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine). Available at: [http://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/21062/1/Heise\\_Partner\\_Violence\\_evidence\\_overview.pdf](http://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/21062/1/Heise_Partner_Violence_evidence_overview.pdf) (accessed on 30 September 2020).
- Heise, L., and Manji, K. (2016), “Professional development reading pack: social norms”, GSDRC Applied Knowledge Services. Available at [http://www.gsdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Social-Norms\\_RP.pdf](http://www.gsdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Social-Norms_RP.pdf) (accessed on 22 January 2021).
- Karam, A. (2015), “Faith-inspired initiatives to tackle the social determinants of child marriage”, *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 59–68.



- Kaviti, L.K. (2015), "Impact of the Tamar Communication Strategy on sexual gender-based violence in Eastern Africa", *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 492–514.
- Khandhela, R.S. (2011), "The role of African culture in tackling HIV and AIDS", in *Traditional Leaders on the Frontline: Addressing Harmful Cultural Practices to Reduce Gender-based Violence and HIV in Southern Africa*, E.F. Wangulu, ed. (Pretoria, SAfAIDS, pp. 19–24)
- Kirk, L., Terry, S., Lokuge, K., and Watterson, J.L. (2017), "Effectiveness of secondary and tertiary prevention for violence against women in low and low-middle income countries: a systematic review", *BMC Public Health*, vol. 17, No. 622, pp. 1–21.
- Leonard, M. (2004), "Bonding and bridging social capital: reflections from Belfast", *Sociology*, vol. 38, No. 5, pp. 927–44.
- Le Roux, E. (2020), "Reflections on GBV, gender equality and social norm change in a time of COVID-19" (webinar). Available at <https://www.ctinquiry.org/videos> (accessed on 1 December 2020).
- Le Roux, E. (2019), *Religion, Development, and GBV: Suggestions for a Strategic Research Agenda*. (Washington, D.C., Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities).
- Le Roux, E., and Bartelink, B.E. (2017), *No More "Harmful Traditional Practices": Working Effectively with Faith Leaders* (Washington, D.C., Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities). Available at <https://jiliflc.com/resources/no-harmful-traditional-practices-working-effectively-faith-leaders/> (accessed on 12 March 2019).
- Le Roux, E., and Palm, S. (2018), *What Lies Beneath? Tackling the Roots of Religious Resistance to Ending Child Marriage*, Girls not Brides. Available at <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/FINAL-Religious-leaders-report-High-Res.pdf> (accessed on 12 March 2019).
- Le Roux, E., and Palm, S. (2020), *Learning by Doing: Synthesis Review of Practice-Based Knowledge on Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls* (New York, United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women).
- Le Roux, E., Corboz, J., Scott, N., Sandilands, M., Lele, W.B., Bezzolato, E., and Jewkes, R. (2020), "Engaging with faith groups to prevent VAWG in conflict-affected communities: results from two community surveys in the DRC", *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, vol. 20, No. 27, pp. 1–20.
- MacGaffey, W. (2012), "African Traditional Religion", Oxford Bibliographies. Available at: <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199846733/obo-9780199846733-0064.xml> (accessed on 15 February 2020).
- Majumdar, S., and Wood, G. (2020), "UNTF EVAW briefing note on the impact of COVID-19 on violence against women through the lens of civil society and women's rights organizations" (New York, United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women).
- Mojapele, M., Chingandu, L., and Chibukire, N. (2011), "Traditional leaders as champions for prevention: the leadership 'Rock' programme", in *Traditional Leaders on the Frontline: Addressing Harmful Cultural Practices to Reduce Gender-based Violence and HIV in Southern Africa*, E.F. Wangulu, ed. (Pretoria, SAfAIDS, pp. 25–30)
- Murray-Swank, N.A., and Pargament, K.I. (2005), "God, where are you? Evaluating a spiritually-integrated intervention for sexual abuse", *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 191–203.
- Palm, S. (2014), "Liberating human rights? Insights from Abdullahi An-Na'im for present day South Africa", *Acta Academia*, vol. 46, No. 4, pp. 93–116.
- Palm, S. (2020), "Resource or roadblock? Engaging the mechanisms of faith to end VAWG" (webinar). Available at <https://www.facebook.com/302306103119496/videos/> (accessed on December 14 2020).
- Palm, S. (forthcoming), "Stories of hope? Sustaining hope in COVID-19 times of despair and anxiety", in *A Time Like No Other: COVID-19 in Women's Voices*, N. Hadebe, S. Radosky and N. Tom, eds. (South Africa, Cluster Publication).
- Palm, S., and Eyber, C. (2019), "Why faith? Engaging the Mechanisms of faith to end violence against children", briefing paper (Washington, D.C., Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities EVAC Hub).
- Peterman, A., and O'Donnell, M. (2020), "COVID-19 and violence against women and children: a third research round up for the 16 days of activism" (Washington, D.C., Center for Global Development). Available at <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/covid-19-and-violence-against-women-and-children-third-research-round-16-days-activism> (accessed on 21 January 2021).

- Petersen, E. (2016), "Working with religious leaders and faith communities to advance culturally informed strategies to address violence against women", *Agenda*, vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 50–9
- Putnam, R. (2000), *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, Simon and Schuster).
- Raising Voices and African Women's Development Fund (2019), *Preventing Violence against Women: A Primer for African Women's Organisations* (Kampala, Uganda, Raising Voices and African Women's Development Fund). Available at: <https://awdf.org/preventing-violence-against-women-a-primer-for-african-womens-organisations/> (accessed on 14 December 2020).
- Raising Voices (2017), *Annual Report* (Kampala, Uganda, Raising Voices). Available at: <https://raisingvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/RaisingVoices.2017AnnualReport.FINAL.pdf> (accessed on 26 October 2020).
- ReliefWeb (n.d.), "A principled approach to conflict sensitive do no harm programming in the context of federal Iraq and the Kurdistan region: emergency livelihoods and social cohesion and cluster". Available at: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/conflict\\_sensitive\\_do\\_no\\_harm\\_guidance.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/conflict_sensitive_do_no_harm_guidance.pdf) (accessed on 16 February 2021).
- Soremekun, O. (2020), "Traditional and religious leaders urged to mobilise community action to end violence against women and girls", United Nations Nigeria. Available at <https://nigeria.un.org/en/86873-traditional-and-religious-leaders-urged-mobilise-community-action-end-violence-against-women> (accessed on 22 January 2021).
- Takana, Y. (2014), "Darfur crisis: the role of traditional leaders in dealing with violence against women", Sudan Working Paper (Bergen, Chr. Michelsen Institute).
- Teffo-Menziwa, M., Mullick, S., and Dlamini, P.C. (2010), *The Role of Traditional Leaders in Preventing and Addressing Sexual and Gender-based Violence: Findings from KwaZulu-Natal, Northwest and Limpopo Province in South Africa* (New York, Population Council). Available at <https://knowledgecommons.popcouncil.org/departments/sbsr-rh/17/> (accessed on 11 November 2020).
- Ter Haar, G. (2011), *Religion and Development: Ways of Transforming the World* (New York, Columbia University Press).
- Tshehla, B. (2005), "Here to stay: traditional leaders' role in justice and crime prevention", *South African Crime Quarterly*, vol. 11, pp. 15–20.
- UN Women (2020), "COVID-19 and violence against women and girls: addressing the shadow pandemic", Policy Brief No. 17 (New York, UN Women). Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-covid-19-and-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=640> (accessed on 1 December 2020).
- Valerio, K., and Butt, A.P. (2020), *Intersecting Injustices: The Links Between Social Norms, Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, and Violence Against Women and Girls* (Ottawa, ON, Oxfam Canada). Available at <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/intersecting-injustices-the-links-between-social-norms-access-to-sexual-and-rep-621098/> (accessed on 21 January 2021).
- Vaughan, C., Sullivan, C., Chen, J., and Vaid Sandhu, M. (2020), *What Works to Address Violence Against Women and Family Violence Within Faith Settings: An Evidence Guide* (Melbourne, VI, University of Melbourne).





220 East 42nd Street  
New York, New York 10017, USA

[www.unwomen.org](http://www.unwomen.org)  
[www.facebook.com/unwomen](https://www.facebook.com/unwomen)  
[www.twitter.com/un\\_women](https://www.twitter.com/un_women)  
[www.youtube.com/unwomen](https://www.youtube.com/unwomen)  
[www.flickr.com/unwomen](https://www.flickr.com/unwomen)